

LUNCH WITH A TRUMP SUPPORTER

Let's call him Jim: a merry, gray-bearded Santa Claus.

"Don't use my name," he said when I mentioned I might write about our recent lunch. "I've already seen some of my friends and family turn against me for what I believe."

We had worked in the same school for 34 years. People loved him. *I* loved him. And during all the years that I'd known him, he'd always been a voice for tolerance; for gender equality; for integration of the Advanced Placement classes (there were no blacks in AP classes before he'd addressed the issue.) Yet for the last six months, I'd suffered at the sight of his red Make America Great Again baseball hat. And he wore the damn thing with pride. "Better get used to the sound of 'President Trump,'" he'd crow.

It was incomprehensible to me. I'd sat in diners with him before the election and laid out my case against Trump: his lack of experience, his coded racism, his arrogance, his narcissism, his inability to stretch the English language beyond "very," "great," and "tremendous."

Finally, I had said to myself: OK, in New Jersey, Jim's vote was statistically insignificant. It was not worth spending our time together in this relentlessly unresolved argument.

And yet, and yet—it gnawed at me. It was as if there were some secret awful part of him that I had never seen—some shadow that hated minorities, that hated strong women.

And then came a retirement lunch last month, when I finally spoke out. It was a lunch for former teachers and administrators. When it was over, and nearly everyone had left, I'd said to him: "Everyone here wanted to talk politics; everyone at this table voted for Clinton; but nobody wanted to bring it up and hear you defending Trump and arguing once again about the Clinton Foundation."

"So you mean *I* can't argue my—"

"Nobody wanted to *argue* with you. They just wanted to be heard."

"So *I* can't be heard?"

And now we found ourselves, Jim and I, eating another lunch at Jose Tejas—the Mexican restaurant on Route 1.

He needed to speak. “I was *really* offended by what you said the other day,” he said.

He felt he hadn’t been heard, and he explicitly laid out the reasons why he’d voted for Trump:

“I genuinely think the Democratic party has failed. And I say this as a lifelong Democrat. How can you look at the issue of race and say it’s been successful? How can you look at the issue of working-class jobs? I just got back from New Orleans. Half that city is unemployed. Literally. Tell me how the Democrats have even begun to address that?”

“So Donald Trump—this man who, in 71 years, has never done a *thing* for the working class—whose relationship with the working class is that they mow his lawn at Mara-Lago—”

“I acknowledge the faults of Trump,” he said. “I may be wrong, but, what I want to see, what I *hope*, is that after four years, after the smoke clears, that there *are* more jobs; that the cities aren’t war zones—”

“And this New York billionaire with his six bankruptcies, this guy who thinks he can run Washington like a king signing royal decrees; *this* guy is going to—”

“I hope it’s better. Yes. And I may very well be wrong. But I don’t want more of the same. Because more of the same isn’t working. You say to me, my *brother* says to me, ‘Oh, you used to be such a liberal’; I still *am* a liberal. But I want America to change—to become fundamentally...more fair; less hateful, less filled with an economic inequality that’s making it feel like we’re living in two different universes in this country.”

I listened.

And eventually I said: “I’m glad to hear you clarifying what you believe. And, honestly, I think you have noble motives. Who can argue with the goals of what you say? I just don’t see this guy delivering.”

“I may be wrong. But four more years of what we have—I think we’ll have civil war on our hands.”

“Look, I hope, when the smoke clears—if anything is still standing—that you’re right. That the world *is* a fairer place.”

“I hope I’m right, too. And if the guy’s a disaster, we vote him out.”

“Disaster or not, our friendship hopefully endures.”

And he raised his enormous plastic cup of diet soda. “Your friendship,” he said, “is one of the great gifts of my life.”

Lunch ended, and I felt we might have navigated some dangerous precipice—narrowly. We spoke of other things: largely, of all the people we knew who were ill or dying.

“Everyday we walk the earth is another gift, bro,” he said.

And, at that moment, I forgave him for the Goddamn hat.