

# Commentary: Voting my conscience in this election may mean staying home

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(RNS)—This summer one of my closest friends quit speaking to me. For decades we've leaned on each other, traded parenting advice and sung in church together. Now we're at an impasse ... over Donald Trump. She can't understand how I can challenge her support for his re-election.

"I just don't get you anymore," she said when we finally talked. "We've always agreed about the important things. Can't you see the Democrats are trying to turn us into socialists and make it harder for us to practice our faith?"

"I don't get you either," I responded. "Can't *you* see that Donald Trump's dishonesty and narcissism are the opposite of everything we value in a leader?"

To save our relationship, we've agreed that for the first time in decades we won't discuss politics.

## Teaching my daughters

I'm having similar struggles with my children, but for the opposite reason. When one of my millennial daughters, who proudly displays a "Black Lives Matter" sign in her front yard, grew distant recently, I asked her, "Have I done something to upset you?"

"Yes, you have," she said. "When we come over for dinner and discuss our passion about racial justice and economic inequality, you push back,

focusing on what you think we're missing. Can't you just affirm the good things we embrace?"

Of course, I can, and I should. But I thought my children understood that one of the ways I've tried to protect them is to point out the lies and distortions I see in any political ideology.

When they were young and wanted to watch primetime TV shows, we had an agreement. "You can watch," I'd say, "as long as when it's over you play the truth and lies game with me." That meant they had to develop the critical thinking skills to catch the deceptions woven through their entertainment.

"Do you really believe lasting love is born out of a lusty one-night fling?" I'd ask my girls after we had watched a sex-saturated sitcom together.

Or "Do you think it's true that living in that big mansion with all those fancy cars will finally make those people happy?"

"Oh Mom," they'd say, "you spoil all the fun."

## **Learning to discern**

"Truth and lies" is a game I taught myself as a young girl to survive the delusions of my alcoholic father and mentally ill mother. After nasty family meltdowns, I'd slip upstairs to my bedroom, close the door, and whisper to myself in the dark, "Someone in this house is crazy and I don't think it's me."

In his bestselling 1978 book "The Road Less Traveled," psychologist Scott Peck defines mental health as "an ongoing process of dedication to reality at all costs."

When I left home for college, I was determined to sort reality from lies, so I

chose journalism as a major. For decades, I've been paid to dig for reality, expose hidden lies, and challenge the status quo.

Now, as lethal fights over political differences break out in our city streets, the stakes for "Truth and Lies" get higher and higher. It seems my circle of family and friends are digging in against their opponents, turning blind eyes to the poisons in their own parties. Caught in the middle, I feel paralyzed between two alternate realities. About the only thing we can all agree on is if the "other side" wins, the wheels are coming off the bus.

That's what Trump and Biden told us in their conventions—that a vote for the other will send democracy down in flames. I watched both candidates and got a serious case of psychological whiplash. Sorting through the conflicting narratives left me exhausted, and whispering in the dark again, "Someone in this house is crazy and I don't think it's me."

## **My conscience**

The only revolution I've ever joined was in college: A group of student activists introduced me to its radical leader, Jesus, not far from the university tower displaying one of his best-known quotes: "You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free."

I still belong to this group, but a lot of my brothers and sisters seem to have pledged loyalty to Donald Trump. I don't get it. I see little trace of our radical leader in Trump, who divides, enflames and stokes chaos in the streets. Under Trump's leadership, a deadly pandemic has spun out of control and the center has collapsed.

Some Christians excuse his sins because he also throws bones our way and brazenly caters to our faith, like raising a Bible, upside down, in a photo op. I'm conflicted, because many of the policies he champions are important to me too: freedom of expression, protection of the unborn, limited

government and now, “law and order.”

I’d still rather have Joe Biden over for dinner. He seems like an emotionally stable family man who genuinely cares for people who are marginalized. But the revolution he heads is being hijacked by what columnist Andrew Sullivan calls “mobs of wokesters” who demand the rest of us join their radical movement or risk being “cancelled” or re-educated.

My decision in this election might have been easier had Biden not made the dramatic shift with his party from making abortion safe, legal and rare to unrestricted through the second and third trimesters. You don’t even have to believe in a higher power to find that morally untenable.

## **Weighing my vote**

As we barrel toward Election Day, I’m weighing each party’s values against the revolution I long ago pledged allegiance to. The Democrats elevate values consistent with my faith regarding race, justice and the environment; the Republicans on the sanctity of life and human sexuality.

Choosing between the lesser of two evils is such a struggle, that I’ve considered staying home November 3rd.

I ran that idea by some close friends from college several weeks ago after we had kayaked together.

“You mean you wouldn’t vote?” my friend Peter asked.

“I’m not sure I can without violating my conscience,” I said.

“That’s a total copout,” he shot back. “It’s your duty as a citizen. If you don’t vote, you should just move to another country.”

My children think opting out in November would make me a hypocrite.

When they were young, at bedtime when I tucked them in, I'd ask God to shape them into strong women who would engage the world for good.

Today the youngest is a pastor in Dallas, helping people sort truth from lies. Her older sister became a federal public defender, fighting to move the needle on racism in the criminal justice system.

My millennial daughters and their husbands have so internalized the core values of Jesus' revolution that now I hear echoes of it in their own words to their growing toddlers: "Don't give up ... be strong and courageous ... be kind to your brother."

If I do step into the voting booth this November, I'll reflect on those words. I'm not confident my vote can slow the unraveling of the democracy I love. Maybe my greatest investment in the future is to teach my grandchildren how to play the game that saved my life.

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