



By Margaret Evans, Editor

Good riddance, 2020. I think we can all agree on that sentiment.

But what now? Will 2021 be any better? Some will answer with a resounding yes, citing the end of the Trump era and the beginning of Covid-19 vaccinations. But I believe the answer is entirely up to us – we human creatures who make up that thing called society. “We are the times,” wrote St. Augustine. “Such as we are, such are the times.” With that in mind, I’m pretty skeptical about 2021.

While recently catching up on the reading I ignored over the holidays, I devoured my yuletide inbox delivery from renegade journalist Matt Taibbi. Formerly a star at *Rolling Stone*, Taibbi is one of a growing number of writers who have left their establishment publications to write independently – for paid subscribers – via a platform called Substack. I find these writers more truthful – and frankly, more fun – than those beholden to the political parties, tribal factions, and corporate interests that wield ever more power over our media. The Substackers ask forbidden questions, express opinions freely – without fear of being censored, shamed, or fired – and nobody tells them what stories they can and cannot report. Reading Taibbi these days feels a bit like reading... well, *Rolling Stone*, before it became such an establishment publication.

And this particular piece really resonated with me. Reflecting on the past year, Taibbi wrote, "It may be simple maturation, or a mass effort at constructing a new order as traditional religious traditions fade, or even a by-product of being forced by a pandemic to spend (a lot) more time online, but the defining characteristic of 2020 America was its manic reevaluation of everything, from history to gender to language to nationality to government, law, love, art, humor, sex, family, and countless other things. We've become a society awash in data and options, while fewer and fewer old guiding principles pass smell tests, leaving us in an accelerating cycle of increased choice and dwindling conviction."

Ain't that the truth. I think?

Taibbi continued: "From elections to money (how long can the Fed keep this up?), no one in the Covid-19 age seems to know what the definition of anything is anymore, and the appearance of UFOs as an apparently legit news story this year not only made weird sense, but underscored the new upside-down nature of everything. Hell, *why not* aliens? Maybe that's who can tell us whether or not to blow up Mount Rushmore, or explain why our political comedy suddenly sucks so much, if advanced beings even have comedy. After this year, I'm a little concerned visitors from the futuristic civilizations might have bad news on that front."

Lord, I do miss comedy. The healing, cathartic purge of a deep belly laugh shared with friends. Laughter without malice, the kind where you're laughing *at* each other, but especially *with* each other. I believe good comedy is the love child of hope and despair. Leave out the love, and it's not good comedy. It's just sanctimonious and mean. The best humor – the kind we need more of – recognizes the universal nature of humanity as deeply flawed but also deeply lovable. The best humor helps us forgive each other – and ourselves – for being *who* and *how* we are.

From what I can tell, much like good humor, forgiveness is not coming easy to Americans of any stripe these days. Our tribal affiliations – the ones we cling to so righteously, because we have our principles! – have turned friends into enemies, making us callous, contemptuous, and cold toward one another.

A few days ago, I read that a young congressman-elect from Louisiana – Luke Letlow, barely 41 – had died of complications related to Covid 19, leaving a wife and two small children behind. In an effort to learn more about this tragic situation – Weren't we all praying he had some underlying condition? Didn't we all hope for some mitigating circumstance? – I began reading comments under the news report. The first I saw were these, before I had to stop reading:

“Did he have any pre-existing conditions or comorbidities?” “Well, he was a Republican.”

“Eff this guy. If he wanted to play risk with mother nature, he got what he deserved.”

“He certainly f'ed over his kids with his irresponsible behavior. But chances are that his wife thought just like him. If that's the case then I don't feel sorry for her, either.”

(Apparently, Rep. Elect Letlow had publicly called for reopening his state's economy back in October, thus rendering himself unworthy of life and his young family of basic human sympathy.)

And just last night – New Year's Eve – a friend emailed me a photo of a house in his nice, middle class neighborhood, writing, “Let's hope this vanishes at midnight. But I doubt it. This flies proudly in our neighborhood at a house with several children in a neighborhood with many children.”

The “this” of reference was a large flag reading “F*** BIDEN” in big, bold letters. (Though the offending word – which, apparently, offends no one but me anymore – was spelled out.)

Y'all, this is just insane. We can't go on this way.

If people with very different values and principles are going to live together in the same country (and even the same small towns) without killing each other, we must learn to be more

tolerant. This goes without saying. But I believe we must learn to be *more* than just tolerant; we must learn to be forgiving.

Ever notice that you don't read much about "tolerance" in religious texts? You do, however, read a lot about "forgiveness." It's a central spiritual concept. Here in the US, cultivating tolerance once seemed the key to ensuring justice and peace. But now that essential divisions have invaded our neighborhoods, our friend groups, and even our families, I think we need to go deeper. We need to double down on the divine quality of forgiveness, and we need to do it pronto. It's a matter of life and death.

According to Dictionary.com, to "forgive" means to "stop feeling angry or resentful toward (someone) for an offense, flaw, or mistake."

Difficult enough in the best of times, right? But in 2021 America, one man's "offense, flaw, or mistake" is another man's honorable act or moral principle. (Mask wearing – or not – is a perfect example off the top of my head, but there are dozens of others.) The challenge seems almost insurmountable.

Our founding fathers had a brilliant vision for our country: a collection of separate states – with different backgrounds, cultures and values – loosely joined for their mutual benefit and protection, but otherwise leaving each other alone. We are not that country anymore. We can't be. Thanks to mobility, the media, and especially social media, we are far more connected than our founders could ever have imagined, while at the same time, our diversity also exceeds their fathoming. For better or worse, we are still a free country, full of very different people – even more so, in fact – but we are now in each other's faces 24/7.

If we can no longer tolerate our fellow Americans – their beliefs, their principles, their values – then by all means, we should work to further our own through the humane channels available to us, political, legal, cultural. But while we're at it, if we expect to survive as a nation, we must cultivate a spirit of forgiveness as if our very lives depended on it. Because they do.

It's all well and good to blame "the times" for our troubles – 1619, 1776, 1865, 2001, 2020 or what have you – but as Augustine knew so long ago, we *are* the times.