

Vigilance without anxiety

My friend in Germany called the night after the election. He was upset.

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Thomas called the night after the election. My penpal of almost 44 years lives in Germany, so it was 7 p.m. in Chicago but midnight for him. His wife Monique was asleep, which was unfortunate as she's trilingual and helps us with our odd but entertaining mix of three languages. I don't speak German, and Thomas's English is limited. This time we'd have to muddle through on our own. To make matters worse, Thomas was upset. The U. S. presidential election results were keeping him awake.

I first met Thomas in his parents' home near Stuttgart, Germany, in the '70s. I was with an American friend who, like me, was spending a college year abroad in France. She and Thomas were penpals, and he had invited her to his family's house for Christmas. I was glad to tag along. Thomas's father greeted us with great enthusiasm—but no English. He pulled out a bottle of Riesling immediately and beamed with joy as he raised a toast to us. Later Thomas explained to me that he'd fought in World War II, but reluctantly, and held Americans in great esteem for having liberated his country. Our glasses of wine and warm welcome were expression of his gratitude.

Thomas's father died many years ago, but Thomas remembers the past thanks to his parents, and along with many Germans, he insists on keeping the difficult memories alive. That makes him alert to others' expressions of hate and exclusion.

"We told ourselves that it would not be terrible," Thomas was saying over the phone. "We heard these things full of hate and we could not believe it would get worse."

But things did get worse, and Thomas is warning me that what he has been hearing from the U.S. alarms him. I'm trying to keep up with his stiff English. "When we

heard these things we didn't think it would become so bad . . ." I'm at a loss. My friend is upset and I can't be with him. I reassure him that my husband and I are distressed about the election, but my words sound flimsy and unhelpful. "We believe that the American people won't tolerate his behavior if he goes too far."

I realize that I am trying to calm him. Me, the American, because of the raw bigotry of a newly elected leader, must comfort a foreigner! It turns out that he has also been to a concert that stirred up emotion. He tries to tell me about it. A concert of music in concentration, he says. Concentration camps, I translate. Later I Google the clues I heard during the conversation and put them together. Thomas attended a concert where KZ-lieder were performed. These are songs that prisoners made up and secretly collected in handmade books. Many were parodies of known songs, so that the melodies are familiar while the prisoners knew, and sometimes sang, alternative lyrics.

Then I found the concert announcement on the Web and suddenly understood my friend's distress: there were concerts across Germany on November 9 in remembrance of Kristallnacht, the Night of Broken Glass in 1938 when members of the Nazi party's paramilitary wing SA killed over 90 Jewish citizens and sent 30,000 others to concentration camps.

In honoring the memory of those who died, Thomas had experienced the raw terror of Holocaust memories and "jumped" from that experience to ours. The Holocaust and the current expressions and acts of hatred aren't related...or are they? Many Americans are keenly aware of President-elect Trump's racist comments, threats, and blustery viciousness. They will not relax their guard now that he is president.

We will be vigilant, I told Thomas, but once again felt distinctly unqualified to respond to the fear and memories that he has lived with.

What does "vigilant" even mean, I wondered after I'd urged my friend to "sleep well." Thomas has spent his life being vigilant, and this is a moment when he has decided to speak up, to bear witness, to warn.

But how do we practice vigilance now? Not all of our reaction to election events is helpful as vigilance. Forcefeeding ourselves 24-hr. news can build a dangerous reactivity that only fuels our indignation and resentment.

I have a sense that to be effectively vigilant, I'll need to practice nonanxiety. I'll need to cultivate some degree of emotional detachment if I'm going to be discerning

rather than reactive. I'll need to seek out the spiritual resources that prepare me to respond when I need to, including silence and prayer. I'm hopeful that, in my effort at vigilance, I'll know which response is needed when, and be ready to act when I need to.