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THE BLOG

We The Diverse People: 'Arrival,' The Election, And The Uncommon Language Of 'We'

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In the new sci-fi film Arrival, which is based on a short story by Ted Chiang, twelve large egg-like spaceships arrive and position themselves around the world. The "aliens" they carry are giant seven-legged creatures whose intentions are unclear: are they here to help or destroy us? Over time—or rather, across time—a linguist figures out the heptapods' language and thus their plans. They are here to unite the world, not through a common enemy, but through their language. On November 8, the United States held its presidential election. While the outcome was decisive and clear, the intentions of the voters were less so. If voting is a language, in the United States it is one in which a quarter-billion people have the option to contribute to its expression. This year, about 54 percent of the electorate spoke, and the winning candidate received just over 25 percent of the eligible votes and just under half of the actual votes.

Speaking matters. But what did this vote say? Our new government will present its interpretation, and this will be reported by a news media that covered the election as if it were a sporting match limited to two teams. The interests of government and media alike are and will continue to be limited: seeking to define power or audience based on a simple majority of 50 percent plus one.

Then there is the American public that voted. We have always been, and still are, a nation of immigrants and a nation founded in diversity. Our nation's motto, "E Pluribus Unum" (out of many, one), is a declaration of this fact. The phrase is printed on most U.S. currency—that is, on the money we exchange hand-to-hand as a symbol of the value of our interdependence on one another. That does not mean we are always in agreement—that is never the case for any group, whether family, friends, workplace, community, or nation. But it does mean "we" who live within the territorial boundaries of the United States are in this together, like it or not. We need to protect both words in the phrase American public. Each term depends on the other to convey two essential tenets of American democracy: a shared national identity and an arena in which we express our differences. In this present moment, we the American public remain many—that is our destiny—but we do not seem to be one around the very ideals that are the foundation of our Constitution: a more perfect union, justice, domestic tranquility, common defense, general welfare, and the blessings of liberty.

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In *Arrival*, the heptapods' language is a gift meant to bring the world together. The film's drama resides in humans' misunderstanding of who is to benefit—the singular or the plural (*you*). For the most part, everyone assumes the gift is meant for one nation, and thus is a weapon to be used against the other nations. Instead, the heptapods have divided their language into twelve parts, and each part is delivered to a different nation. In order to assemble the language, the nations must cooperate in a way that is promised as an outcome of mastering the language. The effect precedes the cause. In 1789, the Constitution did something similar, calling into existence thirteen new states (formerly colonies) and making them and their populations into something larger: "We the People of the *United States*." These were just words, but they created our country and were intended to guide its governance.

Again: speaking matters. Today, we the people must lead the process of becoming one out of many, of continuing to form a more perfect union. The responsibility rests with us, as individuals and as a public comprised of many groups. If we turn that over to the politicians or the press—or to opinion polls—rather than hold them accountable, then we give up our rights. We become a passive audience to our own history. Instead, we must lead by speaking, and not just in the midterm elections in two years, but at every step of the way. And we must start by changing the language with which we speak to one another. Putting together such a language, where many can also be *one*, requires that the effect precede the cause. Our language must call into existence the very ideals we fight for. Otherwise it becomes a weapon we use against ourselves. We must speak as a we, even when we disagree.

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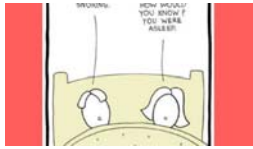
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