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What Does the President Want?

Todd Alcott · Wednesday, February 1st, 2017

I'm a screenwriter. In the spring of 1996, Jeffrey Katzenberg hires me to write a screenplay about talking ants. It's my first studio gig; up 'til now, I've been known primarily as an experimental playwright.

We have story meetings where we hammer out the plot. Jeffrey says, "What's this scene about?" and I describe what the scene means in terms of sociology, design history, film history, comedic rhythm and a dozen other things. Each time, Jeffrey interrupts me and says, "Stop. Stop. Stop. Stop. Stop. *What does the guy want?*" He does it so often, I finally write it down on a postcard and tack it up over my desk: "'WHAT DOES THE GUY WANT?' — Jeffrey Katzenberg."

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The question on Jeffrey's mind is, of course, the question on every good screenwriter's mind: "What does the protagonist want?" That is the question that fuels the engine of a cinematic narrative. Moving forward from the movie about the talking ants, I apply the question to every screenplay I work on. Because that's all a screenplay is: a character wants something, he or she pursues it, things get in the way, forces are arrayed against the pursuit. "What does the protagonist want?" becomes my mantra, my organizing principle, my religion. Once I understand how screenplays are written, it's impossible to watch movies the same way again. I stop seeing acting and editing and direction and production design and see only structure: a character in pursuit of a goal.

But it doesn't stop there. After I start seeing movies that way, I start to see life that way. Instead of the news being a constant barrage of random incoherent information, I start to see the world in terms of narrative: People want things, forces are arrayed against them, and they get what they're pursuing or they don't.

My father, Royal Alcott, was a grade-A, blue-ribbon, gold-medal narcissist. He would start conversations with me that were just excuses to emotionally terrorize me and make me feel stupid and helpless. He was a funny, charming, charismatic businessman who made friends quickly and, ultimately, burned every bridge he crossed. He bankrupted my family and stole my college fund.

So when Donald Trump's campaign begins in June of 2015, I recognize him for what he is immediately — a bully and a con man, a racist, sexist, anti-Semitic demagogue, and a — not to put too fine a point on it — disgusting pig. How anyone can even look at that smug, bloated, sneering,

snide face, dripping with entitlement and imperial disapproval, and not see a dimestore Mussolini is beyond me. But apparently some people, best described as “racist morons,” not only can bear to look at Trump, but see him as a bona-fide leader, someone to entrust with the levers of government, someone to represent the United States on the world stage.

(I’ve read approximately ten billion articles on how Trump won because of the “overlooked voter” in the American Industrial Midwest, that racism and sexism had nothing to do with it. The idea is laughable on its face. This is a man who introduced himself on the political stage by saying that president Obama was born in Kenya, and who announced his candidacy by saying that Mexicans are thieves and rapist, and who stoked nationalist fires for fifteen months by bellowing terrifying lies about Muslims coming to get us. Trump voters looked at Trump and they saw themselves. They didn’t see a profoundly ugly, hollow, dishonest, cheating, blustering blowhard and con man, they saw a strong man to lead their nation out of the darkness, the absolute hell of the Obama administration, where minorities and women were held to be equal with white men. They had no economic reasons to vote for Trump, because they had no understanding of economics. If they had any understanding of economics they would have known that none of his talk about economics made any sense.)

In my office in my home in southern California, I look at Trump in 2016 and I’m horrified. To say that he’s monumentally unqualified to be president is damning with faint praise. But, as a screenwriter, I put my mind to work and ask the only question that matters: “What does the protagonist want?” When the screenwriter knows what the protagonist wants, the plot of the screenplay begins to reveal itself. In life, once you understand what a person wants, you can begin to predict the future.

What does Donald Trump want? It’s not “to govern the United States.” He doesn’t know anything about governance, to say the least, and shows no interest in it in any case. He doesn’t care about “jobs” or “helping the American middle class” or “improving trade” or any of the other phrases he tossed around during his campaign. In the end, he doesn’t even want money; if he did, he’d be a better businessman instead of a six-time bankruptcy case.

Donald Trump, like Charles Foster Kane, the protagonist of Trump’s favorite movie, wants “love on his own terms.” Everything he does, he does for that. The constant expansion of his “brand,” putting his name and face on so many different buildings and books and merchandise, very little of which is actually created by him, is all part of his great need to fill a hole somewhere in his heart, a hole that can never be filled, not with money, not with fame, not with ratings, not with power. Donald Trump is a broken person, and has decided that nothing less than being the most powerful man in the world, with billions of lives in his hands, is enough to make him feel loved.

That is, of course, why he’s obsessed with money, with ratings, with the size of buildings, with the size and success of real estate ventures, with magazines and TV shows and celebrity and fame and the numbers of people at his rallies and at his inauguration. Love cannot be measured, but all those other things can be. He needs to have the biggest, the best, the most expensive, or just simply “the most.” Nothing else will do.

The sticking point is the second part of his want, not the “love” part but the “on his own terms” part. Because love on Trump’s terms is a horrifying proposition. Trump, as a narcissist with an ego the size of a planet, demands total subservience to anyone who comes in contact with him. His ego is as easily damaged as lace made of spun sugar, his patience is as evanescent as fairy dust, and his

anger is as towering and fierce as a hurricane. An ordinary narcissist will be jealous of other people; Trump is jealous of absolutely everything. Anything that takes attention off him is his mortal enemy.

He's so self-centered, with such a sense of entitlement, that he considers it a grace to allow people to work for him. He feels that any employee, of any level, should be grateful that he even knows they exist. If you ask him for pay for your work, you reveal your ingratitude and provoke his rage.

I wish any of this was an exaggeration. But, again, I've seen this behavior, I lived with it for my entire childhood. The narcissist must have his ego fed, more and more, there is no end to it. Trump seems genuinely hurt that people think no one showed up to his inauguration, and he's marked everyone who protested the next day as enemies. Any state that did not vote for him is now an enemy nation and must be destroyed for failing to adequately show him devotion. Vladimir Putin praises him, and so Vladimir Putin is now a friend for whom Trump will do anything. There are rumors swirling that Putin offered Trump 19% of Rosneft, but he probably didn't even need to do that, a pat on the head would have sufficed.

Image: Donald Trump speaking with supporters at a campaign rally at the South Point Arena in Las Vegas, Nevada. Credit: Gage Skidmore.

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