

Seriously Wasting Time

Written by Margaret Evans

One night, not too long ago, my husband and I were having a heated discussion (we never argue, we discuss... hotly) about something we'd just heard on the news. Honestly, I can't remember the topic, but I can only assume it was presidential primaries-related. As our conversation unfolded – “unfolded” being, perhaps, too gentle a term – our pitches rose, our comments began to overlap, then collide, and our pleasant, after-supper “family time” teetered on the brink of... unpleasantness.



Suddenly, from the peanut gallery (or the kitchen, as we call it) we heard the voice of reason, from the mouth of a babe:

“Would you guys *please* stop talking about *pitilics*!”

Thus it was that our six-year-old daughter put an end to her parents' selfish, petty bickering *and* coined a new word.

Pitilics: pronounced “pi-duh-lix.” (Sounds like ‘fiddlesticks.’) Definition: Boring ole’ politics

It's almost frightening how obsessed one can become with politics, especially during an election year. This presidential primary season has been an especially challenging/exciting/frustrating time for me because it's the first time that I've been fully engaged in the process, intellectually speaking.

(I know; it's an embarrassing admission at my age, but there you have it.)

Oh, I've always *voted*. I've always been “for” one guy or another. I've even sported the occasional bumper sticker on my car. And I've always been happy to attend campaign victory parties.

But the thing is – and it's the God's honest truth – I never really knew *why* I was sporting that bumper sticker...

why

I was at that cocktail party. (Aside from the cocktails, I mean...) The fact is, politics used to bore me silly. I did my civic duty (voting) because I'm a good girl, my mother's daughter. And I supported whomever I supported because... well, because all the cool kids were doing it. And the movie stars.

Now, I'm not disparaging the cool kids and the movie stars – I have no doubt plenty of them are quite sincere about their politics. There are many, many true believers out there. I just wasn't one them.

And I'm still not. Ironically, now that I *have* taken an interest in politics – a genuine, some might say *rabid*, interest – I find it harder than ever to put all my eggs in a particular politician's basket. By the time you read this, I will have already voted – I guess – but as I write it, the Republican primary is two days away and I'm completely undecided. Heck, maybe I haven't voted yet. Maybe, by the time you read this, I'll have decided to vote in the Democratic primary, instead. If nothing else, it gives me another week to deliberate...

It was much easier to choose a candidate back when I didn't know much about them. Turns

out they're all somewhat flawed. It was easier to side with a political party when I didn't understand the philosophies that undergird them. Those, too, it seems, are flawed. And actually pretty different. (Who knew?) It was definitely easier to choose a bumper sticker when the choice seemed little more than a fashion quandary, like skinny jeans versus bootcut. I almost miss those days...

Because now, what I've got is a brain that won't shut off, or *up*.... a constant, thrumming soundtrack in my head – history, political theory, policy proposals, stump speeches, media sound bites, platitudes about “hope” and “change,” and wildly-conflicting editorial opinions. It's noisy up there, and exhausting!

But I keep going back for more. I wake up extra early in the morning to read news and commentary online. Later, it's off to the blogosphere, to check in with a host of deep-thinking strangers who feel *way* too much like friends, then on to my own blog, where I try to muster up an original thought or two (which may be officially impossible at this point.) I run through my actual job and my mothering duties as quickly as I can, 'cause Hardball's on at 7, doncha know, then Countdown at 8! Oh, and let's not forget all that time in the car, when I toggle back and forth, like the schizo-lunatic I am, between NPR and AM Talk Radio. It's madness, I tell you! Madness!

Actually, what it *is* is addiction. And as soon as the election's over, I intend to seek help. But trying to kick the habit now would be like starting a diet during the holidays.

I knew I had a problem when I realized that the *Golden Globe Awards* had come and gone and I'd barely noticed. Not only did I not watch; I didn't even know who'd been nominated. Then, a few nights ago, I found myself torn between whether to watch the season opener of *American Idol*

... or the returns from the Michigan primary. (My family was

not

torn, so

Idol

it was. I fidgeted all the way through.) You know how everyone's whining about the Hollywood writer's strike? Not me. No

new

shows means more time for

news

shows!

This morning at the Y, I attempted to peruse a *People* magazine; thought it would be a lark, sort of a light-hearted “palate cleanser” for the brain. But by the second paragraph of the big cover story, “Is Britney Mentally Ill?,” I felt my own mental illness kicking in. Deadly Boredom.

How could anyone possibly care about Britney's bad behavior (or Katie Holmes' new bangs or Jessica Alba's baby bump) when there are Big, Important Questions to explore: Are John McCain and Mike Huckabee “real conservatives”? Is Barack Obama's pastor a reverse racist? Did Hillary Clinton mean to insult MLK, Jr, by praising LBJ? (And, by the way, were those tears real?) Who is the genuine “change agent” in the election? Is John McCain too old and cranky to be president? Does Mitt Romney wear Mormon underwear?

See, while some of you are still stuck on superficial puffery, I've graduated to Significant Issues. Heh.

I guess I could take pride in the fact that I've traded my lowbrow obsession with pop culture for a loftier fixation on politics. But I don't kid myself. I may be wasting my time, now, on

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something more “serious”, but that doesn’t mean I’m not seriously wasting my time. When your daughter needs help with her math homework, but you can’t tear yourself away from an online discussion (with strangers!) about the imperiled fate of the Reagan Coalition, you know you’ve crossed over from “informed citizen” to ‘Get a life, ya freak!’ territory. Sure, you’re looking at your computer screen, but you might as well be gazing at your navel.

The only respite I’ve found from my obsession, lately, is PBS, where Masterpiece Theatre is showing “The Complete Jane Austen” for the next five Sundays. *Persuasion* was up first, and was absolutely wonderful. For a solid 90 minutes, I didn’t think about politics at all. What a relief!

I’ve always loved Austen’s heroines; feisty yet refined, they’re women after my own heart, maintaining both a healthy respect *and* gentle disdain for the status quo. Instead of seeking to overthrow the establishment, they wage their quiet little revolutions within it, relying on their own smarts, ingenuity, and integrity. Invariably, they succeed in securing personal happiness within the bounds of tradition, while still managing to tweak those bounds, and even expand them a bit, for the common good. If Austen were alive and living in the US today, I suspect she’d consider herself a conservative, but then again, with that feminist streak...

See?! I’m totally out of control!

I’ll be glad when the election’s over, so I can get a little perspective, life can get back to normal, and politics will, once again, be pitilics.