

A couple of weeks ago, my mom called me up after supper and told me to turn on CNN. Seems while I'd been scrubbing taco grease from my skillet, the presidential hopefuls from the Democratic Party had been engaging in the first-ever YouTube debate.



"Boy, that Hillary sure is good up there," Mom said, sounding vexed, as I rushed to finish the dishes, phone pressed between shoulder and chin. "I still don't like her, but she is good."

My husband was engrossed in a Star Trek rerun and my daughter was on the computer tending her Webkinz menagerie, so I snuck off to the bedroom to catch the debate. As I settled into it, annoyed by the YouTube gimmickry (must we jazz up and dumb down everything?) but impressed with the depth and breadth of the candidates' answers, it was clear that my mom was right. Hillary was good up there – whip smart, articulate, confident and poised. And it occurred to me, not for the first time, that unlike my mom, I do like her.

Now, on the political spectrum, my mom's about as far away from Hillary Clinton as you can get. In fact, she and my dad are currently on a cruise to Alaska with the National Review magazine, enjoying panel discussions, lectures, and the occasional cocktail with William F. Buckley. Mom's a political junkie, so this is her idea of the ultimate vacation. More than just a hobby, politics is her passion. She's a true-believing, dyed-in-the-wool, intellectual conservative.

Which may have something to do with her feelings for Hillary, but not that much. It's almost impossible to hear the name Hillary Clinton without the word "polarizing" popping up in the same sentence. It's been that way since the beginning of time. Early on, she made that Tammy Wynette crack about baking cookies and standing by her man (which incensed social conservatives and thrilled liberal feminists), then later, she actually did bake cookies and stand by her man (which baffled social conservatives and liberal feminists). She tried to pass a universal health care plan (some applauded, others booed), and failed (ditto, but vice versa), and at some point, she stopped wearing headbands, which caused a deep schism in the fashion industry and rent the hair care community asunder.

But seriously, it seems that Hillary, more than any other contemporary political figure (George W. Bush would be the possible exception), has an effect on people that's almost entirely visceral. Unlike, say, Barack Obama, whose politics one might not share but who is virtually impossible to dislike, Hillary seems to stir profound revulsion in those who take issue with her ideas. They don't just disagree with her; they despise her.

Columnist Paul Campos theorized in last week's Gazette that the reason the idea of a Hillary Clinton presidency causes so many people to "foam at the mouth" is that she's a girl. "And girls," Campos wrote, "as modern science has recently confirmed, have cooties." Campos may be onto something. It may be that Hillary is judged more harshly by some because she's a woman. But I would argue that plenty of people give her extra brownie points for the same distinction. In the case of someone like my mom, I have a hard time believing Hillary's sex has anything to do with anything. My mother is a big fan of Margaret Thatcher, and she, too, is a girl.

So why am I the only right-leaning human on the planet who's not put off by Hillary? Why is it that, despite my wariness of her politics, which are a little socialist-y for me, and despite my mom's opinion, which I value over almost anyone's, I can't help liking the lady? As with those who loathe her inexplicably, way beyond the bounds of political disagreement, my opinion of Hillary is a gut response, pure and simple. I like her because... I like her. I like that she grew up in a traditional, middle class (Republican, even!) home, like me... that she was once a "Goldwater girl," like my mom... that she was, and still is, a Methodist (I grew up Methodist!). I

like that, despite being a product of the anything-goes 60s culture, she seems a bit of a good-girlish prude... that, while so many of her Summer of Love contemporaries were turning on and tuning out, she was studying hard at Wellesley, fretting over social injustice and Oscar Wilde, and writing embarrassingly introspective letters to a friend who would, forty years later, earn his fifteen minutes of fame by handing them over to the New York Times. I like that she was then, and still is, hopelessly uncool.

I even like her big, sturdy legs. All the women in my family have big, sturdy legs. Trust me, it's a character builder.

There's that word, character. Despite all the partisan accusations to the contrary, I believe Hillary has a strong one. She gets a lot of flack from folks who believe she's too calculating. They say she's dreamed of being president since she was a girl, and that everything she's done up to now was with that goal in mind. You know what I say to that? Good for her! As long as she didn't lie, cheat, steal or murder anyone along the way, I think it's just great that she dared to dream that dream, and has come so very close to realizing it. As for the accusation that she only stuck with Bill Clinton, post-Monica, out of political expediency... well, I just don't buy it. A couple of years ago, I read Michael Medved's book, *Right Turns*, which, incidentally, is delightful. In it, Medved, who was at Yale law school with both Clintons, writes of how sweet, bookish, unglamorous Hillary fell hard for handsome, charming, country-boy Bill, and he for her. Apparently, it was quite a love match. Ask any woman who's ever fallen under his charismatic spell, whether in person or just on TV (and who hasn't, really?); there are plenty of reasons to stand by Bill Clinton, and not all of them smack of ambition. I believe Hillary loves this man. He is her intellectual equal, her best friend, her partner, and the father of her child. I simply don't believe she's so hard, so ruthless, that these things mean nothing to her. Of course, that's just my gut talking.

But in the end, we all have to trust our guts when it comes to choosing a president, don't we? Best case scenario: the candidate who most clearly espouses our political values is also the one we find most inspiring, intelligent, and attractive. But barring that perfect convergence, our candidate must at least pass the gut test, right? We don't have to like the way he says "nuclear," we don't have to admire her corral blazer, we don't have to approve of his \$400 haircut, but we do have to come away from a speech or a debate thinking, "yep, he's good people."

At this point, I can honestly say that about several contenders from each side of the aisle, but I'm nowhere near passionate about a candidate yet. Since I list a bit rightward, I wish I were more dazzled by the Republicans than I am, and that fewer Democrats were passing my gut test. But politics is an imperfect science, and the election season is long. There's still plenty of time to fall in love with a candidate... or at least in like.

I was unable to make it to USCB for Hillary's talk last week. This is probably fortunate, since I heard from a friend that she was fabulous in person. As a principled conservative – and one who looks forward to many more happy holiday meals at her mother's table – I really can't afford to like Hillary any more than I already do.