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Notes from editor (not for publication):

Hi, Django — I made only light changes to clean up for publication. I don't anticipate any surprises, but please do let me know if you have any concerns. You give me hope for our future.—J

HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

Coming to common sense on common ground

####END HED####

####BEGIN SUBHED####

'We can no longer view fellow Americans as the enemy because they fall on the opposite side of a contrived divide. We need to collaborate with them because they are the only way forward.'

####END SUBHED####

TEXT BODY:

####BEGIN TEXT####

I WANT TO START by saying that I'm so proud, I'm so proud, to be from this community.
I'm so proud to see my peers and family and loved ones stand up for things that they believe in.

11 I'm so proud to have had the opportunity to grow up in a
12 place where I was free to contemplate the state of the world I
13 found myself in, to get angry, and to do something with my anger.

14 I'm so proud to live in a place where the people are not
15 passive, where opinions matter, where people have their ears to
16 the ground, where people are awake to the complex realities of
17 America, where people see injustice and get angry.

18 But I'm here today because I believe that it is no longer
19 enough to be angry. It is our responsibility to look further, to look
20 past the actions of one demagogue in the Oval Office, for behind
21 him lurks something much worse, something he is merely a
22 product of.

23 And if we can take a step back and ask how the hell we
24 actually got here, if we have the courage to peer deep into the
25 heart of America, I believe that we will find a disease much more
26 lethal than the actions of one man and his cronies — a force that
27 we are all a part of. A force that even we who believe we are
28 revolutionaries conform to every day.

29 I am talking about the force of polarity. A culture of
30 retaliation, where everything has somehow become two-sided.

31 If we are left, we must hate right, we must constantly
32 retaliate and condemn the other side.

33 The only debates occur over two-sided trends that are
34 spit onto our plates, and political curiosity is supplemented with
35 one-shot headlines and Instagram reels.

36 America is becoming a pendulum that is confined to
37 swing on one axis, and the farther it swings into the extremities of
38 left and right, the farther it batters down the concept of nuance
39 and free thought that this nation is built upon.

40 * * *

41 HOW DID WE GET into this state of absurdity?

42 I fear that this is not natural, that we have been tricked,
43 incentivized, and herded to live under the rules of polarity, to
44 play this game. And I'll tell you this: The demagogues you

45 condemn, the kings you hate, the billionaires you want to make
46 pay, they *all* want you to keep hating the other side.

47 They want you to play their game.

48 It's a game of distraction, it pits Americans against each
49 other so colossal amounts of money can move unnoticed, it
50 wants to pit red against blue, it wants to pit Vermont against
51 Alabama and Florida, and, I hate to say it, but it wants to pit
52 everyone who came to this rally against the people that didn't.

53 This is dangerous!

54 I see the tendrils of polarity already wrapped around the
55 facets of this community.

56 I see elementary-school kids alienate a peer because his
57 family voted for Trump.

58 I see teenagers threaten each other's lives over political
59 Snapchat posts.

60 I see neighbors turn on each other over a lawn sign.

61 I see strangers screaming at each other in the street over
62 text printed on a T-shirt.

63 I see people afraid to speak in meetings and classrooms
64 because they are afraid to move against the popular current.

65 I see people losing the ability to speak to one another,
66 because under this bipartisan gridlock, "disagree" is morphing
67 into the word "hate."

68 Now, the only way to escape this bipartisan gridlock, the
69 culture of hatred, is to re-learn how to talk to each other and to
70 unite on common ground. Our children deserve to know that
71 "disagree" does not mean "hate."

72 * * *

73 WE NEED vitalized discourse, and we need it right here
74 on the community level because this is ground zero. Now, more
75 than ever, is the time for community-based democratic structures
76 such as Representative Town Meeting in Brattleboro. How dare
77 we say that we are politically concerned when the systems of
78 discourse in our own town are unstable?

79 Right here we have all these beautiful little arenas for
80 free thought, and they are ugly sometimes and frustrating to work
81 with, but they are operationally free from partisan powers and
82 they are being abandoned.

83 The only reason we should be altering this system of
84 Town Meeting is to dismantle the barriers that prevent more
85 people from participating. Your passion means nothing if you are
86 unwilling to apply it.

87 We need civic discourse right here at ground zero — we
88 need common ground.

89 * * *

90 COMMON GROUND is not reached by shutting down
91 opposition, it is not attained through cancel culture. Common
92 ground is not reached by sticking a lawn sign in the front yard, by
93 buying a flag or wearing a provocative T-shirt, or by angrily
94 reposting something on your Instagram.

95 We must completely abandon the ridiculous notion that
96 social media is a platform for activism. These apps are dangerous
97 — all they really do is give us the illusion of civic discourse, all
98 they really do is put us further into ideological echo chambers.
99 Their algorithms profit by dividing us, by feeding us what we
100 want to hear and condemning the opposite. They allow us to feel
101 like we are participating in civic discourse while sitting on the
102 toilet.

103 And even worse, consider the top four social media
104 platforms we use.

105 X is owned by Elon Musk, the richest man on the planet;
106 Instagram and Facebook are owned by Mark Zuckerberg, the
107 third richest person in the world; and a deal is in place for
108 TikTok's algorithm to be regulated by Oracle, an entity owned by
109 Larry Ellison the second-richest man on the planet.

110 What a gorgeous roster that is.

111 These men have total control over the platforms we
112 worship: They would love it if things stayed exactly the way they
113 are right now. It is dangerous for discourse to occur under the

114 algorithmic control of these few men. We need to take it back to
115 the hands of the American people at the community level, where
116 it belongs.

117 * * *

118 I MAY BE young and naïve, but I still believe in the
119 common sense of the American people! These are not partisan
120 issues, even though we may have been convinced that they are.

121 I believe that no American wants to live in a reality
122 where the top 1% of the population controls as much wealth as
123 the bottom 90% combined.

124 No American thinks people working 60 hours a week
125 should struggle to feed their families.

126 No American hopes for billionaires to receive tax breaks
127 while 16 million working-class people are left without medical
128 insurance.

129 No American wants to live in fear that their neighbors
130 and loved ones may be abducted by masked agents at any hour
131 of the day.

132 No American wants to live in a reality where politically
133 motivated assassinations are applauded.

134 No American wants to live in a reality where we have
135 given up on stopping climate change

136 No American want to live in a reality in which it is
137 contentious to condemn terrorism.

138 And no American wants to live in a reality in which it is
139 controversial to oppose the mass starvation, subjugation, and
140 slaughter of thousands of innocent people in Gaza.

141 * * *

142 BUT THE ONLY WAY to come to these truths, to this
143 common sense, is on common ground.

144 I wish I had a concrete blueprint to attain common
145 ground, a policy plan to dismantle this bipartisan gridlock that
146 blackens the heart of America, but I, like you, have no idea what
147 this looks like.

148 I'm just trying to be a student. And you're just trying to
149 be a carpenter, and you're just trying to be a dad, and most of
150 you are just trying to enjoy your retirement, and you're just trying
151 to be a soccer player, or a kindergarten teacher, or a lineman, or
152 a farmer, or a gardener.

153 We're not politicians — we're just people. And it's so
154 sad, it's so sad that the conditions of today drive us to have to
155 come out here in anger and sadness, because the politicians in
156 Washington can't do it themselves.

157 All they know how to do is play this two-sided game,
158 and even the ones who truly have our intentions at heart are
159 suffocated by its rules.

160 And I know this.

161 I know that many of us probably have terrible grievances
162 with the ways that other people in this country think, but the only
163 way that we can escape the perversion of democracy that is
164 happening is to engage with those people. We must end this
165 unspoken internal war.

166 Believe in this community, invest in your neighbors, put
167 down your incessant Facebook-ing and TikTok-ing and look
168 people who disagree with you in their eyes as you speak to them.
169 Learn their language.

170 We can no longer view fellow Americans as the enemy
171 because they fall on the opposite side of a contrived divide. We
172 need to collaborate with them because they are the only way
173 forward.

174 * * *

175 BUT TO THOSE self-interested individuals who profit from
176 this divide, cultivating this disgusting political gridlock by
177 undermining common sense, to those who turn a blind eye on
178 atrocities to reap the fiscal benefits of war, to the man in our
179 White House who lines his pockets by brutalizing and dividing
180 the American people — to them, I say: "Let's go toe to toe.

181 "I do not fear you.

182 "I do not fear your money and your primitive rhetoric
183 and the ease with which you forget morality. Without a distracted
184 populace to use as fodder, you are nothing, and when we remove
185 ourselves from this manufactured divide, when we take our
186 hands to the gears and our feet to the wheels, the apparatus of
187 hatred and political division will fall."

188 We owe it to our children and our children's children to
189 stand against these forces; we owe it to them to rebuild trust in
190 the American people.

191 No more will we allow ourselves to be played in their
192 bipartisan game. Democracy does not belong in the hands of a
193 minority, it does not belong in the hands of one side or the other,
194 it belongs to all the people.

195 And I stood up here to say that when I was 13, I'm
196 standing before you now at 19, and I will stand up here again
197 and again until my hair is white if that's what it takes.

198 Democracy belongs to us, and that is final.

####END TEXT####

BIO/COATTAIL:

####BEGIN BIO/COATTAIL####

199 **DJANGO GRACE** spoke a version of these words at the
200 No Kings 2.0 rally in Brattleboro on Oct. 18. "I tend to
201 paraphrase a bit when I get as fired up as I did, but the following
202 is generally what I said and 100% what I believe," he says in
203 sharing the written version of his remarks.

204 "Today was an unbelievable opportunity, and I want to
205 express my gratitude to all those who came out in support," says
206 Grace, a Brattleboro Union High School graduate and current
207 sophomore at Columbia University. "This is a daunting, uphill
208 battle, but I have a feeling that the energy America felt today will
209 never be forgotten. Thank you, Brattleboro."

####END BIO/COATTAIL####

LAST ISSUE IN WHICH THIS FILE CAN BE RUN:

210

####BEGIN MAXISSUE####

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####END MAXISSUE####

LINKS:

211

####BEGIN LINKS####

####END LINKS####

VIDEO:

212

####BEGIN VIDEO####

####END VIDEO####

LOGLINE (SOCIAL MEDIA):

213

####BEGIN LOGLINE####

####END LOGLINE####