

Against the Current

Reflections on power, fear, and what survives

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Author's Note

I didn't set out to write *Against the Current* as a political piece.

It began, as many things do, with a feeling rather than an argument — a growing sense of disorientation while watching events unfold that felt disturbingly familiar, even when the details were new. Not shock. Not outrage. Something quieter and more unsettling. A sense that certain ways of organising human life were being normalised again, while others were being quietly dismissed as naive, weak or impractical.

This essay is an attempt to think that unease through.

It does not focus on individual leaders, parties or policies. That is deliberate. Personalities change. Systems and patterns endure. What interested me was not who is in power at any given moment, but how power behaves when fear, exhaustion and certainty begin to crowd out responsibility, curiosity and care.

The reflections here draw on history, psychology, lived experience and observation, but they are not intended as scholarship or prediction. They are offered as a way of noticing — of tracing recurring dynamics that often become visible only in hindsight, once the damage is already done.

Running alongside this analysis is a quieter thread: the question of how to live when the current runs strongly in the opposite direction to one's values.

When obedience is rewarded, what does responsibility look like?

When certainty is demanded, what does curiosity cost?

When dehumanisation becomes acceptable, what does it mean to keep seeing people as people?

I use the phrase living from the heart in this context not as a brand, belief or answer, but as an orientation. A way of remaining present, ethically awake and human in conditions that make all three harder than they should be.

This essay offers no calls to action and no guarantees. History does not provide those. What it offers instead is a reminder that authoritarian moments, however overwhelming they feel, are not the whole story. What survives them — decency, memory, connection, conscience — matters more than we often realise at the time.

If this piece unsettles, that is not an accident. It unsettled me to write it. My hope is not to alarm, but to invite attention — and perhaps to help keep a line open, quietly, where it still can be.

1. Opening: a growing sense of inversion

There are moments in life when the world seems to tilt, not with a sudden jolt, but with a slow, almost imperceptible shift. You're sitting at the kitchen table, the morning news murmuring in the background, and you realise you're not shocked by what you're hearing. Not really. There's no sharp intake of breath, no outrage rising in your chest. Instead, there's a quiet, persistent sense of recognition—a feeling that what's unfolding is not new, but deeply, unsettlingly familiar.

It's as if the ground beneath your feet has been quietly rearranged while you slept. The rules you thought were fixed—about decency, about truth, about how people ought to treat one another—are being rewritten in real time. You watch as events play out on screens and in the streets, and you sense, with a kind of weary clarity, that the world is moving in the opposite direction to everything that allows human beings to live thoughtfully, responsibly and humanly.

There's no need for declarations. No need for outrage. The feeling is quieter than that, and more enduring. It's the awareness that something fundamental is being turned upside down. The values that once seemed self-evident—honesty, kindness, the willingness to listen—are now treated as naïve, even suspect. The loudest voices are those that trade in certainty and division, and the space for doubt, for humility, for genuine conversation, is shrinking.

You notice it in small things, at first. The way people talk past each other, rather than to each other. The way disagreement is treated not as a chance to learn, but as a threat to be neutralised. The way complexity is flattened into slogans, and nuance is drowned out by noise. It's there in the language of leaders, in the headlines that scroll across your phone, in the conversations you overhear at the shops or on the train.

But it's not just out there, in the public sphere. It seeps into private life, too. You find yourself hesitating before speaking your mind, wondering if it's worth the trouble. You notice friends and family growing more guarded, more wary of saying the wrong thing. There's a sense that the boundaries of what can be said, and even what can be thought, are narrowing.

This is not a story about sudden catastrophe. It's about the slow erosion of the conditions that make thoughtful, responsible and humane life possible. It's about the gradual inversion of values, the turning upside down of what once seemed obvious. And it's about the quiet, persistent awareness that this is happening not as a distant possibility, but as a lived reality.

There's a temptation, in moments like this, to reach for outrage, to declare that things have never been worse. But outrage is exhausting and declarations are quickly drowned out by the next wave of noise. What remains, when the shouting dies down, is the quieter awareness that something essential is at stake. That the world is being reordered in ways that demand not just attention, but a different kind of response.

This is where the story begins: not with a bang, but with a murmur. Not with shock, but with recognition. Not with declarations, but with the quiet awareness that something fundamental is being turned upside down.

2. Two ways of organising human life

There's a moment, often unremarked, when you realise that the world is not simply a collection of individuals muddling along, but a tapestry woven from the ways we choose to live together. It's not just about laws or governments, but about the deep patterns that shape our days, our relationships, our sense of what's possible. These patterns are rarely named outright. They're felt, absorbed, inherited—passed on in the way a parent speaks to a child, in the stories we tell, in the silences we keep.

If you pay attention, you can sense two very different currents running through this tapestry. They're not doctrines, not manifestos. They're more like the grain of the wood beneath your hand, or the pull of the tide when you wade into the surf. One current is cold, bracing and familiar. The other is warmer, more uncertain, but alive with possibility.

The first current is the one that runs on fear. It's the voice that whispers, "Be careful. Don't stand out. Don't ask too many questions." It's the comfort of certainty, the safety of obedience, the reassurance that someone else is in control. You see it in the way people fall into line, in the way rules are enforced not just by authorities but by neighbours, colleagues, even friends. It's the logic of the closed gate, the locked door, the unspoken warning. It promises protection, but at a price: the narrowing of possibility, the shrinking of the self.

This way of organising life is seductive, especially when the world feels dangerous or unpredictable. There's a relief in handing over responsibility, in letting someone else decide what's right and what's wrong. Certainty is a balm for anxiety, and obedience can feel like a kind of belonging. But beneath the surface, there's a brittleness, a sense that the price of safety is the slow erosion of agency, curiosity and care.

The second current is harder to describe, because it doesn't announce itself with slogans or rules. It's the quiet insistence that people are more than their fears, that life is more than survival. It's the willingness to ask, "What if?"—to wonder, to explore, to take responsibility for one's own choices. It's the courage to care, even when it's inconvenient or risky. This way of living is messier, less predictable. It requires trust—in oneself, in others, in the possibility of change.

You see this current in the teacher who encourages questions rather than rote answers, in the neighbour who checks in on someone doing it tough, in the friend who listens without judgement. It's there in the moments when people choose to act not out of fear, but out of a sense of shared responsibility. It's the logic of the open door, the invitation, the hand extended in welcome.

These two ways of organising human life are not abstract theories. They're lived, day by day, in the choices people make and the habits they form. Sometimes they coexist, uneasily, within the same community, the same family, even the same person. There are days when fear wins out, when certainty feels like the only safe harbour. And there are days when agency and care break through, when curiosity leads somewhere new.

What matters is not that one way is pure and the other wholly corrupt. Life is rarely that simple. But the balance between these currents shapes everything, from the way we raise our children to the way we respond to crisis, from the stories we tell about ourselves to the futures

we imagine. When fear and control become the organising principles of a society, something vital is lost. When agency, curiosity, responsibility and care are allowed to flourish, something essential is preserved.

You don't need to name these currents to feel their pull. You sense it in the way people look at each other on the street, in the tone of public debate, in the rules that are enforced and the ones that are quietly ignored. You feel it in your own body—the tightening of the chest when you're told to keep your head down, the lift in your heart when someone trusts you to make your own choices.

This is not a call to arms, nor a blueprint for reform. It's simply an invitation to notice: to pay attention to the ways we organise our lives and to ask, quietly but persistently, which current we are swimming in and which one we want to shape the world around us.

3. The seduction of certainty

There's a particular kind of relief that comes with certainty. It's the feeling you get when someone tells you, with absolute conviction, that they know what's going on and what needs to be done. In a world that feels increasingly unpredictable, that kind of assurance is magnetic. It draws people in, not because they're foolish, but because they're tired—tired of ambiguity, tired of the endless churn of conflicting information, tired of feeling like nothing is solid beneath their feet.

Authoritarian figures understand this instinctively. They don't offer understanding, which is slow and complicated and full of doubt. They offer certainty. They don't invite you to wrestle with complexity or to sit with uncomfortable questions. They give you answers—clear, simple, and unyielding. In times of anxiety and change, that's a powerful thing.

It's tempting to look down on those who are drawn to this kind of leadership, to dismiss them as gullible or weak. But that's not only unfair; it misses the point. The appeal of certainty isn't about ignorance. It's about exhaustion and fear. When the world feels like it's spinning out of control, the promise of order, however brittle or illusory, can feel like a lifeline.

Certainty is offered instead of understanding. Strength is offered instead of wisdom. Obedience is offered instead of responsibility. These are not just rhetorical moves; they're emotional bargains. The leader says, "Trust me. I'll take care of it. You don't need to worry." And for a while, that can feel like a kind of freedom—the freedom from doubt, from the burden of having to figure things out for yourself.

But there's a cost. Certainty, when it's enforced from above, requires the suppression of questions. It demands that people stop looking too closely, stop asking why, stop wondering if there might be another way. It's a bargain that trades agency for comfort, curiosity for conformity.

You see it in the way people rally around slogans, in the way dissent is painted as disloyalty, in the way complexity is flattened into black and white. The world is divided into us and them, right and wrong, safe and dangerous. There's no room for ambiguity, no space for the messy, uncomfortable work of thinking things through.

And yet, the seduction of certainty is not just a political phenomenon. It seeps into everyday life. It's there in the way people cling to routines, to familiar explanations, to the comfort of knowing where they stand. It's there in the way communities close ranks, in the way families avoid difficult conversations, in the way individuals retreat into certainty when the world feels too much.

The trouble is, certainty is rarely as solid as it seems. It can be comforting, yes, but it's also brittle. It can't accommodate change, or difference, or the unexpected. When reality intrudes—when things don't go according to plan, when new information comes to light—certainty cracks. And when it does, the response is often not to open up, but to double down. To insist, even more loudly, that the answers are clear, that the leader knows best, that questioning is dangerous.

This is how authoritarian figures flourish. Not by persuading people that they're right, but by convincing them that the alternative—uncertainty, ambiguity, responsibility—is unbearable. They offer a kind of emotional shelter, a place to rest from the storm. But it's a shelter that comes at a price: the narrowing of thought, the suppression of doubt, the erosion of the very qualities that make us human.

To acknowledge the appeal of certainty is not to excuse its dangers. It's to recognise that, in times of anxiety and change, the longing for order is powerful. It's to see that the line between comfort and control is thin, and that the desire for certainty can be turned against us—used to justify obedience, to silence dissent, to shut down the messy, necessary work of thinking for ourselves.

The challenge, then, is not to sneer at those who are drawn to certainty, but to understand the forces that make it so seductive. To see that, beneath the surface, what's at stake is not just politics, but the deeper question of how we live with uncertainty—how we find the courage to think, to question, to take responsibility, even when the world feels unsteady beneath our feet.

4. Why thinking becomes dangerous

There's a quiet, persistent threat that hovers over societies where certainty is prized above all else. It's not the threat of violence, or even the threat of overt censorship. It's the threat posed by thinking itself—by the habits of mind that refuse to settle for easy answers, that insist on evidence, uncertainty, and correction. In these places, science and education are not just institutions; they are ways of being, ways of seeing the world that are fundamentally at odds with rule by decree.

Science, at its heart, is a discipline of doubt. It asks for proof, for repeatability, for the humility to admit when you're wrong. It's a habit of mind that values questions over answers, uncertainty over dogma. Education, too, is more than a curriculum or a classroom. It's the practice of teaching people how to question, how to weigh evidence, how to think for themselves rather than simply absorb what they're told.

These habits are dangerous to those who seek control. They are slow, deliberate, and resistant to shortcuts. They require space for disagreement, for correction, for the possibility that the official story might not be the whole story. In societies where obedience is the highest virtue, these qualities are not just inconvenient—they are threats.

So, the attack begins. Science is ridiculed, reframed as elitist or irrelevant. Education is undermined, painted as indoctrination or dismissed as unnecessary. The language shifts: evidence becomes “opinion”, correction becomes “bias”, and truth itself is recast as just another narrative. The goal is not to win an argument, but to erode the very foundations of thinking.

You see it in the way experts are mocked, in the way teachers are pressured to stick to the script, in the way scientists are told to stay in their lane. The message is clear: don't ask questions, don't challenge the official line, don't make things complicated. Thinking is dangerous because it slows things down, because it introduces friction, because it refuses to settle for what's familiar.

But the danger is not just to those in power. It's to everyone. When thinking is weakened, when evidence is dismissed, when education is hollowed out, the space for genuine conversation shrinks. People become wary of asking questions, afraid of being labelled as troublemakers or dissenters. The boundaries of what can be said, and even what can be thought, narrow.

And yet, the habits of mind that science and education cultivate are not easily destroyed. They persist, quietly, in the corners of society—in the teacher who encourages curiosity, in the scientist who insists on evidence, in the student who asks “why?”. They are acts of resistance, small but significant, that keep the possibility of thoughtful, responsible, and humane life alive.

The challenge, then, is to recognise the value of these habits, to defend them not as institutions but as ways of being. To insist on the right to question, to weigh evidence, to admit uncertainty. To remember that thinking is not just a privilege, but a necessity—one that is always, inevitably, a little bit dangerous.

5. Controlling reality itself

There's a shift that's subtler than the tightening of laws or the silencing of dissent. It's the move from demanding obedience to demanding control over reality itself. In this new landscape, power isn't content with people following orders—it wants to shape what people believe, what they remember, what they recognise as true.

It starts with the repeated lie. Not just once, but again and again, until the line between fact and fiction blurs. Assertion replaces evidence. Familiarity masquerades as truth. The purpose isn't persuasion, but exhaustion. When people are worn down, they stop asking what is true and settle for what feels familiar.

You see it in the way language is twisted. Words that once had clear meanings are bent into shapes that suit the powerful. "Security" becomes a justification for surveillance. "Freedom" is used to defend exclusion. "Truth" is whatever is repeated often enough to drown out doubt.

This isn't new. There's a historical echo here, but it's not delivered as a lecture. It's the quiet reminder that societies have always wrestled with the tension between reality and power. The difference now is the speed and scale. Lies can be broadcast instantly, repeated endlessly, and amplified by algorithms that reward outrage and certainty.

The effect is cumulative. People become weary. They stop checking sources, stop questioning motives, stop wondering if there might be another way. The familiar becomes comfortable, even when it's false. The repeated lie isn't meant to convince—it's meant to wear down resistance.

In this environment, evidence is sidelined. Data is cherry-picked, context is stripped away, and complexity is flattened. The loudest voices aren't necessarily the most truthful—they're simply the most persistent. The goal isn't to win an argument, but to dominate the conversation.

Power seeks to control not just what people do, but what they think, what they remember, what they believe. It's a kind of colonisation of the mind, a slow erosion of the habits that make thoughtful, responsible, and humane life possible.

The challenge, then, is to recognise the tactics. To notice when assertion replaces evidence, when repetition is used not to persuade but to exhaust, when familiarity is mistaken for truth. It's to remember that reality is not a matter of decree, but of careful attention, honest conversation, and the willingness to question what's familiar.

This is not a call to arms, but a call to awareness. To pay attention to the ways reality is shaped, contested, and sometimes distorted. To insist, quietly but persistently, that truth matters—not because it's comfortable, but because it's necessary for living thoughtfully, responsibly, and humanly.

6. Silencing friction

There's a peculiar discomfort that comes with being slowed down, with having your certainty interrupted by someone who insists on checking the facts, or who asks an awkward question at just the wrong moment. In a world increasingly obsessed with speed and efficiency, friction is seen as a nuisance—something to be eliminated. But friction, in the form of independent scrutiny, is precisely what keeps power honest.

Journalists, scientists, educators, critics—these are the people who introduce friction. They remember. They verify. They ask for evidence, for context, for the story behind the story. They don't merely disagree with power; they slow it down. They make it harder for the powerful to rewrite reality on a whim, to pass off assertion as fact, to let slogans stand in for substance.

It's no surprise, then, that these voices are so often targeted. The attack is rarely direct, at least at first. It begins with mockery, with the suggestion that experts are out of touch, that journalists are biased, that teachers are pushing an agenda. The language shifts: correction becomes "bias", evidence becomes "opinion", and truth itself is reframed as just another narrative among many.

The aim isn't to win an argument. It's to muddy the waters, to make it harder for anyone to know what's real. If every correction is just another form of bias, if every fact is just someone's opinion, then nothing can be trusted. The result isn't clarity, but confusion. And confusion, far from being a failure of the system, is the goal.

When people are confused, they become passive. They stop asking questions, stop challenging authority, stop insisting on evidence. They retreat into the comfort of familiar slogans, into the safety of belonging to a side, any side. The space for genuine conversation shrinks, replaced by echo chambers and shouting matches.

The silencing of friction doesn't always look like censorship. Sometimes it's just a matter of drowning out dissent with noise, of making it too exhausting to keep up with the latest twist in the story. Sometimes it's about making people doubt their own judgement, about convincing them that the truth is always just out of reach.

But friction matters. It's what keeps the wheels of democracy from spinning out of control. It's what allows for correction, for learning, for the slow, painstaking work of getting things right. When friction is silenced, when the voices that slow things down are mocked or marginalised, the result isn't just a faster system—it's a more brittle one, prone to collapse when reality finally intrudes.

The challenge, then, is to recognise the value of friction, to defend the right to ask awkward questions, to insist on the importance of evidence and correction. It's to remember that confusion is not a sign that something has gone wrong, but that something is working exactly as intended. When truth becomes just another narrative, when correction is dismissed as bias, it's not an accident—it's a strategy.

And so, the work of resistance is often slow, often thankless. It's the work of remembering, of verifying, of insisting that facts matter, even when it's inconvenient. It's the work of keeping the line open, of refusing to let confusion have the last word.

7. Faith without conscience

There's a subtle but powerful shift that occurs when faith is harnessed not as a wellspring of conscience, but as a tool for certainty and control. It's a shift that's easy to miss, especially in societies where religion is woven into the fabric of daily life, where rituals and beliefs are handed down like family heirlooms. But when faith is recast as rigid certainty—when obedience becomes virtue and doubt is treated as sin—something essential is lost.

This isn't an attack on faith itself. Genuine faith, at its heart, is a conversation with uncertainty. It's the willingness to wrestle with questions, to sit with mystery, to discern what is right rather than simply obey what is commanded. It's a practice of conscience, not just a set of rules. But ultra-conservative religious fundamentalism, encouraged by those who seek power, flips this on its head. Certainty replaces discernment. Obedience is elevated above responsibility. Moral complexity is flattened into simple, unyielding answers.

You see it in the way authority is invoked. The leader, the preacher, the institution—these become the arbiters of what is right and wrong. The individual is relieved of the burden of moral responsibility. Doubt is discouraged, even punished. The virtue of questioning, of wrestling with conscience, is replaced by the virtue of compliance.

This mirrors exactly what happens to science, education, and media. In each domain, the qualities that make them valuable—curiosity, evidence, correction, discernment—are reframed as threats. The logic is the same: certainty is prized, obedience is rewarded, and doubt is treated as dangerous. Whether it's a scientist asking for proof, a journalist verifying facts, or a believer wrestling with faith, the message is clear—stop asking questions, stop complicating things, stop slowing down the machinery of control.

Different domains. Same logic. The attack is not just on institutions, but on the habits of mind and heart that make thoughtful, responsible, and humane life possible. When faith is stripped of conscience, when science is stripped of evidence, when education is stripped of questioning, the result is a society that prizes certainty above all else—a society where obedience is the highest virtue, and doubt is the greatest sin.

But conscience matters. The willingness to wrestle with uncertainty, to discern what is right, to take responsibility for one's own choices—these are the qualities that keep societies honest, that prevent power from becoming absolute. The challenge, then, is to defend faith as conscience, not as certainty. To insist that questioning is not a failure, but a virtue. To remember that obedience, without discernment, is not virtue—it's abdication.

This is not a call to abandon faith, or science, or education. It's a call to reclaim them as practices of conscience, as ways of being that resist the seduction of certainty and the comfort of obedience. It's a reminder that the work of discernment is slow, messy, and costly—but that it is precisely what makes us human.

8. The need for an enemy

There's a pattern that repeats itself, quietly but relentlessly, wherever power seeks to tighten its grip. It's the creation of an enemy—sometimes shadowy, sometimes all too visible, but always essential to the machinery of control. Authoritarian systems, whether grand or petty, need a bogey-man. Not as an accident of history, but as a deliberate strategy.

An internal enemy absorbs blame. When things go wrong, when promises fall short, when the world refuses to bend to the will of those in charge, there must be someone to point to, someone to hold responsible. Complexity is a nuisance; it muddies the story, makes it harder to rally the crowd. But an enemy—an outsider, a dissenter, a group marked as different—simplifies everything. The world is divided into us and them, safe and dangerous, loyal and suspect.

Difference becomes danger. People become problems. The boundaries of belonging are redrawn, sometimes overnight, and those who find themselves on the wrong side are not just excluded—they are blamed, feared, sometimes even hated. The rhetoric shifts: what was once a neighbour is now a threat; what was once a disagreement is now a betrayal.

Bigotry is not incidental. It is functional. It binds through fear rather than values. The stories told about the enemy—whether they are migrants, minorities, intellectuals, or anyone who refuses to fall in line—are not just about exclusion. They are about unity, forged in opposition. The crowd is brought together not by what it loves, but by what it fears.

This need for an enemy seeps into everyday life. It's there in the jokes that aren't really jokes, in the sideways glances, in the quiet calculations about who is safe to trust. It's there in the policies that single out, in the laws that punish difference, in the silences that grow when people are afraid to speak up for those who are targeted.

The logic is circular and relentless. The more the enemy is blamed, the more the crowd is unified. The more the crowd is unified, the easier it is to justify new measures, new exclusions, new acts of cruelty. The cycle feeds itself, growing harsher with each turn.

But the cost is enormous. Not just for those who are targeted, but for everyone. A society that binds itself through fear is a society that shrinks, that grows brittle, that loses the capacity for empathy and imagination. The enemy may change, but the damage remains.

The challenge, then, is to notice when difference is being turned into danger, when people are being made into problems. It's to resist the temptation to find comfort in unity forged against a common foe, and to remember that real strength lies in the messy, difficult work of living with difference.

This is not a call to ignore danger, or to pretend that all conflict can be wished away. It's a call to recognise the ways in which fear is used, deliberately, to bind and to blind. It's a reminder that the need for an enemy is not a sign of strength, but of weakness—a sign that power, uncertain of itself, must always find someone to blame.

9. Law, order, and licensed cruelty

There's a language that creeps in, quiet at first, then louder, until it becomes the background hum of public life. "Maintaining order." "Protecting values." "Doing what must be done." These phrases are repeated until they lose their edges, until they become so familiar that no one stops to ask what, exactly, is being ordered, whose values are being protected, or what must, in fact, be done.

Violence, in this context, is not always the spectacle of riot shields and rubber bullets. Sometimes it's quieter, more procedural. It's the knock at the door, the paperwork that denies, the policy that excludes. It's the slow tightening of rules, the expansion of powers, the normalisation of surveillance. It's the way uniforms and slogans and euphemisms turn brutality into duty, and duty into reassurance.

The rituals of authority are everywhere. The parade of uniforms at the border, the solemn press conference after a crackdown, the language of necessity and inevitability. "We regret the inconvenience." "For your safety." "There is no alternative." These are not just words; they are signals, cues for the public to look away, to trust that someone else is in charge, to feel reassured even as the boundaries of what is acceptable are quietly redrawn.

Ordinary people are invited to participate, or at least to acquiesce. Sometimes it's as simple as ignoring what happens to others, as easy as accepting the official story. Sometimes it's more active—a nod of approval, a shrug of indifference, a willingness to believe that those who suffer must have done something to deserve it. The machinery of licensed cruelty runs not just on orders from above, but on the quiet consent of those who choose not to see.

The language of law and order is powerful because it appeals to deep instincts—the desire for safety, the longing for predictability, the comfort of belonging to the group that is protected rather than threatened. But it is also dangerous, because it can be used to justify almost anything. Once violence is wrapped in the language of duty, once cruelty is reframed as necessity, the line between protection and persecution becomes perilously thin.

The challenge is to notice when language is being used to soften, to sanitise, to obscure. To ask, each time a new measure is announced, whose safety is being protected, whose values are being enforced, whose suffering is being overlooked. To remember that law and order, without justice and compassion, can become little more than a licence for cruelty.

This is not a call to reject order, or to romanticise chaos. It is a call to remain vigilant, to refuse the comfort of slogans, to insist on seeing what is actually being done in our name. It is a reminder that the rituals of authority, the uniforms and the euphemisms, are not ends in themselves. They are tools, and like all tools, they can be used to build or to destroy.

The work, then, is to keep looking, to keep asking, to keep insisting that law and order must serve humanity, not the other way around. To refuse to look away, even when it would be easier, even when it would be safer. Because the line between duty and cruelty is not drawn by uniforms or slogans—it is drawn, every day, by the choices we make and the questions we are willing to ask.

10. When people leave — and when they stay

There's a moment, sometimes quiet and sometimes desperate, when those who see most clearly decide to step away. It's not always a grand gesture or a public stand. More often, it's a slow retreat—a decision made in the privacy of one's own mind, or around the kitchen table, or in the small hours of the morning when the cost of staying has become too high.

When people leave, the system they depart from rarely mourns their absence. In fact, it often becomes purer, more rigid, more extreme. The voices that once offered caution or dissent, that slowed things down or complicated the story, are gone. What remains is a kind of echo chamber, a place where only one note is played, louder and louder, until it drowns out all others.

Silence accelerates extremity. Without friction, without the awkward questions or the inconvenient truths, the machinery of power runs faster and harder. The boundaries of what is acceptable shift, almost imperceptibly at first, then with gathering speed. What was once unthinkable becomes normal. What was once debated becomes dogma. The absence of dissent is not peace—it is the precondition for escalation.

But leaving is not always a choice made lightly, or with malice. Sometimes it is survival. Sometimes it is the only way to protect oneself, or one's family, or one's sanity. There is no shame in recognising one's limits, in stepping back when the cost of staying becomes unbearable. This is not a failure of courage, but an honest reckoning with reality.

And yet, the cost of departure is not borne by the leaver alone. Each absence leaves a gap—a space where complexity used to live, where empathy used to soften the edges, where memory used to remind people of what was possible. The system grows harsher, more brittle, less able to adapt or to hear.

Those who stay, for whatever reason, face their own challenges. They may feel isolated, or complicit, or simply exhausted. They may wonder if their presence makes any difference, if their small acts of resistance or decency are noticed at all. But sometimes, it is the quiet persistence of those who remain—the ones who refuse to be silenced, who keep asking questions, who keep the line open—that makes all the difference.

There is no single right answer. Sometimes leaving is an act of self-preservation; sometimes staying is an act of courage. Both are shaped by circumstance, by temperament, by the shifting calculus of risk and hope. What matters is not to judge, but to understand—to see that both choices are responses to a world that has become inhospitable to thoughtfulness, responsibility, and humanity.

The challenge, then, is to acknowledge limits honestly. To recognise that survival is not betrayal, that silence is not always consent, that absence is not always abandonment. But also to remember that every departure changes the system left behind, and that every act of staying—however small—can be a thread that holds the fabric together, if only for a little while.

11. The opposite way of being

There's a quiet kind of courage that doesn't announce itself with slogans or grand gestures. It's not about standing on a soapbox or waving a banner. Instead, it's the steady, deliberate choice to live from the heart, even when the world seems determined to reward the opposite. It's an orientation, not a brand—a way of being that resists the pull of certainty, obedience, and division.

To live this way is to stay present, rather than reactive. It's to resist the urge to retreat into old certainties or to lash out in fear. It's the willingness to sit with discomfort, to listen when it would be easier to shout, to remain open when the world urges you to close down. It's the quiet discipline of choosing responsibility over obedience, of asking, "What is required of me?" rather than, "What am I allowed to do?"

Curiosity becomes a form of resistance. In a climate where certainty is demanded, to remain curious is to refuse the easy answers, to keep asking questions even when the answers are slow in coming. It's to wonder about the lives of others, to imagine what it's like to walk in their shoes, to resist the temptation to dehumanise—even when dehumanisation is rewarded.

This way of being is not without cost. In fact, the cost is precisely what gives it meaning. To stay present in a world that rewards distraction, to choose responsibility in a culture that prizes obedience, to remain curious where certainty is demanded—these are not easy things. They require patience, humility, and a willingness to be misunderstood.

But the alternative is a kind of shrinking—a narrowing of the self, a retreat into the safety of the familiar. To live from the heart is to accept that you will sometimes stand apart, that you will sometimes be out of step with the crowd. It's to accept that kindness may be mistaken for weakness, that doubt may be seen as disloyalty, that care may be dismissed as naïveté.

And yet, it is precisely these quiet acts—staying present, choosing responsibility, remaining curious, refusing to dehumanise—that keep the possibility of a more humane world alive. They are the threads that hold the fabric together, even when everything else seems to be unravelling.

This is not a call to heroism, or to martyrdom. It's an invitation to notice the small, daily choices that shape who we become. It's a reminder that living from the heart is not about being perfect, but about being willing to try—again and again, even when it's hard, even when it's costly.

Because in the end, it is these choices—quiet, persistent, often unseen—that matter most. They are what allow us to remain human, even when the world seems determined to turn us into something less.

12. Decency as resistance

In a world where noise is mistaken for strength and bluster for leadership, there's a quiet power in decency. It doesn't shout. It doesn't demand the spotlight. Instead, it persists in the background—steady, deliberate, and often unnoticed. Yet it is these small, quiet acts that preserve what is most human in us, especially when the world seems determined to strip it away.

Decency is not a grand gesture. It's the truth spoken calmly, even when it would be easier to stay silent. It's care offered deliberately, not because it will be rewarded, but because it is needed. It's the neighbour who checks in when someone's doing it tough, the colleague who refuses to join in when the conversation turns cruel, the stranger who steps in to help without expecting thanks.

Community is sustained quietly, in the everyday acts of looking out for one another. It's the meal dropped off at a friend's door, the message sent to someone who's gone quiet, the willingness to listen when someone needs to talk. These are not the things that make headlines, but they are the things that hold the fabric of society together.

Language, too, is kept honest. In a climate where words are twisted and meaning is blurred, there's resistance in refusing to play along. It's in the insistence on calling things what they are, in the refusal to let euphemism soften cruelty or to let slogans drown out nuance. It's in the quiet correction, the gentle challenge, the willingness to say, "That's not right," even when it's unpopular.

This is not how power is seized. It is how humanity is retained. Decency doesn't topple regimes or rewrite laws overnight. But it does something just as important: it keeps the possibility of a better world alive. It reminds us that, even in the midst of confusion and cruelty, there are other ways of being—ways that are grounded in care, in honesty, in the stubborn refusal to give up on one another.

Decency is resistance, not because it is loud or dramatic, but because it endures. It's the thread that runs through the darkest times, the quiet assurance that, no matter how much is lost, something essential remains. It's the choice, made again and again, to act with kindness, to speak with honesty, to hold the line against the tide.

In the end, it is these small acts—truth spoken calmly, care offered deliberately, community sustained quietly, language kept honest—that matter most. They are not just gestures of resistance; they are the means by which we hold onto our humanity, even when everything else is at risk.

13. Closing: what survives

There's a temptation, at the end of a reckoning like this, to reach for comfort—to offer a neat resolution, a promise that everything will be alright. But honesty demands something different. The danger is real, and the outcome is uncertain. There are no guarantees that decency will prevail, that memory will be enough, that connection will always endure. The world has seen moments like this before, and not all of them have ended well.

Yet, even as the future remains unsettled, there are deeper truths that persist beneath the noise and the fear. Authoritarian moments pass. The machinery of control, no matter how relentless, eventually falters. What survives is not the bluster of power, but the quieter, more enduring threads of human decency, memory, and connection.

You see it in the way people keep the line open—between themselves and others, between conscience and action, between power and reality. It's there in the conversations that refuse to be silenced, in the acts of care that persist even when they're not rewarded, in the stubborn insistence that truth matters, even when it's inconvenient.

What survives is not certainty, but the willingness to live with uncertainty. Not obedience, but the courage to take responsibility. Not division, but the slow, patient work of building and rebuilding community. These are not grand gestures, but the daily choices that shape the world, quietly and persistently, over time.

So the question is not whether danger can be avoided, or whether the outcome is assured. The question is what we choose to keep alive—what lines we keep open, what memories we refuse to let go, what connections we nurture, even when the world seems determined to turn us against each other.

In the end, what survives is not the machinery of power, but the humanity that endures in spite of it. The story is not finished. The line is still open. And the question—what will we choose, and what will we keep alive?—remains, quietly, for each of us to answer.

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