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Be decent. Be earnest. Don't lose your capacity for shock and sorrow.

We cannot become desensitized if we are going to reclaim our democracy.

By RUTH DEFOSTER

Maybe you're numb by now. One could hardly blame you, amid the seemingly endless progression of horrifying news that comes to light weekly.

It's easy to become desensitized, even hardened. I certainly don't want to think about the moral and epistemological crisis plaguing my country. I don't want to look it in the face. Staying engaged is exhausting. But every so often a piece of news comes along that shakes even those who feel exhausted. That finally happened for me this week, with ProPublica's stunning piece of investigative journalism uncovering breathtaking cruelty and depravity on the part of some 9,000 border patrol agents on Facebook. (See: tinyurl.com/propublica-border.)

On a picture of a migrant trying to carry a little child across a rushing river in a plastic bag, one agent wrote "at least it's already in a trash bag." It. And I, who have felt incapable of shock for months now, was shocked by this report. I grieved for these people who are so far gone, so incapable of human empathy.

And it's just the latest one. It's impossible to keep track of the avalanche of atrocities the Trump administration has ushered in. Cramming detention camps full of terrified, hungry people in conditions we would deplore anywhere else, refusing humanitarian aid that would ease their suffering, all while mocking these desperate migrants and even dead children — it's just the latest thing on the pile.

When I was a child, I felt secure in my identity as an American. I embraced a sort of shining, earnest patriotism. America was exceptional and so was I, as a native-born daughter. I took pride in the flag. I treasured my family's immigrant story, like so many others, a trajectory of trial and triumph. When I was a child in New York, my grandfather took me to the Statue of Liberty, where he urged me to always remember the poem inscribed on the base, Emma Lazarus's "The New Colossus."

America, Mother of Exiles. Beacon of light in the darkness. Hope for the hopeless. This is what the United States represented for my family. The hope

for something better than poverty and suffering that stalked them at home.

When the twin towers fell in 2001, I stood at ground zero just a few weeks later, with my fingers through the chain-link fence, looking around in a daze at the sea of American flags that had sprung up around me. I felt comforted by their presence. I felt unified with other New Yorkers, proud to be American, defiant in the face of evil, certain we would win.

American flags once inspired a stirring of earnest patriotism inside me; they don't anymore. They've come to symbolize a kind of zealotry that makes me uneasy. Too many people who wear them emblazoned on their bodies are not Americans I recognize. They delight in anger, screaming for the heads of their enemies, bound by a shared, gleeful, hardened cruelty. They mock the dead and demean the living.

In some ways, I think the only thing surprising about recent events is our capacity to remain surprised. Decent people still feel grief and outrage at the sight of human suffering. I find this simple, communal fact oddly comforting. We are not alone. You are not alone in your sorrow.

Earnestness may be emphatically out of fashion now. But it's OK to be earnest. It's laudable to weep for the dead, for the suffering. It is good to be soft and empathetic and kind.

The gleefully cruel do not own American patriotism. They don't own the flag. The flag is mine, too. It belongs to my family, and to the families of brand-new immigrants, and to our children, who have to inherit this mess.

Hold on to your earnestness. Hold on to your empathy. Hold on to your sorrow. Call your legislators. Donate to organizations that are holding corruption and evil to account. Actually talk to your family and your neighbors — in person. Don't retreat to partisan echo chambers. Speak the truth.

Earnestness hurts. Engagement hurts. Sorrow hurts. But it's necessary, if we are going to reclaim our democracy from this degradation. Don't let your heart grow hard. We are in this together.

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