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The Left, Online and Outraged

Liberal Blogger Finds an Outlet and a Community

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SHERMAN OAKS, Calif. -- In the angry life of Maryscott O'Connor, the rage begins as soon as she opens her eyes and realizes that her president is still George W. Bush. The sun has yet to rise and her family is asleep, but no matter; as soon as the realization kicks in, O'Connor, 37, is out of bed and heading toward her computer.

Out there, awaiting her building fury: the Angry Left, where O'Connor's reputation is as one of the angriest of all. "One long, sustained scream" is how she describes the writing she does for various Web logs, as she wonders what she should scream about this day.

She smokes a cigarette. Should it be about Bush, whom she considers "malevolent," a "sociopath" and "the Antichrist"? She smokes another cigarette. Should it be about Vice President Cheney, whom she thinks of as "Satan," or about Karl Rove, "the devil"? Should it be about the "evil" Republican Party, or the "weaselly, capitulating, self-aggrandizing, self-serving" Democrats, or the Catholic Church, for which she says "I have a special place in my heart . . . a burning, sizzling, putrescent place where the guilty suffer the tortures of the damned"?

Darfur, she finally decides. She will write about Darfur. The shame of it. The culpability of all Americans, including herself, for doing nothing. She will write something so filled with outrage that it will accomplish the one thing above all she wants from her anger: to have an effect.

"Darfur is not hopeless," she begins typing, and pauses.

"Ugh," she says.

"You are not helpless," she continues typing, and pauses again.

"Weak."

She deletes everything and starts over.

"WAKE THE [expletive] UP," she writes next, and this time, instead of pausing, she keeps going, typing harder and harder on a keyboard that is surrounded by a pack of cigarettes, a dirty ashtray, a can of nonalcoholic beer, an album with photos of her dead father and a taped-up note -- staring at her -- on which she has scrawled "Why am I/you here?"

Outspoken and Uncensored

These are mean times.

"I just want to see these [expletive] swinging from their heels in the public square," reads a recent comment from someone named Dave in a discussion about the Bush administration on a Web site called

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Eschaton.

Crude times, too.

"Laura Bush Talks; No One Gives a [expletive]," someone who calls himself the Rude Pundit writes on his Web site, and he continues: "The Rude Pundit doesn't give a retarded dog drool what Laura Bush has to say about the Olympics."

Loud, crass and instantaneous.

"I feel like I'm being molested everytime I hear his voice," one person writes on the Daily Kos Web site while watching a Bush news conference.

What's notable about this isn't only the level of anger but the direction from which it is coming. Not that long ago, it was the right that was angry and the left that was, at least comparatively, polite. But after years of being the targets of inflammatory rhetoric, not only from fringe groups but also from such mainstream conservative politicians as Newt Gingrich, the left has gone on the attack. And with Republicans in control of Washington, they have much more to be angry about.

"Powerlessness" is O'Connor's explanation. "This is born of powerlessness."

To what, effect, though? Do the hundreds of thousands of daily visitors to Daily Kos, who sign their comments with phrases such as "Anger is energy," accomplish anything other than talking among themselves? The founder of Daily Kos, Markos Moulitsas, may have a wide enough reputation at this point to consult regularly with Democrats on Capitol Hill, but what about the heart and soul of Daily Kos, the other visitors, whose presence extends no further than what they read and write on the site?

How about the 125,000 or so daily visitors to Eschaton? Or the thousands who visit Rude Pundit, the Smirking Chimp or My Left Wing, which is O'Connor's Web site?

Put another way, can one person sitting alone in a living room, typing her fingertips numb on a keyboard, make a difference?

"Rage, rage against the Lying of the Right" is the subtitle of O'Connor's Web site.

"If I can't rant, I don't want to be part of your revolution" is how she signs her comments, in the place other people might write "Sincerely."

"I was not like this before," she says. "I was riddled with empathy for everyone suffering in the world. Classic bleeding-heart liberal."

Before:

She signed petitions. She boycotted veal. She canvassed for Greenpeace. She donated to Planned Parenthood. She read the Nation, the New Yorker, the Utne Reader and Mother Jones. She agonized over low wages for overseas workers every time she bought a \$40 leather purse.

Then George W. Bush was elected. Then came 9/11, Afghanistan, Iraq, Guantanamo Bay, Abu Ghraib, the Patriot Act, secret prisons, domestic eavesdropping, the revamping of the Supreme Court, and the thought "It has come to the point where the worst people on Earth are running the Earth." And now, "I have become one of those people with all the bumper stickers on their car," she says. "I am this close to being one of those muttering people pushing a cart.

"I'm insane with rage and grief.

"But I also feel more connected than I ever have."

Angry Together

The people she's connected to include Shanikka, who decides one day to post on O'Connor's Web site a 737-word "open letter to President George W. Bush" that says in part: "You can't hide from the truth, Dubbya. You also can't hide from yourself. And it is YOU, Mr. President, that you need to run from. Because you are the problem. You destroy everything you touch professionally when you're left to do what you want. Everything."

To which another of O'Connor's connections, Bill, responds, "A most excelentest rant, shanikka, but don't you think you should distill this down to twenty-five words or less if you want [Bush] to read it? Or have it read to him. I'm sure he has ADD."

To which Nite74 responds, "ADD implies that some attention span is already present to be deficient."

To which Linnaeus responds, "I might say, though, that saying he has ADD is an insult to those who actually have it."

To which Bill, responding to his responders, writes, "It was rather though[t]less of me to compare the most asinine, brutal, criminal, disgusting, enraging, felonious, gross, horrendous, incompetent, jaundiced, kleptocratic, lazy, malicious, nefarious, objectional, psychopathic, quarrelsome, repulsive, sanctimonious, treasonous, unfit, vindictive, wasteful, xenophobic, yahooish, zealotic piece of [expletive] inhabiting the White House and the planet to persons suffering with a neurobiological disorder."

And on it goes, every day, around the clock, on Web site after Web site. Since its debut last July, My Left Wing has had some 450,000 visits and is now averaging about 3,000 visits and 14,000 page views a day. At any given moment, several dozen people are looking at the site, and user data shows that they are all over the world -- mostly from the United States, occasionally from overseas and often from Washington, D.C., where the log-on addresses sometimes end in senate.gov or house.gov.

All of which O'Connor finds remarkable, especially when she considers her route to this point -- the complications of which are reflected in the items she keeps close at hand.

The cigarettes are because of a personality that she describes as compulsive.

The nonalcoholic beer is because for several years she drank to excess.

The note that says "Why am I/you here?" is because she is in constant search of an answer.

And the photo album is because of a 25-year-old Marine who died fighting in Vietnam three months before she was born, which she thinks helps explain the note, the alcohol, the cigarettes and the very first piece of writing she ever published online, a rant against the war in Iraq that began, "Every single millisecond of my life was directly affected by the nightmare that was Vietnam."

As for the keyboard, it is where O'Connor finished her evolution from lost soul to angry soul, beginning with that very first rant, which concluded with a wish that Bush, "after contracting incurable cancer and suffering for protracted periods of time without benefit of medication," go to hell.

She wrote it, sent it to Daily Kos, saw it appear online, watched as people responded to it -- and learned something about the effect of being both heartfelt and vicious. "It's impactful," she says. "It gets attention."

It also felt good, she says, transforming even, and soon she was posting regularly to Daily Kos, where

she became one of the more widely read diarists with attention-getters such as "Go [expletive] Yourself, Mrs. Cheney" and "Bush Must Be HIV Positive By Now (you can't [expletive] 500 million people and not get infected)."

Then, ready to try her own site, she started My Left Wing, and now she is practically banging on the keyboard as she finishes a 1,000-word piece about the need for sanctions and peacekeeping forces as ways to stop the violence in Darfur.

"You don't think you can do anything? ANYTHING? You're right. YOU can't do anything. But WE can. WE CAN," she writes.

"MAKE SOME [expletive] NOISE ABOUT DARFUR and you WILL be heard, and it WILL be addressed. Keep silent . . . and none of your future 'How could we let it happen' elegies will mean a good goddamn."

Almost finished.

She attaches a photograph she finds on the Internet of a pile of bones and skin that turns out to be a dying little boy.

"All right," she says nervously, after checking everything for spelling errors. "Here it goes."

She clicks the mouse, and "WAKE THE [expletive] UP" instantly appears on My Left Wing, where, at the moment, 57 people are signed on.

A few seconds later, to increase its chances for impact, she sends "WAKE THE [expletive] UP" to Daily Kos, where the number of viewers per hour is about 30,000.

Thirty-eight seconds later, she gets her first response.

"I'M AWAKE!!!!!!" it says.

A Rant With Results

"I'm going to be proud of this," O'Connor says, as the responses keep building. Ten now. Twenty-five.

Meanwhile, around her, the other parts of her life go on: the two-bedroom rental, the car that got egged at the grocery store because of the bumper stickers, the family.

Her husband, Adam, who works as a lighting technician in Hollywood and is generally calmer about things, comes in from the kitchen. "I have an announcement," he says.

"The disposal is fixed?" she says.

"Yes."

She gets up, hugs him, comes back, sits down, checks the latest responses.

Nearing 50 now.

The front door opens and in comes her 6-year-old son, Terry, home from school, who starts batting around a blue balloon at the other end of the living room, batting it closer to her, closer, closer. She searches through her iTunes library until she finds one of her favorite downloads -- not music, but a speech by a character named Howard Beale in the movie "Network." She presses "play" and turns up the volume. "I want you to get mad!" Beale shouts at one point. "I want you to get mad!" she shouts

along, startling Terry. "What?" he says, backing away with his balloon.

Past 60 responses now, and as they keep coming O'Connor describes a trip she took to Washington last September for a rally against the Iraq war. It was a "buoyant" experience, she says, "exuberant," right up until the moment that the speakers onstage began yammering about things that had nothing to do with why they had gathered.

Free Palestine? Free some death-row inmate? End global warming? "That was when I just freaking lost it," she says. "Shut up! Shut up!" she remembers screaming into a bullhorn.

Now, as the responses near 100, O'Connor has a cigarette.

Now, as they head toward 200, she picks up the album about her father, where there's a letter from him to his wife, written three days before he died, that ends, "I love you and the baby more than I ever knew a person could love."

The baby.

He never knew her name, or that she was a girl, or that his wife weighed less on the day their daughter was born than when she was conceived. "Catatonic" is how O'Connor describes what her mother became for a while, and then the mother got better, and then the daughter got worse, and then the daughter got better by becoming angry rather than silent about a new war, so angry she began wishing her president would go to hell.

"I've got to stop looking at this," she says, putting the album away and turning back to the screen.

Meanwhile, over on Eschaton, Dave is writing, "As a matter of fact -- I do hate Bush!"

On Rude Pundit: "George W. Bush is the anti-Midas. Everything he touches turns to [expletive]."

On the Smirking Chimp: "I. Despise. These. [Expletive]!"

And on Daily Kos and My Left Wing, the responses keep rolling in.

"Thank you, Maryscott."

"Thank you for the kick in the [expletive]."

"I wrote to my [expletive] so-called representatives."

"I also wrote to my [expletive] congressman to get off his [expletive] [expletive] and do the right [expletive] thing."

"You know what?" O'Connor says. "I did a good thing today." And for a moment, anyway, she isn't angry at all.

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