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This is What Democracy Looks Like

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Independent Submission

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No one slept past his or her alarm on Saturday. The noise was audible all throughout the city. Locals and out-of-towners alike were determined to make President Trump's first day in office a memorable one.

Red hats began to peek through the windows and appear on the balconies overlooking Washington. The sounds of protest echoed through every avenue and side street. Up above, the red hats remained to observe or closed the curtains, hiding behind the slogan "make America great again," behind optimism, behind the presumed lesser evil, disgruntled and critical about the ruckus below.

Down below, the people shouting were indistinguishable, but unified in their cry: "Shut it down! Shut this broken system down!" It looked like complete madness. And it was complete madness: beautiful, colorful madness. The madness was visible down every street – blue and red, black, brown, and white, and every shade of pink. Diverse as one could imagine, but never more united in mission.

On January 21, 2017, for the first time since the two presidential candidates were announced, I felt proud to be American. I felt like I wasn't crazy for feeling unsettled about electing a president who tore down more than he built up, who rejected more than he listened, who did not represent me even though I am a part of his party. Every color and cause united to stand against hateful speech and to prove that America is still a place for immigrants, people of all faiths, and for free speech.

I joined fellow Americans on Pennsylvania Avenue in front of the National Archives, the building that guards the original guarantees of freedom for all. I walked on the same concrete where Dr. King led the civil rights movement, where thousands protested the Vietnam War, and where the LGBTQ+ community staked their claim on constitutional rights. The viewing stands along the inauguration route were empty for the 45th president on Friday, but packed with photographers and observers waving American flags throughout the protest.

In the history of the United States, there has never been a one-day protest this large. In Washington, the crowds were inescapable for miles, the subways were packed and people stayed out all day. The whole atmosphere changed from formal gloom to hopeful harmony. If you were out on the streets, it was clearly to protest and this understanding allowed for mutual respect between all people and even led to acts of unusual kindness. I saw locals giving directions to tourists. I saw a young white man give up his seat for an elderly black woman. In the metro, people spontaneously cheered and clapped because they were excited and energized about the events of the day. Their voices were being heard and the message was loud and clear.

The Women's March on Washington brought people together in D.C. and all over the world. The solidarity was not unilaterally confined to the United States. I was encouraged and inspired by the hundreds of "sister marches" that occurred around the country and the globe. Women and men in Sydney, Berlin, London, Wellington, Barcelona, Mexico City, Paris, Nairobi, Cape Town, and Geneva marched in solidarity with the citizens in Washington and in opposition to the adverse values they believe President Trump represents.

While the message was globally well-received, not everyone partook in the protests. President Trump may not have won the popular vote, but he still won the election. Many of his supporters, evangelicals and others who opposed the pro-choice groups in the march chose to watch the happenings on TV, behind curtains, and from front yards, or balconies.

To the people observing from the outside: you may be disgruntled about the ruckus you're hearing below and on your Facebook and in the news. From a bird's-eye view, it's hard to see the beauty of what happened on Saturday. Americans should be careful not to close eyes or ears to the change that is happening. The march wasn't about opposing conservative social policies – I am in agreement with many of those. These events were not a bunch of liberal sore losers hitting the streets because their candidate didn't win. In reality, it wasn't about one party or the other.

Some men and women chose to make diversity and race their reason for marching. Others made reproductive rights their primary focus. Many marched on behalf of the women who were sexualized, the handicapped who were criticized, and for the immigrants who were disrespected throughout the election. Still others came to show support for religious freedom for Muslims. There was no single cause for the march, which is why it was beautiful. It was a fusion of calls for justice.

In the words of Barack Obama, "Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are the ones we've been waiting for. We are the change that we seek."

As the protesters chanted many times, "this is what democracy looks like." Indeed, democracy is about people acting on their convictions to ensure a strong, representative government. The new administration will have the choice to disregard the ruckus or to listen to the voices for change and act. I hope for the latter. If the representative voices of the people are heard, I believe President Trump can create positive change in our country. I'm willing to give him a chance. *That* is what democracy looks like.