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Some Assembly Required

By Richard Lourie

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In today's America, only media personalities can draw crowds in the hundreds of thousands to demonstrate in Washington. Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert, two of the United States' favorite comedians, both hosts of "fake news" programs, called a "Restore Sanity and/or Fear" rally for Oct. 30 in Washington, which I attended.

Estimates of the rally's size are no longer made, the subject being both too imprecise and too pointedly political. But Washington was clearly deluged and overwhelmed. Restaurants began running out of food at breakfast, the subway was so packed that it was useless, and taxis were impossible to find. The cell phone system collapsed under a tsunami of signals causing someone to wonder aloud, "What if this were an emergency, not a rally?"

Because of that — or despite it — social behavior began undergoing change. People spoke to one another directly without preamble — to ask directions, make a joke, share a tip or comment about the signs, many with tart, youthful humor like "Why can't we all just get a bong?"

The force of the crowd had other effects besides abrading away the usual anxieties that exist between strangers. As the crowd grew denser, it exhibited a sort of herd civility, making room for others, especially people with disabilities or strollers. The moving crowd also created random encounters that would otherwise have a near-zero chance of occurring. A black working-class family from Kansas City ended up shooting the breeze with a columnist from The Moscow Times.

Some of the pleasures of assembly were impersonal. It was gratifying to see so many others with similar values and sense of life. That's not a feeling you get at a sports stadium where people don't connect, even though their emotions may rise and fall in unison.

In his book "Warsaw Diary," Kazimierz Brandys observed that the political awakening that became the Solidarity movement began with Pope John Paul II's first visit to Poland in 1979. People had a vision, though not a religious one. What they saw was: There are so many of us.

On the day following the Washington rally, there was something of a breakthrough event in Moscow. The authorities permitted 800 demonstrators and 200 journalists to gather on Triumfalnaya Ploshchad. For 1 1/2 years, these activists — "demonstrating essentially for the right to demonstrate" as The New York Times put it — had been hauled off on the 31st of every such month as they attempted to exercise the right of free assembly guaranteed by Article 31 of the Constitution.

On Oct. 31, the 800 activists — although permitted to demonstrate — were, however, hemmed in by iron barricades and police. They were mocked by their more radical colleagues who chose to shame them and risk arrest by demonstrating outside the permitted area.

It seems there's a split among the authorities, as well as among the demonstrators. Permission to demonstrate was given because it looks better at a time of rapprochement with the West than photographs of old women being dragged across the square. Still, some in power genuinely fear that demonstrations could inevitably lead to a Solidarity movement or an Orange Revolution. If the powers-that-be were as cynical as they're painted, they'd let the demonstrators march so they could see, as opposed to Poland, just how few they are in number.

But the powers-that-be aren't cynical at all. They still believe in the danger of demonstrations and the power of the people. In an odd sort of way, that is heartening.

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