

AN ARENA IN HUNTSVILLE, ALABAMA; CHARLOTTESVILLE, VIRGINIA;
DACA; THE WALL
A REFLECTION THROUGH THE LENS OF AN ANTI-POVERTY AGENCY
TWO IMAGES TO TAKE INTO THE NEW YEAR

*"When you gonna wake up, When you gonna wake up
When you gonna wake up Strengthen the things that remain"
-Bob Dylan, "When you gonna wake up"
Album: SLOW TRAIN COMING*

Flipping through the television channels on a Friday evening in late September, I lingered on the following visual constituting what I considered to be the latest assault perpetrated by the man occupying the White House on our country's collective sense of dignity and community. Speaking at a political rally in Huntsville, Alabama on behalf of one of the Republican candidates in a Senate primary, Mr. Trump decided to excoriate NFL players, almost all people of color, who chose to replace the standard respectful gesture for our national anthem with a different respectful gesture of dissent. As the television cameras panned the arena, a sea of white, well-fed and well-dressed images filled the screen.

I wasn't even surprised. Although I will say that the Alabama portrayed on the television screen that Friday evening looked almost nothing like the Alabama I remember from nearly a half century ago during my Sunday afternoon drives when I would pick up Alabama Route 431 outside of Phoenix City and travel through Eufaula and Dothan on my way to the Florida panhandle.

The scene in Charlottesville was, frankly, terrifying. Not solely because of the image of well-dressed males carrying tiki torches and marching in military formation, but also for Trump's response to the incident. DACA was simply disheartening because you can feel the potential tragedy and heartbreak pulsating right below the surface while "The Wall" simply represents one of the ugliest, divisive images perpetrated in recent memory.

To me, these are seminal images spray painted on freight cars heading to a destination that no one I know wants to go to. So the question arises - should we take solace in the pundits and non-stop commentators that seek to assure us that America is a strong democracy, fair play at its heart and strong enough to withstand impulses toward nativism and authoritarianism.

I hope those pundits are right, but my mind turns to wondering if these same kinds of reassuring conversations amongst like-minded people were taking place in the cafés in Rome and Milan in the 20's, Barcelona in the 30's or Santiago, Chile in the early 70's.

My fear is that it's too easy to fall asleep and wake up in a place where you don't want to be and can't understand how it is that you got there.

"The doctor said, as the ambulance rolled away 'He died in his sleep, there was no pain.'

The Fire Chief said, 'They found him in bed. It was the smoke that killed him, not the flames.'"

-Bill Morrissey, John Haber

Album: STANDING EIGHT

Chanting heartening slogans may provide momentary relief yet they are more often than not empty gestures. At the heart of the matter is the ability to listen. I believe that there have been at least two events in the past 20 years where, if enough of us had listened, we may have found ourselves in a different place.

First, I ask you to think of the "Battle in Seattle" in 1999. This moniker refers to the protests that accompanied the WTO (World Trade Organization) meetings and focused on the social disruption inflicted upon workers and their communities from the loss of manufacturing jobs due to the effects of globalization. Instead of listening to the anger and constructing strategies to

lessen the negative impact of globalization, we simply trivialized the event and made it into a movie.

The second event I would call your attention to is the Occupy Wall Street movement that began in September of 2011 where, again, the impacts of globalization and economic equality were at the forefront.

Six years later, it simply seems like a fading memory instead of the impetus for a movement with the goal of addressing the growing economic inequality in this culture.

So here's the question. How do you avoid suffocating from the putrid smoke emanating from this Administration, or avoid being anesthetized by the onslaught of unnerving images? I can only answer personally. Each day, I try to walk through our building and catalog what I observe. Here's a brief snapshot. I see Caucasians helping people of color. I see people of color helping Caucasians. I watch poor people being helped by not-so-poor people. I watch people who at one point in their lives walked through our front door seeking help now helping others. I observe people who have been in this country for a long time helping people who are recent arrivals. I watch recent arrivals helping folks who are not-so-recent arrivals. As I walk through the second floor, I watch first generation staff from Eastern Europe, South America, Africa and Oceania working together in the same open space with people whose roots in this land go back either a couple or a number of generations. See, that's the beauty of the gig that we have created in this culture. That's the beauty that needs to be fought for. That's the beauty that could dissipate if we fall asleep.

***"Maybe you're tired and broken
Your tongue is twisted
with words half-spoken
and thoughts unclear
What do you want me to do
to do for you, so see you through
A box of rain will ease the pain
and love will see you through."***

-Grateful Dead, A BOX OF RAIN
Album: American Beauty

Just yesterday, as I headed for the stairs to go swimming, another image of Alabama passed through my mind - election night, Senator-Elect Doug Jones Headquarters. Surrounded by a group of people who reflected the makeup of the Alabama I remember Doug quoting Martin Luther King's great line "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice," and urging the Senate he will be joining to reauthorize CHIP (Children's Health Insurance Program). A welcome sight.

Before reaching the staircase, I spotted a familiar face.

"Hey Cheryl, great to see you. How are you doing?"

I got a smile in return. "I'm doing great. I stopped by to say hi to everybody," as she fixed her gaze and smiled at her social worker. "I've been busy and haven't been here too much."

"Yeah. It's cold out now. I haven't seen you sitting outside of 360 having your morning cigarette when I cut over from Franklin Street to Union Avenue."

"I got the patch," patting her right shoulder.

"Great. Whatcha been up to."

"I'm feeling good. I've been out every day with the kettle (Salvation Army) ringing the bell. I'm singin' out there. I'm dancin' out there. I'm havin' a time . . ." . . ."Not bad for a unicorn, huh?"

"Not bad? It's wonderful. It's great to see you. Happy New Year."

So, as we hurtle into the new year, that's the image I want to leave you with: that of a middle-aged woman, a face that reflects a good bit of time sleeping rough, navigates with a cane but is now in from the cold, smiling, dancing and singing

as she rings the bell enticing others to throw coins into a kettle.

Jim Cuddy
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