

Week of the Impeachment Trial

This morning's *New York Times* reports that "as of Wednesday evening...more than 470,00 people with the [corona]virus have died in the United States." And yet the update on the virus is only a page 4 item. The major news articles are of course about the Impeachment Trial, which began on Tuesday. Since so many Americans surely were watching a great deal of this coverage on television, or at least listening to it on the radio, and indeed there will be so much written and recorded in other forms of media about it (the story that the prosecution has laid out is detailed, shocking, and to a large extent told in the former president's own spoken words and tweets), I hardly need to sum it up here for posterity. There will be so many other sources our grandchildren or great-grandchildren can look to for that. Indeed, assuming that there is almost no chance that the prosecution will be able to secure a conviction by two-thirds of the members of the Senate, I agree with what some of the Democrats have been saying that this trial is important, even if conviction is next to impossible, for the sake of laying out the facts for the writing of the history books for future generations.

We are in the midst of African American History Month, and as we attempt to learn more about the history of Black people in this nation (and in the pre-nation Colonies), we become aware of how limited the resources are, since Black and Indigenous folks' history, for most of our nation's history, was not considered a story worth recording. This issue, important in and of itself, is also relevant to the ideological divide that is still rending our nation (yes, *still* after 400 years). As Jonathan Holloway, the president of Rutgers University, and a historian, writes in an opinion piece in the *Times* this morning:

Many of the insurrectionists who stormed the Capitol on Jan. 6 were driven by a belief that they were acting in accord with the principles fashioned at the birth of this country, that their protest embodied America's long history of patriotic rhetoric about freedom and citizenship...The insurrectionists seem to believe that their America is under assault...[and] that the ideological underpinnings of America [are] being threatened and that the nation need[s] to be reminded 'that our Declaration is worth preserving, our Constitution worth defending, our fellow citizens worth loving, and our country worth fighting for.'

Holloway goes on to remark:

There's nothing to argue against in this statement – except that it fundamentally ignores centuries of efforts to make sure that only certain people were protected by that nation's laws, reflected in its glorious rhetoric and considered worthy of love. Others could be owned, beaten, separated from their families, denied their birthrights, receive substandard education, be relegated to substandard housing and have shorter life expectancies.

...Black history is profoundly illuminating: It produces a bright light by which we can make an honest assessment of how well our actions align with the ideals that have led us to proclaim that ours is a special nation. Black History Month is a time that dares us to think about the limitations of the Proud Boys' white nationalism, which excludes the diversity that is one of this country's strengths. (cf. Jonathan Holloway, "Isn't 400 Years Enough?", *New York Times* Op-Ed, Thursday, Feb. 11, 2021)

Atop Holloway's column, the *Times* op-ed pages editorial staff chose to insert a beautiful black and white photograph of a slim Black woman in a white dress with a flared skirt, white heels, holding a white purse and wearing white earrings standing on a sidewalk with a young girl (presumably her daughter), also in a white dress with a ruffled skirt, a white bow in her hair, and white socks inside black patent-leather Mary Janes. The woman and her daughter are looking out at the street – perhaps waiting for someone to join them, or perhaps waiting to be picked up – outside some sort of establishment such as a restaurant or catering hall. There is a large neon sign overhead with an arrow pointing to the door. It says "Colored Entrance."

If "a picture is worth a thousand words," what does this photo by *Life* photographer Gordon Parks say? The town, as much as we can see of it in this photo, appears to be a well-kept one: the sidewalks are well-swept – not one piece of trash can be seen. A shiny 50's era sedan is heading up the street, and there appears to be an open space across the street, perhaps a park with a monument (of a Confederate soldier, I am imagining, for this is clearly a scene from Jim Crow America). The Black woman and her daughter appear to be middle class – certainly they are well turned-out, a lovely vision of "respectability." Even the white strap, probably of a full-length slip, which has slipped down the woman's bare arm, is a sign of her gentility. Perhaps they are waiting to be joined by a family member to attend a wedding reception or a graduation ceremony. But however "respectable" they may be, they are nevertheless commanded to enter this establishment by a separate entrance.

To me, the unnamed establishment in this photo stands as a metaphor for the "establishment" of America. "Yes, you can come in," it says, "you can partake – but you are second class, an afterthought. This nation was not established for *you* –

and so you do not get to make the rules. If you want to keep making your way up into the middle class, keep quiet, know your place, do not challenge the White establishment.”

How do I know this? Because this could easily be the Southern town I grew up in, the “colored” and “white” signs having just gone down around the time I began to learn to read (in 1965). While I can imagine many of the adults who were my parents’ friends having looked approvingly at this beautifully turned-out young Black woman and her daughter, I also know that the looks on their faces would have drastically changed had they seen this same woman marching down this same street with others, both Black and white, chanting or holding signs demanding equal rights. Even my own mother, whom I think on with admiration, knowing all the many unselfish civic causes that she engaged in during my childhood, even she at least once (that I can remember) referred to the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., as a “rabble rouser.” In 1968, when King was killed, there was much footage of King leading protests on the news – footage which I did not understand and had no way, as an eight-year old child, to contextualize. This was the answer my mother gave me when I asked who this man was.

At a virtual meeting of United Interfaith Action this afternoon, one participant opened our clergy-discussion by playing a video of Amanda Gorman, reading her inaugural poem, “The Hill We Climb.” With the images still fresh in my mind of the mob invading and overrunning the Capitol on January 6th, I once again shed tears at the inspirational vision of this young Black woman in her sunshine-yellow coat incanting a letter of love, hope, and bravery for our nation so soon after that horrible, dark day.

What was at the base of all that passion, all that hatred? It is not enough to say “racism.” I think of my mother back in 1968 and of my parents’ yacht-club friends. They would never have been involved in a mob like that, but they may have shared one sentiment with those rioters: they wanted things to stay quiet, to stay the same as they had “always known” (I use quotation marks because of course things are always changing). Of course those Jan 6th rioters were far from “quiet,” but their *cause* was to stop our society from changing so rapidly, bringing more and more women and people of color into positions of power, changing mores about marriage, the military, women’s rights, and the official narrative of our nation, including the way that American history is taught. They wanted to preserve a status quo that had already been overturned – to turn it back to a time when the power of

the white majority was firmly entrenched, to a time when everyone “knew their place,” a situation which they imagine to themselves as being a time of “peace and quiet.”

But there are, of course, different kinds of “quiet.” In her poem, Gorman writes so aptly:

*We've learned that quiet isn't always peace,
and the norms and notions
of what just is
isn't always just-ice.*

Whether by coincidence or not, I've noticed that an unusual amount of entertainment that I have been consuming of late involves *time-travel*. Last week Mark, Lev and I watched one segment of the trilogy *Back to the Future* (long a family favorite, but one we had not dipped into for some years); and I recently finished watching the fourth season of *Outlander*, a long saga of an English woman visiting Scotland with her husband just after the end of War World Two, when she accidentally travels, via an enchanted Stonehenge-like circle, 200 years back to the Scotland of the 1700's. It is far too long and complicated to explain this whole story, but I was particularly struck by the fourth season, where Claire and her Scottish husband Jamie travel to pre-revolutionary North Carolina. Claire knows what America will become, and she believes in the values of women's rights and civil rights. And now she is challenged to live in a time when Blacks were treated as property, treated more cruelly than farm animals, and she has to get used to people's assumptions about the “place” of women. In addition to this, Claire and Jamie have numerous encounters with the Indigenous people of the North Carolina mountains, the Cherokee, and later, the Mohawk people. You can see in Claire's face the pain of knowing what will happen to these people and their culture, which is increasingly being displaced during this period.

Why do I bring this up? Because we might imagine that if we could “go back in time,” we might travel to an era when things were “simpler,” somehow more “wholesome,” or where it was easier for a man to “earn a decent living and feed his family.” And maybe it *was* easier *for some men* (and I do mean *men*). But if we were truly able to go back in time, I think we would find out how unequal, how unjust, how cruel some of the eras that we idealize actually were.

So what can we do? We have to *learn* from history. But first we have to see that history for what it truly *was* – not as a gauzy, romanticized time when things were so much more “wholesome” than today. And then we have to take stock of what is *good* today: to realize how much better it is to live in an era when the principles of human rights *for all human beings* is something that is, gradually, being incorporated as a value that *should* be upheld in nations all over the world.

Not that it *is*. Horrible abuses, even genocides, are still occurring around the world. Slavery and human trafficking still exist. But the fact that such abuses *get called out* in international diplomacy, and even the fact that the committers of such atrocities *deny* these charges shows that we all agree at some level that such things are *wrong*. That would not necessarily have been the case in the 1700’s.

It has taken countless generations for humanity to inch forward in recognizing that “liberty and justice for all” really *should* be for *all*, irrespective of faith, color, gender-orientation, birth country, etc. And of course there are still many in our generation who have *not* come to this realization – even though they may have been educated by institutions that upheld this value. Perhaps they even once *believed* in this value, but have for some reason turned backwards to the brutal values of a less enlightened time. It is hard for me to understand, and a *shande* to know that many members of so august an institution as our U.S. Senate are at this very moment closing their ears and their consciences to the cause of justice in the case that is now being tried as I write. In their case, I trust it is not because they so fervently believe in the values of the mob that stormed the Capitol on January 6th, *or* in the goodness of the man that these rioters adored – but rather, that they put their desire to stay *in power* above what they in their hearts know is *right*.

Nonetheless, conducting this trial is *not* an exercise in futility. It is getting the timeline down, and the facts of that day (and of all the many months leading up to it) on the record, and we *will* be able to learn from this history as we move forward.

In Shakespeare’s “A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” it is said that “the course of true love never did run smooth.” I suppose the same must be said for the course of a nation that would be just, and enjoy a “perfect union.” Nevertheless, such a realization does not prompt us to give up on love, and neither will such a set-back lead us to give up on our nation.



Rays of the setting sun shining through snow-covered forest after last week's storm - along Wilson Road near North Watuppa Pond, Fall River.