

Opportunity in independence

4 July, 2020

Last night Mary and I hunkered down in our family room with the dogs, doing our best to reassure them that the fireworks couldn't get them. Tonight will be worse as every idiot with money to burn (and many who really don't) spend the evening worshipping the rockets' red glare. It would be easy to focus on the unwelcome noise, the danger of pyrotechnics flying over our house. But we choose to focus on keeping the dogs calm and the effort helps keep us calm. This, too shall pass.

Of course, bottle rockets and M-80s aren't the firestorm that worries me most this holiday weekend. We face a perfect storm of challenges this Independence Day. I need not catalogue them here.

The first and most urgent element of life, liberty and opportunity is life. (Patrick Henry might disagree but this isn't his web site.) And on this day of celebration we find ourselves engulfed in the foul tide of a disease more dangerous than any other in our history, a pandemic that if not dealt with finally and globally will continue to run amok, tearing apart families and communities and nations, leaving broken futures and lost possibilities in its wake. I speak, of course, of hate. The presumption that 'they' are less than or alien to 'us.'

As I write this morning, hate and its offspring are being decried in our country in a way too seldom seen and too long silenced. Whether you focus on Black Lives Matter (as should we all) or rights of women (duh!) or providing fair access regardless of (minority status, gender difference, location, disability, etc.), people are standing up and demanding the attention of a long somnolent citizenry, yanking us out of our lethargy. It remains to be seen whether the great cultural uprisings of our time will bring about lasting and positive change. I hope so but as a child of the sixties I have to admit the very real danger that we will celebrate marginal gains and then, tiring of the barricades, go back to our families and careers with the big jobs, the truly important tasks left unfinished.

Not all of the challenges we face today are life-threatening but they might be no less life-changing. Many people are seeing their means of livelihood disappear as the need to quarantine erases patronage. Students find the routes to education now involve roadblocks and detours that are likely to change the nature of our educational enterprise. Our cultural touchstones have become untouchable in this time of masks and social distancing – museums closed, live theatres dark, showings put on hold.

We will find ways around the roadblocks for many of our most major problems. Livelihoods will be restored, although only after significant pain. We need to find ways to help our brothers and sisters through this and emerge whole on the other side. We must transform our educational enterprise and I believe we will learn how to transfer knowledge - and more important, encourage thinking – in ways and using channels and media that we'd never considered before simply because we'd grown self-satisfied with the K-12-plus-maybe-college model that (if we admit it) has always served some well, many good enough and some not at all.

Reframing our cultural landscape will be more difficult. And yes, I do mean *reframing*. I considered very

carefully the word I wanted to use there. *Repairing* would have implied something that was formerly satisfactory and has simply been damaged; *restoring* would have us simply bring back the status quo. But our culture should never have been solely or even primarily about the preferences of the majority. It has never been whole.

A bit of confession here: As I write this, I have Barenboim's Divan orchestra playing Beethoven in the background, and I pause my writing long enough to listen closely to a bassoon solo by Zeynep Koyluoglu. Transcendent music that I've been trained through long custom to appreciate, but of course, very traditional, very European, very WHITE. But not all great music is played to a diatonic scale or rendered on 'Western' instruments, is it? Neither is all great art done in oils on canvas. In our museums, even those that seek to offer a balanced rendition of history, the stories of non-white peoples and cultures always end up coming off as somehow 'other.' And in this country and the one from which today we celebrate our Independence, the primacy of Broadway and West End theatre has long promoted a mostly light-skinned take on the human condition.

I have many friends and family members watching in horror as Covid-related distancing shuts down live theatre. I understand and embrace their pain. But I also have to wonder where they'll go next and I believe in their collective ability to reclaim their acreage within the wider cultural landscape. A Facebook friend who many years ago was Jesus to my Caiaphas is posting self-recorded videos of folks singing their favorite songs. My daughter and her friend are considering how to do local, live theatre while keeping everyone, you know, alive.

Speaking of live theatre, when a brilliant writer / performer reframed the story of our nation's founding in a hip hop modality, with non-white actors representing our founders, guess what: no one died. And a LOT of people who would never have intentionally dialed in soul music or pop and certainly not hip-hop on their radios found this iconic story no less familiar or compelling when seen through an unaccustomed lens.

Seems to me that for all the horror surrounding us this Independence Day, cultural and political and physically infectious, this Independence Day is alive with opportunity. Alive in the sense of people seeing and sharing and recognizing our problems at precisely the time when our technology allows us to communicate freely without interference by higher authority.

Friends, if we simply marvel (or grouse) at the fireworks displays tonight or hunker down with our furry friends without thinking of what an independent people can do, what an independent person can contribute, we will have wasted a precious opportunity. We can and should focus for a moment on the opportunities that present themselves on this signal day in this self-professed Land of Opportunity.

We might each and all embrace Independence Day in both upper and lower case. Contribute to our Independence by standing up for those ideals – and only those - that are worthy of our dedication. And then declare our individual independence by finding an area of endeavor in which we can help define what the future can be.

'Make America Great Again?' Hmm... Perhaps better if we concentrate on making America great At Last and make sure that