

Corona Chronicle

Week Fourteen

Wednesday, June 17th

This morning I opened the *New York Times* to find a particularly insightful article by Maggie Astor (who, it is worth noting, studied political science at Barnard before becoming a journalist). She writes about how, years, often decades after major movements to procure justice or an expansion of civil rights for various groups in the United States have taken place, they become acceptable, even “laudable” *in retrospect*: we make Martin Luther King’s birthday a federal holiday; a Hollywood studio makes a film about Harvey Milk (first openly gay elected official in California and rights activist in San Francisco, assassinated in 1978), when for most of this nation’s history being attracted to anyone other than some one of the opposite sex was something that society pressured one to hide (and even to deny from *oneself*). What happens? We conveniently “forget” how much ugly heat and opposition such movements took when they began, how their leaders were vilified, beaten, even killed. We sanitize them for public consumption, and then add them to our public schools’ history curriculum alongside the Revolutionary War and the discovery of the Salk vaccine. Astor writes:

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. of the public imagination was a unifying figure who bridged America’s bitter racial divide and peacefully liberated the South from Jim Crow.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. who actually existed was spied on and blackmailed by the federal government, arrested roughly 30 times, beaten, stalked and assassinated, and died one of the most disliked people in America.

In life, despite his commitment to nonviolence, he was not seen as a model of socially acceptable protest. But in death, he is presented as such by opponents of newer movements, including the demonstrations that have spilled from Minneapolis into thousands of cities and towns in response to the police killing of George Floyd. These sorts of transformations happen repeatedly in the accounting and recounting of social movements, historians say. As movements unfold, the most disruptive parts tend to get disproportionate attention, and critics often portray them as representative of the whole. In the retelling, the least confrontational parts get the same treatment: People sanitize the movement for public consumption, downplay its opposition and use the mythologized version to discredit its successors.

So it is that the Rosa Parks in many history textbooks just wanted to sit after a long day of work, when the real Rosa Parks was a longtime activist who sat as a calculated political act; that the suffragists most popularly memorialized are those who circulated petitions, not those who burned President Woodrow Wilson in effigy outside the White House; that the antiwar activists who went to Woodstock are better known than the ones who ransacked draft board offices and destroyed the files.

What emerges is not only an antiseptic image of individual activists, but [an oversimplified division](#) between “right” and “wrong” ways to protest that historians and social scientists say impedes understanding of how movements achieve their goals.

“The whole purpose of protest is to interrupt your daily life, to interrupt the previously scheduled programming so you pay attention to something new,” said Deva Woodly, an associate professor of politics at the New School who studies how movements use public discourse. “That’s not necessarily the same thing as condoning setting buildings on fire, but it’s certainly not the case that plain civility is something that would ever work.”

*(“Why Protest Movements Are ‘Civil’ Only in Retrospect,” by Maggie Astor, June 16th, 2020, the *New York Times*)*

Well, I think I can safely say that the whole nation is paying attention to “something new.” Or...perhaps I should not say that it is *new* – certainly unfair treatment of non-white persons by the police, by the law, in so many systems of our society is hardly *new* – but the conditions under which this disease, racism, is being brought so urgently into the public eye is unique to our time. At the superficial level, it is a result of the ubiquity of people who are ready at any moment to record what is going on around them on their cell phones, and of the mandated wearing of body-cams by the police – so that all can see without dispute what is actually going on. It is also due to the work of activism put in over the past seven years by participants in the Black Lives Matter movement (which began with the 2013 acquittal of George Zimmerman after his shooting of Trayvon Martin in 2012, supposedly in accordance with Florida’s “stand your ground” law – though Martin presented no reasonable threat to his assailant).

But if we look more deeply, we can see how the past three years of attacks against so many groups in this nation – or against people *trying to come* to this nation – have led us little by little, outrage by outrage, up to this boiling point. The protests are not just about George Floyd or the Minneapolis police force, nor only about police brutality in general. They are also about inhumane treatment of refugees and would-be immigrants; about the effort to roll back the reproductive rights of women; about the civil rights of LGBTQ folk; about the basic human right to health care, food, shelter, and a decent education for all residents of our country; they are about a fair wage and decent working conditions throughout our land; they are about a loving and forward-looking treatment of the Earth which is our home.

I was talking about all this last night with Mark, who said that he is afraid that this surprising moment – when these protests are garnering huge support not just amongst people of color, but amongst *all* Americans (67%, according to a Pew Research Center poll from just last week) – will evaporate, and that things will just

return to the way they were before. I too, have that fear, but does it not signify something substantial that in my home state of Virginia statues of one of the previously most-revered Southern historical figures, Robert E. Lee, are being taken down? If you did not grow up in Virginia, you may not realize how momentous this phenomenon is: George Washington, Patrick Henry, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and James Monroe were all born in Virginia – but not even Washington was held in as much esteem by white Southerners when I was growing up as Robert E. Lee. (Of all the figures in this list, only Lee rated my knowing the name of his *horse* – Traveler.) I hate to say it, but probably the second-most esteemed native son by a certain generation of white Virginians was Stonewall Jackson, one of the most successful generals of the Confederacy. Richmond, the state’s capital, has a famous road running through it called Monument Avenue, with a grassy “boulevard” running its length, punctuated with statues of Jefferson Davis (recently torn down by protesters), Lee (soon to be removed) and other Confederate War “heroes” (and also one of the tennis star Arthur Ashe). I did not grow up in Richmond, but I remember seeing this famous avenue on a visit to the capital, and thinking, “But these statues are memorializing the South’s legacy of *slavery!*”

I have written and spoken before about how I never felt I “fit in” to Southern culture – which had nothing to do with being Jewish, since I did not become Jewish until my early adulthood. No, I grew up a true daughter of the South, with white Anglo-Saxon (Presbyterian) families on both sides of my family; I went to an almost-all-white public elementary school. It was not until junior high school, followed by high school that I had the opportunity of studying with a wider spectrum of students, more reflective of the demographics of my hometown (Hampton) overall.

How did all those black students, my contemporaries, in Hampton (or in Portsmouth, where another monument was recently torn down; or in Richmond) feel about this lionizing of figures like Lee, Davis, and Jackson? Would anyone have ever even thought to *ask* them? Even I, with my anti-Southern feelings, never did. And today the white governor of Virginia (who not so long ago came into the public eye because of a photo found in his 1984 medical school yearbook, where he posed with another student, one of them as a hooded KKK member, the other in blackface) is agreeing that it is time for the equestrian statue of Robert E. Lee to be removed from Monument Avenue. (Although as of this writing, a judge has halted the removal for fear that it will be damaged in the process).

When things change this much in the former capital of the Confederacy, when granite statuary comes down, this is not just an ephemeral change. And just this week the Supreme Court ruled that yes, LGBTQ people's civil rights *are* to be protected by the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits sex discrimination – that this law rightly applies to discrimination based on sexual orientation or on gender identity.

Meanwhile, one of my colleagues, Rabbi Jessica Shimberg, in Nashville, TN, posted on Facebook about the recent incident of anti-Semitic graffiti that was perpetrated upon a memorial to Holocaust victims on the campus of the Nashville JCC. Although Jessica did not report exactly what words or symbols were used, she said she was

...strangely grateful for just how classically racist the displayed message was. We have seen, across this country, White Nationalist messaging and behaviors masquerading as one marginalized group acting against another, or in misinformation spread that protesters were causing damage rather than demonstrating non-violently. This is an important issue for us to be aware of and those who acted heinously on Shabbat in Nashville gave us a classic example of White Nationalist "thinking" (an age-old anti-Semitic trope, used by Hitler and others bent on "White" domination) to explain a more racially diverse and loving (or at least tolerant) country as a Jewish conspiracy to "replace" White power and authority ... This White Nationalist trope targets Jewish support of our Black and brown brothers and sisters, of immigrants and refugees, of equal rights under the law for all people regardless of sexual orientation, gender, race, religion, and other statuses created to disenfranchise some in favor of a powerful few.

Oy! How I would love to write about a different topic – to report on my continued wanderings out in nature around the South Coast. (I am so happy that we MA residents are finally allowed to hike in RI again!) In the happy company of Mark and/or Lev, or often on my lonesome, I have taken so much solace during this coronavirus-time in the balm of nature. We indeed have so much beauty around us – and the limitations on travel have prompted me to see what is near to home in much greater depth. But I think I have written enough for one week now, so instead I will just close with a photo of a fully-open beach rose on the rocky beach of the MA Audubon preserve, Allens Pond (on the Westport/Dartmouth line) – and express the wish that *yes*, let the monuments of the Confederate South come down - but let the beach roses (whose blossoms are ephemeral) return every year!



Rugosa roses, beach at Allens Pond MA Audubon Preserve, Westport, MA