

Corona Chronicle

Week 20

Monday, July 27th

Yesterday I watched on TV as a carriage, driven by an African-American man in tails and a top hat, and pulled by two black horses, bore the casket containing the remains of Representative John Lewis across Selma, Alabama's Edmund Pettus Bridge (over the Alabama River). This was just one moment in the long journey of Lewis' funeral procession from his childhood home in Troy, Alabama (where he had once toiled in the cotton fields) all the way to Washington D.C., where his body now lies in state in the Capitol Rotunda. But it was a most significant moment, as this was the bridge where as a young man he came near to losing his life at the hands of white vigilantes and the police. Hundreds of people, black and white, lined the streets on either side of the bridge to pay tribute to this local against-the-odds hero. This time his procession was accompanied, guarded, and honored by Alabama state troopers.

Does this mean we have changed as a nation? Well, certainly we have, as our last president before our current one was a black man, Barack Obama, who managed to win the presidency for not just four but for eight years, and who generally had a high approval rating (but not as high as that of his wife, Michelle!). And yet the push-back was strong, and it lingers today in so many ways.

Well, that is democracy, you may say. No one is compelled to like or approve of someone just because s/he was elected president, or congressperson, or what-have-you. True. But many in Washington, even those who opposed most of the things Lewis fought for in his 34 years in the House of Representatives, attended his memorial service in the Rotunda today, and at least gave the impression of being moved and inspired, even grateful to this brave man, who encouraged us all to "Speak up, speak out! Get in the way, get in trouble! Necessary trouble! And help redeem the soul of America."

In the throes of this pandemic, the worst that this nation has seen since that of the 1918 flu, we find ourselves battling on at least three fronts: first, there is the battle to stay safe and healthy; second, there is the battle for families to be able to pay the

rent/mortgage and put food on the table during a time of record unemployment; third, there is this battle for the “soul of America.”

Some would like to stop hearing about injustice; would like to stop hearing charges of systemic racism in so many of our institutions. They would like to go back to a time when we accepted what was in the standard public school history books, a time when we did not question whether the person being honored by a statue in the public square “deserved” that honor or not. Most would not go so far as to say that they would like to go back to an era of segregated schools, or to a time when women stayed home after marriage to “keep house,” or to a time when children born with disabilities were hidden away in institutions (and some families pretended that they didn’t exist). They don’t say such things out loud; but sometimes we can intuit these wishes in the public policies that a certain faction pushes or try to squash, demanding less taxation and less spending on public schools, on programs to lift people out of poverty, in their opposition to increasing access to decent healthcare, and even to voting, for all Americans.

Yes, for *some* people the post-war years of the late 40’s and of the 50’s were idyllic – if you were white, if you were a man (or a white woman who found fulfillment primarily as a homemaker), if you and all your family members were fully-abled and fully neurotypical, if you were lucky enough to have a happy marriage...but the more you look at it, the “good old days” could not have been so great for a large number of people. (Not to mention that *everyone* lived with the “red scare,” and the fear of an atomic war that might break out at any moment.)

So after some consideration, I would venture to say that those who want to turn back the clock to that mythical idyllic time are not fighting for the “soul” of America. They are just longing for a time when things were simpler for *them* – a time when they were not so often called upon to think about what life was like for people *not like them*. That longing has much to do with nostalgia and perhaps warm memories – but it has little to do with our nation’s *soul*.

What does “redemption” mean when applied to an entity like a nation? Is it not that the nation’s citizens be willing to sacrifice something, to give something up in order to create a better reality for all – and, of course, to *succeed* in creating that new, better reality? Sometimes the results are tangible; sometimes they are intangible: a higher moral plane might be reached upon which we carry out our lives, our nation’s business, etc., a new atmosphere within which corruption and injustice are the exception rather than the rule. Populations that have been more

successful economically in this country due to the unfair advantage granted them by our nation's legacy of white-entitlement, and through discrimination against people of color, have to be willing to *give up* this unfair advantage, and to give up their tolerance of a laissez-faire policy about equality and economic, educational, health, and housing opportunities within our nation.

Tuesday, July 28th

Well, I am supposed to be a cantor, not a politician or a political philosopher, right? But since when do clergy not concern themselves with the problem (or promise) of *redemption*? The biblical prophets, of course, spoke mostly about the redemption of the Jewish people, but they almost always spoke about the people *as a nation*, not of the redemption of individual souls (as is the case with Christianity). That is because they saw that we can be redeemed not just through individual piety or *tzedakah*, but that we have to somehow transform ourselves as an entity of people, as a nation *together*.

Tomorrow night the mourning day of *Tisha b'Av* begins, a fast day when we bewail the destruction of both the First and Second Temples, and also many other Jewish tragedies, such as the Babylonian Exile, the exile of Jews from Jerusalem by the Romans, the Expulsion of our people from Spain, etc. Although this was meant to be a fast of mourning rather than of atonement, there is nevertheless an element of atonement/redemption implied, as the mood of our calendar lightens up immediately after this day draws to a close. After this day, practices such as drinking wine, getting a haircut, or celebrating a marriage or other *simchah* are once again allowed. The Rabbis of the Talmud often speculated that the Messiah would be born on *Tisha b'Av* – as if to say “out of the bitter comes the sweet.”

Because of the fasting, though, the *haftarah* for Yom Kippur comes to mind: Isaiah depicts eloquently here the hypocrisy of pious postures without a true love of one's fellow, and also shows what this *redemption* that Congressman John Lewis spoke of might look like:

*Is this the fast I desire,
A day for people to starve their bodies?
Is it bowing the head like a bulrush*

*And lying in sackcloth and ashes?
Do you call that a fast,
A day to gain Adonai's favor?
No, this is the fast that I desire:
To unlock the fetters of wickedness,
To loose the cords of the yoke,
To let the oppressed go free;
To break off every yoke.
It is to share your bread with the hungry,
To take the poorest of the poor into your home,
When you see the naked, to clothe them,
And not to hide yourself from your own kin. (Isaiah 58:5-7)*

And who, we might ask, are our “kin”? In the larger sense of the word, they are all human beings, all of whom were created in God’s image, all of us descended from the first two parents. Whether you take this literally or as a myth, the tale of our creation is a teaching about the essential equality of all humankind.

Of course the conditions of the world post-Eden are such that our “equality” is very much left up to randomness, the designs of those in power, and the vicissitudes of what is acceptable within a given culture. God does not force us to “clean up our act.” It is up to us; we have to want it, to aspire to it – and to *act*.

Isaiah also tells us that when we *do* act...

*Then shall your light burst through like the dawn
And your healing spring up quickly...
Adonai will guide you...God will slake your thirst
[even in] parched places
And give strength to your bones.
You shall be like a watered garden,
Like a spring whose waters do not fail. (Is. 58: verses 8 & 11)*

Thank you, John Lewis, for your courage, your example, your light. Thank you for watering the garden of our nation – may we see it grow and flourish!



A well-watered street-garden for all to enjoy on Highland Avenue, Fall River – flourishing, even in this heat (photographed on Wed., July 29th).