

Corona Chronicle

Week 22

Wed, Aug 12<sup>th</sup>

Another day with temps in the nineties; if the virus were not already keeping us in our homes, we'd be mostly hunkering down in any case – in any indoor place with air-conditioning (or in my case, at home in front of a fan), rather than being outdoors enjoying the beach or hiking some mountain in New Hampshire – at least during the heat of the day. Blessedly, the evenings and early mornings have still been enjoyable (although now they are telling us that we have to beware of virus-bearing mosquitoes during those hours!). It might seem a coincidence that we are enduring the double-whammy of a pandemic and a super-heat wave, but in all likelihood this is not just a “coincidence.” Both global warming (or climate change, if you prefer) and zoonotic viruses (viruses that pass from animals to the human population) are phenomena that scientists have been warning us about for decades, phenomena that we humans have brought on ourselves as a result of our decisions about development, and about our energy and food sources. Of course those members of the human population with the greatest political and financial power have the most say on these issues, and so they are the most responsible for the predicament we are in. But just saying that does not change the situation. One can as easily say that the poorest and least powerful are inevitably the most vulnerable and the first to suffer from the dire consequences of these disasters. In truth we are seeing this play out already in terms of which populations are suffering the highest mortality rates from the coronavirus, and in terms of the swelling numbers of climate refugees all over the world.

I had thought I would be feeling my own private euphoria today since yesterday was the day I was released from the imprisonment of my wrist-cast. The x-rays looked fine, the doctor said. But I naïvely did not realize that I would not just be able to bounce back to “normal,” that there would be significant lingering pain and weakness in my right wrist. Tomorrow I start physical therapy. Not ready to go out bike-riding or cutting the grass just yet. But yesterday I drove myself to the supermarket – *and* I discovered that I can play the guitar again!

So yesterday's announcement that a black/South Asian-American woman, Kamala Harris, had accepted the invitation to run as the number two on the Democratic presidential ticket was a bright thread in the muddy-grey tapestry that this summer has felt like, for the most part. Even those of the opposing party have to acknowledge the historic significance of this moment. The pioneering black female novelist, Zora Neale Hurston, published her masterpiece, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, in 1937. In this novel, one of Hurston's characters explains to her granddaughter that while the black man may be at the bottom of the social pecking order, the black woman has been assigned a place lower than that – she is the world's *mule*:

*Honey, de white man is the de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it's some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don't know nothin' but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see.*

And now a black woman has a chance to become the vice president, and maybe even someday a president, in the United States of America. This is the storied nation of “equal opportunity” that we were taught to believe in...but will this story come true? Only time will tell.

It seems significant that both Barack Obama and Kamala Harris were children of immigrants, and of mixed ethnicities. A slogan that I have seen on signs during the past four years in demonstrations for immigrants' protections (quoting a line in the musical, *Hamilton*) leaps to my mind: “Immigrants: we get the job done.” Like Kamala Harris' Jamaican dad, Alexander Hamilton was an immigrant from an island in the Caribbean, St. Kitts and Nevis. (Some historians have also suspected him of having been of mixed race, though certainly was seen as “white” in his day). Harris' mother, like Mahatma Gandhi, was from India. Of course India has a huge population, so why bring up Gandhi? Because, as I remember from his autobiography, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (written between 1921-1929), it was during his time living away from his homeland, an immigrant in South Africa (and deemed there to be amongst the population known as “colored”), that Gandhi, after reading Thoreau's essay “On Civil Disobedience,” began to develop his world-changing ideas about non-violent resistance to injustice (which he called *satyagraha*, a Sanskrit term he coined meaning “truth-force”).

Like former President Bill Clinton (whose father died before he was born), Harris was raised by a single mother. (Harris' parents divorced when she was seven). And

come to think of it, Barack Obama was also mostly raised by his mother, and later, his mother's parents. This pattern not only reflects the reality of the lives of so many in our nation, but perhaps also helped these individuals be able to embrace women as strong leaders. With so many things to be glum about these days, it was absolutely joyful last night to hear how many of the personalities interviewed on the news confessed to having tears in their eyes over Kamala's nomination. And though I was *not* interviewed on the news yesterday, I also found myself weeping these good tears last night. Might we actually become a nation of *united* states again – instead of what I have often written in as a typo (and now realize that perhaps it is true) the *untied* states?

This week's Torah portion, *Re'eh*, begins with the exhortation:

*See, I have set before you blessing and curse:*

*Blessing, if you obey the commandments...*

*And curse, if you do not obey...but turn away from the path...*

(Deut. 11: 26-28)

We moderns do not live in a world where God personally blesses or curses us for our choices (as seems to be the implication in this passage, although it can be argued that God here was talking about the *whole nation*, not about individuals). But we *do* live in a world where our choices have *consequences* – especially those choices that affect large-scale policies (relating to the environment, to immigration, to racial- and gender-justice, to international relations, etc.). Although, amongst God's commandments to Israel in the Torah no small number have to do with *ritual* observance, probably as many, or perhaps more (I do not know the exact balance) have to do with the way we human beings treat one another, with the way we treat animals, and even with the way we treat the land. The God who speaks in the pages of the Torah may make these consequences of “blessing” or “curse” sound like supernatural rewards and punishments – as if we have a big parent, police officer or judge “in the sky” who will reach a hand down to earth to try to enforce our compliance with the commandments.

But the real thrust of this message is: *it is up to you to choose*. God, or your teachers, or the wise of your community (which includes *yourself*, with your ability to *self-educate*) can lay out the map for you of the best way to live so that you and your community, and indeed all the earth will *thrive* (e.g. be *blessed*); but you still have the ability to choose otherwise. You can choose to live in a way that does not

embrace the good of all – but just of yourself, or just of your own group. But that is like making sure that just your section of the Titanic does not have a leak; if there is an irreparable leak anywhere in our good ship, Planet Earth, we will all go down together. So although my individual choice alone may not be able to either sink our ship or keep it afloat...well, in the end, you do the best you can, and give thanks for the good that you have the privilege of experiencing during your time here.

This past Sunday evening Mark, Lev and I drove out to Little Compton for a walk on the beach at Sakonnet Point. The breeze was delightful, we enjoyed a magnificent sunset, and once again we gave thanks that we live in an area with so much natural beauty. A slogan I once painted onto a banner decades ago for demonstration against nuclear weapons rose up in my mind as I watched the sun setting (or, more precisely, observed the effect of our planet revolving on its axis): “Good planets are hard to find!”



*Sunset seen from Lloyd's Beach (Sakonnet Point), Little Compton. Newport's Pell Bridge in the background.*