

Corona Chronicle

Week 59

Wednesday, April 28th

Fatalities from the coronavirus in the U.S. as of today: 573,000

Number of Americans currently fully vaccinated: 97,000,000

Yesterday I sat down to begin composing this week's chronicle, but realized almost immediately that, with all the current headlines swirling in my brain about the recent deaths of way too many Black Americans at the hands of law enforcement, and with my consciousness of the alarming rise of "mass shootings" (legally defined as shootings where 3 or more people are victims), I would not be able to write a neutral, "non-political" chronicle that day. So instead I got to work on a project that I had meant to do this past Sunday, but failed to do, since the weather was not conducive to working outdoors.

I put in a garden, using a kit that I had ordered months ago to make a raised planting-box. It is not large – about three and a half feet square – but it is large enough for two rows of carrots on one side, a sprinkling of a wildflower mix on the other side, and two hills of nasturtiums, one on the front corner of each of the two sides that face out toward the yard. First I decided to rip out a corner of my old garden bed that had been left for mint to run rampant in (I had enough mint in other places, so I could sacrifice these), and then I built my box-garden on top of that area. It was hard, dirty work, but sweet- (or rather minty-) smelling. After pouring in the heavy bags of organic soil I had purchased at the local hardware store, breaking up the clods of earth and raking it out nicely, I carefully planted the carrot seeds, sprinkled the wildflower mix, and nestled the nasturtium seeds into their small hills, and watered it all lightly.

Now I felt so proud of my handiwork that I pulled out the mower and cut the grass for the first time this season! And it *does* feel good – not only to get away from all the distressing news for a few hours, working the body rather than the overtaxed moral conscience, but also to look out at a backyard that is now a pleasure to view. Our neighbors' redbud tree, which reaches out over our backyard, is beginning to bloom (I love that deep magenta color), and our white lilac bush is on the brink of blossoming. There must be something about cut grass that is alluring to critters, too, because this morning there was a fat, furry groundhog waddling all over the yard, munching on choice greens here and there. And s/he is welcome to those

dandelion greens (since we don't use any chemicals on our yard, they are indeed health food!).

People everywhere, I think, entertain a romance with their "roots," and, to some degree, with an imagined past of long-ago. Last night I changed the channel from the news at the end of the 7 o'clock hour to watch Henry Louis Gates Jr's always-inspiring "Finding Your Roots" on PBS. The two guests Professor Gates was featuring were both Broadway singers, and both hailed from ancestors who had seen their share of troubles.

The first was Audra McDonald, six-time Tony-award winning actor and singer on both the Broadway and opera stage, a Black woman who grew up in Fresno, CA, was involved in local teen musical theater, went to Julliard, graduating in 1993, soon to become one of the brightest lights on Broadway. The second guest was Mandy Patinkin, actor and singer both on Broadway and in film, who grew up in an Ashkenazi Jewish household in Chicago. He worked closely with Stephen Sondheim, starring, notably, in "Sunday in the Park with George" and other shows (but perhaps most people know him from the role in which he did *not* sing, that of Inigo Montoya in the film *The Princess Bride*).

This was an especially moving, rewarding episode of "Finding Your Roots," and I will return to why this was so in a moment. But first I want to turn aside to look at the "romance" that is being attributed these days to our *nation's* "roots." When rioters stormed the Capitol building on January 6th, many of them were chanting, or carrying flags with the caption "1776". Presumably these rioters wanted to equate their actions, on one level, with those of the nascent Americans who first rebelled against England in 1775 (1776 being when the actual *declaration* of independence was asserted), and on another level to send the message that they were going *back to American roots*, thus obliquely criticizing all those today who they see as despising, or having drifted far away from, these roots. (In like manner, the political movement which named itself "the Tea Party," beginning in the 2009, wanted to link its members with the "brave rebels" who revolted against the English excise tax on tea in 1773.)

This yearning for a "pure" "golden age," conveniently located far enough back in history (or pre-history) where the facts are fuzzy or hard to come by, is somehow endemic to the human brain. In the synagogue liturgy we chant plaintively the words *chadesh yameinu k'kedem* right after we have returned the Torah scrolls to the ark, and stand there facing the scrolls, about to close the door on them until our next ritual encounter. These words are hard to translate, but they mean,

approximately, “Renew our days [to be like they were] in the beginning.” In the daily *Amidah* we pray not just for justice to be established for our people, but for the *restoration* of our judges “as at the beginning,” and of our advisors, “as at the start.” But if you turn to the Bible to search for this time when all our judges were perfect, you find only the figure of Deborah (in the Book of Judges), who was more of a political/military leader than what we would think of as a “judge.” (It is also interesting that she was a *woman*, while in Orthodox Jewish law, a woman is not allowed in most legal cases to even stand as a witness, much less a *judge*.) The “judgeship” of Deborah (who was also seen by our tradition as a *prophet*), a story told near the beginning of the Book of Judges, was apparently the highpoint of this period of Israel’s history, because throughout that book, the phrase *Now in those days there was no king; every man did that which was right in his own eyes* keeps getting repeated like the refrain in a song. And the stories in Judges keep getting darker and darker – presumably as a way of explaining why it was necessary for Israel to transition to being led by a *king*, rather than by judges.

The point is – one would be hard-pressed to find any time in the history of Israel (biblical or otherwise) when all the judges were perfect, incorruptible, dispensing justice in a way that inspired the populace as a whole to live out their lives with integrity and a true “fear of God.” And yet, even though our own Bible shows us this history plainly, nevertheless the composers of our liturgy held on to the idea that there *was a time* when things were better, perhaps even perfect – and we implore the Almighty that in our era we might return to such a state, so that things might be the way they were “back then.”

When *was* this “golden age”? Many of our prayers express a desire for the reestablishment of the throne of David, and/or for the blossoming of “the shoot” of David (or sometimes of the “son of Jesse,” a circumlocution for David), who is seen, like King Arthur in British lore, as a redemptive figure, able like no other ruler to spread peace, order, and compassionate justice. But again, if you actually go to the stories about David in the books of 1st and 2nd Samuel, you find a much more complex figure. The biblical David had some admirable qualities, but he was ruthless in amassing power, at times brutal towards his enemies, a man who committed adultery with the wife of one of his most loyal soldiers (resorting to having her husband killed when he could not cover up her subsequent pregnancy), and a disastrous failure as a father to his sons (one of whom tried to overthrow his own father, others of whom murderously vied with one another for hegemony while David lay on his deathbed).

I doubt we would sincerely wish to see such a ruler sit, not as an elected official (who could be voted out of office) but as a ruler-for-life over Israel today. Of course if we are talking not about an ordinary monarch, but about an almost-divine ruler overseeing justice, order, and peace in a “messianic” era when corruption, lies, and causeless hatred would be non-existent, well, that might be a different matter. But we all know what it would take for such an era to come about: a fundamental change in human nature. The prophet Jeremiah said as much, speaking the following words on behalf of God:

But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days...I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. And no longer shall each man teach his fellow and each his brother, saying “Know Adonai,” for they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest... (Jer.31:33-34)

Only when God changes human nature so that we all have God’s ways programmed into our hearts, so that we will always hew to the right path of living automatically (rather than it being an external message that we have to be taught, and which is dependent on our *choosing* to follow it) – only then could we human beings possibly know such a “messianic age.” And you might even say that when/if such an era should ever *come*, we would not even *need* a king or any other kind of ruler, for we would automatically live with one another in peace, truthfulness, and generosity towards one another.

Clearly this is the stuff of myth. Human nature has never been this way, and is not likely to ever change to become this way. But there are certain things that have impacted the human experience of the world that may make it *seem* to us that somehow things were better in some previous era, and they are: the rise and fall (but mostly rise) of human population density; the ever-increasing accumulation of technological advances; the historical forces that drive certain phenomena in our society; and finally, forces of nature that are seemingly beyond our control (such as earthquakes, droughts, floods, heat waves, pandemics, etc.) On this last factor I say “seemingly,” because in fact we probably *do* have some control over some of these disasters – but for most of history people did not see the relationship between their use of natural resources and the resultant negative consequences (for example: as late as the 1930’s, the farmers of the Midwest and Southern Plains did not understand that tearing up the prairie grasses to plant row crops could cause soil erosion, leading to the terrible dust storms that drove them off the land).

In every era of human history, there have been those who have been “on top,” leading more comfortable and enjoyable lives than others, and others “at the bottom,” who usually somehow support those on top, either intentionally (by

voting for them or fighting on their behalf) or unintentionally (by working for them for low wages, or buying products which afford a handsome profit to those on top) – or *unwillingly* (being held as prisoners or as slaves to this elite). When those who once were on top *fall*, for whatever reason, it is natural for them to remember the past as “the good old days.” But of course those “good old days” were not so *good* for the population outside their privileged circles.

Whenever one population *rises* in social power, wage-earning ability, etc., there is likely to be another population that gets displaced, not necessarily to the point of destitution, but to the point of losing some of the power and privileges that they once had. This causes both resentment among this displaced group, and a longing for the ways things *used to be* – as if that were the “right” way, the way things *should be*, the natural God-ordained order.

But when we step back and look at human history from a distance, we know that this is not so. God does not love Americans more than Russians, Jews more than Muslims, Whites more than Blacks, men more than women, heterosexuals more than non-heterosexuals. God (at least, according to the prophet Micah) loves those who “do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly” according to their understanding of the ways of God.

Audra McDonald’s ancestors did amazingly well in this country – rising from the status of slaves to enterprising freed Blacks who farmed in Mississippi, saving money, and a generation or so later moving to California, where her great-grandfather invested in real estate in the Black neighborhood of Fresno (called “Jericho”), also becoming a successful store owner and shopkeeper. Her grandfather excelled academically, earning a PhD and teaching in a Black college, and her parents were both educators, who recognized their daughter’s singing talent, and steered her towards venues that would help to cultivate that talent. Audra’s family story, as Gates told it, was one which moved progressively from darkness to ever-increasing light. Audra had not known anything about her enslaved or newly-freed ancestors, and as she learned about them with Gates, she was overcome with inspiration at the hardship they must have had to endure, and the grit and strength that they mustered to make their lives better after emancipation.

Mandy’s family story, on the other hand, was a kind of diorama – the kind seen through a pinhole at the end of a box, with light falling on some parts of it, and other parts left entirely in shadow. Gates discovered scores of relatives on Mandy’s paternal grandfather’s side that had stayed in the Old Country, been trapped when

the Nazis marched into Poland, and were gassed in Treblinka. Mandy had never heard this story. He had asked, but, no one would reveal this history to him. It was a tragically sad story – certainly not a hearkening back to any “good old days” – and yet Mandy felt tremendously moved and enriched to learn about this branch of his family that he had never been told about before. At the end of the episode he told Gates, with tears in his eyes:

“I’m a crybaby. That’s okay. But I’ve cried [here today] in ways that are different from how I’ve cried before. And I can’t define what that difference is – but it was something unfamiliar, and I’m grateful for it. I feel more alive from this journey than I ever imagined.”

Whatever learning about our past – be it that of our nation, of our ethnic/cultural group, of our ancestors, or of our immediate family – reveals to us, even if it reveals ugly or upsetting truths, this learning should be welcomed. Of course it feels nicer to discover *admirable* people in our past, but the more we understand where we have come from, the better we can understand who we are now, and how we can move forward in a way that will be beneficial, life-giving. Perhaps, as Mandy Patinkin said of himself, we will feel *more alive* by virtue of this knowledge. This knowledge will serve us far better than gauzy myths or nostalgia for a past that was actually never so wonderful (at least not to everyone in that society). This doesn’t mean that we can never tell happy stories about our own past or about long-ago eras – only that we should remember that there were always people in every era suffering in the shadows, and that their stories are also important, also part, in some way, of our own. As Jews, we should know this truth perhaps more deeply than any other people.



Backyard lilacs with our neighbor's redbud tree blooming in the background.