

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Friendships Across the Aisle

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This is not a political piece. Or maybe it is. It *is* a piece about friendships. New and old. And how they can make you see yourself, and the world, differently. Especially at the start of a new year, on the East Coast of not so sunny Florida, half way between West Palm and Miami Beach.

I'll start with the new friend. Mr. Bobbha. That's not his real name, but it will suffice, even though the man is not a Buddhist, in fact far from it. He's a devout Christian, Catholic in fact. He and his childhood sweetheart, now wife, Mandy, grew up in the Deep South. They go to church, believe in God and family, and say grace over every meal. Jesus is their main man. Me? I'm a devout atheist. A New Yawk skeptical Jew. A man of little faith. God? Marriage? Parenthood? Phooey! I'm a faculty member at a big academic university; a left-leaning, Bernie Sanders, dyed-in-the-wool, bleeding heart liberal. I have little understanding of, and little tolerance for, devout Republicans, O'Reilly conservatives, right wing, Red State, virulently-religious, gun-toting, flag-waving Americans.



Mr. Bobbha, he's not many of these things, but he definitely lives "on the other side of the aisle" than I do. He doesn't believe in big government. He doesn't believe in Hilary because "she's not honest and I don't trust her," nor Bernie, who's "just a 78 year old pencil pusher who's got his head so far up the establishment that voting for him is just a waste of time." "We need something new!" he says with heated conviction. And how can I argue with that? I've been saying "it's the end of the American Empire" for decades, but I've just resigned myself to the painful decline. "American exceptionalism"? That's just an updated turn of the phrase for "ugly American", as we've seen our government bully other nations with economic, political, and military power, and our over-proud people look at the world with under-educated arrogance and myopic entitlement.

But back to Mr. Bobbha. I mean, who *was* this new guy, just "droppin' by" all the time... without ever calling? Didn't he know that you just didn't do that in LA? Was he some kind of "Southern hipster gentleman"? Or rather, as some of our long-standing, tight-knit, LA group of friends intuited, "a CIA spy" coming after all us pot-smoking, left-leaning liberals? But then... *he* smoked pot too. And cooked all the meals. And serenaded us with his guitar. Anything you wanted to hear: Dylan, The Eagles, Nora Jones. By ear! Hard not to like this Mistah Bobbha, and his lovely wife, Mrs. Bobbha, who explained to us that it was just a natural Southern tradition called "visitin", a friendly way of dropping by to say howdy and "set a while", any time one had the improvisational urge.

So we're out in the middle of Palm Desert.



The Great Taj Mondayla has organized another "man" trip. Out to the Swiss Spa in the middle

of nowhere. About seven of “the guys” are out on one of our “man hikes”... into the dry, mountainous desert. All... uphill. Definitely not my thing. No thanks. So I medicate myself with an abundance of medical marijuana chocolate. Everyone knows I have a prescription and that I like my chocolate.... ...which kicks in very potently about 20 minutes into the hike. I can hardly walk, no less “hike”. I’m completely... dis-combobulated. Dys-functional. I can’t take two steps in a row without falling down.

But then... out of the dis-combobulated blue, Mr. Bobbha suddenly takes me by the hand, talks calmly into my ear, walks me away from the quickly-ascending man group, and plants me in a little desert cave... full of sand... overlooking a little pond... all by myself.



“Just *chillax*, man. I’ll be back for ya.”

...which... after about three psychedelic hours... he does... come back for me....congenially, without complaint. He stands me up on my now slightly more stable feet, assesses my physical well being, and calmly walks me back to the man car. We all drive home, cook a big man meal, and get Bobbha-serenaded. Don’t know what would have happened to me that day... without Mr. Bobbha.

Then... there’s the time he comes to one of my USC solo performance shows.



Out of curiosity. Out of friendship. Mr. Bobbha just does things like that. Wires your sound system. Fixes your garage door. Paints your tromp d’oeil wall... twice... after you don’t like the first color. Shows up at your solo performance show. You know, all kinds of friendly, neighborly stuff.

So Mr. Bobbha watches the whole performance of 13 monologues... open mindedly, open heartedly, might I even say, with compassion and love. But unbeknownst to him, I’ve decided to place the last piece on the program for his particular benefit. A piece about faith. Written by a young Christian girl from Texas named “Story”. Her real name... “Story”... who was raised to believe in God and in her Savior, Jesus Christ... just like Mr. Bobbha.



And in her story, Story tells us that she, indeed, did believe. And worship. And pray. Until God disappointed her one too many times... with sickness and death and loss and life. Until Story, sadly but truly, abandoned her faith. With all those smart-ass, trash-talking, cynical USC kids, how could she keep her faith? Well... she simply couldn’t. And it broke her heart. And her spirit. But then, being in so much pain.... Story told... of how she *chose* to reclaim her faith... in the face of... everything. In the face of loss and life and sickness and death, she chose to keep her optimism and her belief and her faith.... just like Mr. Bobbha... who... at the end of the show... goes up to Story and takes the cross around his neck... over his head... and places it over Story’s head... onto her neck. Story cries. Mr. Bobbha smiles. They embrace. And just last week, two years later, I see Story riding her bike across campus. She stops, gives me a big hug, and takes out Mr. Bobbha’s cross, under her shirt, with a happy and grateful smile. A good story... if ever I heard one.

Then there’s Big Rick. The old friend. Six four, 250, Big Rick used to play basketball on the UB varsity team (University of Buffalo back then, now the State University of New Yawk at Buffalo).



He was also my “little brother” when I was 19 years old. That’s right, I have to truthfully admit here for the first time in print, that when I was a desperate and socially-misfit Joe college

boy, I had the need and the weakness of character, to join Phi Kappa Psi, the hard-drinking and hard-playing fraternity in UB's late 1960s Greek system. True. I did it because I felt.... stuck.... and because I just couldn't force myself to sign up to pledge "Sammy" or any of the other primarily Jewish frats, with all my Jewish teenage compatriots from Lon-Gisland, who just brought out all my self-consciousness and failure from high school. Instead, I somehow accepted the invitation from the "local" frat, primarily made up of Catholic and Italian boys from blue-collar Buffalo. They were wild and fun. They wore white socks instead of black, which made them "hicks" to us snooty and judgmental "City kids". And they were something completely... new for me. They taught me about parties and alcohol and Christmas and girls. They scared the bejeezus out of me, socialized me, and opened my eyes to see beyond the myopia of the Long Island suburban ghetto that I grew up in. I played intramural football with these burly guys, going both ways at defensive back and wide receiver. They liked me. I was the first Jew most of them had ever met. I was as strange and unusual to them as they were to me. Alfano, Siragusa, Campagnola, Capozzi.... the list went on and on.



In 1968, my junior year, just as I was "turning on, tuning in, and dropping out", my frat bros tried to elect me Vice President of the fraternity. The vote ended up in a dead tie between me and Art Stefanato, a big, fun-loving party boy, who in the re-vote voted for himself, while I, too, also voted for him, thereby making me lose the election by one vote. It was probably the best thing to happen at the time, because after that I grew my hair long, smoked dope voraciously, and psychically left my old self and my old skin behind. I came out of my frightened cocoon and took my first faltering steps towards taking the road less traveled and becoming an artist.

But back to Big Rick. At UB. Late 60s. A good ol' boy (from rural Buffalo anyway), if ever I met one. A future Rush Limbaugh-Bill O'Reilly devotee, if ever I met one. Paul Bunyan with a big heart and a big, gap-toothed smile. A good friend. A good networker before there was ever a concept called "networking". Back in the day, we good-naturedly called him a "big Polak", just as we called each other "Dagos" and "Jews", long before there was ever anything called "political correctness". Big Rick — a giant of a man who looked up to... me.... my only explanation somehow being: "once a little brother, always a little brother". For even after I took my own winding and rebellious road away from straightsville into modern dance, clowning, theater and iconoclasm, Big Rick kept in touch with me vicariously. He saw me on tv in the 70s, winning the "Apple Polisher Award" from WOR Channel 9 "for Improvement of the City of New York" — as a clown. He saw me take beers in the face as I played thugs on LA soap operas in the 80s. And he even saw my recent TEDx Talk online and said it was very emotional for him to watch it. "I cried, Big Bro. I really did."

Big Rick and Mistah Bobbha.... my two conservative, straight as two arrows, "friends".

And now it's January, 2016, and I'm down on the East Coast of Florida — visiting Mr. Bobbha and Big Rick. With a wife and a kid of my own. Who woulda thought? I've been married since 2001. To Surya, from Sumatra, Indonesia. And uncle to Exsel, our nephew, who we brought from Sumatra to live with us last May. Mr. Rebel... Mr. Non-conformist... is now "a family man". With a dawg named Cassius. Who woulda thought? But I'm not complaining. Surya and Exsel have been game changers. They've forced me out of my own world... into theirs. Marriage has been my crucible, forging partnership and love out of narcissism and self centeredness. Being an uncle has been nothing less than... a joy. I take the kid to school, do homework with him, and watch him play basketball and Pokémon. I teach him ice-skating and English, buy him Little Ceaser pepperoni pizza, and I've shown him his first Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's. His

innocence and enthusiasm... make me laugh. Make me see the world through his child's eyes. Make me happily bring him frozen grapes and ice cream while he watches cartoons on our flat screen. I am, indeed, despite myself... a lucky man....



... who... is now down in gator territory... on one of the Florida barrier islands between St. Augustine and Miami Beach. Near Cape Canaveral and Patrick Air Force Base. Satellite Beach to be exact. Red, White, and conservative Blue all around. With a bunch of snow birds and liberal New York retirees scattered about.

The Trules are staying with the Bobbhas, who have not only been kind and generous enough to invite us down for a week, but have also picked us up at the airport in Orlando, after we've been waylaid in Houston overnight because of bad weather. They've taken care of our every need: given us two bedrooms, warm clothes which we never thought we'd need in "sunny Florida", and Mr. Bobbha has cooked us deliciously soft, cheesy omelets each morning, while making homemade fried rice for Exsel in a second pan because the boy doesn't like cheese. Mandy has serenaded us on piano and sung harmonies to accompany Mr. Bobbha's guitar medleys of funky blues, sweet folk songs, and original stylings. Bobbha has had Exsel jumping up on a soft leather chair next to him, dancing wildly, and shaking his Indonesian booty to rock 'n roll music, telling him, "Now that's what 'boogie' means, Boy!"

And Big Rick? Somehow he's gotten himself into the picture. Even though I haven't seen him in nearly 46 years! He's gotten his slightly shorter, but still big jock ass, up at 4 a.m., driven down from West Palm Beach almost two hours away, to pick me and Exsel up at the Bobbha's at 6 — to take us fishing on Sunday morning on the Banana River near Melbourne Beach. How did he find me? Facebook, of course. I mean, who *can't* find you on Facebook? Especially... Big Rick... brother forever.... who naturally has discovered that me and "the fam" were coming to Florida, and insisted that Big Bro and Little Bro hook up after five decades of cultural discrepancy and alternative universes. And when he offers to hire Captain Jake to take on a private fishing boat to go "flats fishing" (whatever that means!) and guarantees us to "catch lots of fish", it's simply an offer I can't refuse.

So here we are after four hours of "flats fishing"... on the Banana River... and Exsel is driving the boat back, at least with the help of Captain Jake, and yeah, we have caught a ton of fish... although we've had to throw them all back because of size... "too small"... even though me and the X-man can't really understand. "Oh, c'mon," X demands in his newly acquired English, "*that* big enough!" as Big Rick de-hooks another piddling fish, smiles apologetically, and throws it back overboard. Until... finally... the X-man hooks a legal one... barely... a skinny and slippery red fish. He reels it in... with all of us hooting and cheering him on. "Reel it in, X! Pull! Harder! Reeeeel!" Wow! It's beautiful... at least to uncle and nephew it is. Five hours, one skinny fish... for lunch... at the Bobbha's... where I've arranged for my Florida-living, conservative new and old friends, to meet.



Big Rick is sitting out at the Bobbha's pool, holding court.

"And then they threw me into that crummy German jail for seven months. No bull! *Never* happen in our country."

He's telling Bobbha his life story, just as he told it to me on the fishing boat a few hours before. As I said, Big Rick loves to talk. Not so much for the sake of self aggrandizement, but just really because he's a big, friendly kinda guy. He likes people. He likes to share. And... just like I suspected and anticipated for the last two months before our trip, he's met his good ol' boy match in Mr. Bobbha.

“Yeah, man, I know what you mean, too much privilege in this country. Not enough hard work. By the time I was eighteen, I had five or six jobs. Postal clerk, fisherman, delivery boy, machine shop operator... never thought of goin’ to college until my early 20s.”
They’re on a roll.



“Yep, this country is broken, man,” Big Rick replies, eyes flashing over to include me. “What about the family unit, man? That’s the trouble with America! It’s broken! No education, no responsibility. I’m not giving these people any free ride. That’s why I like listening to O’Reilly, man. He makes a lot of sense.”

“O’Reilly?” Bobbha counters. “C’mon, dude, the guy’s too much. He just likes to hear himself talk. Cuts his guests off all the time.”

Back and forth, they’re a match made in heaven. Jabbing, sparring, but mostly reinforcing their good ol’ American values. I feel like a traitor, sitting there between them, not saying a word of provocation, for fear of having the whole weekend, the whole vacation, blow up in my face. Sure, I want to tell them how f-ked up I think this whole country is, particularly our government’s meddling in foreign affairs, its endless wars, puppet governments, economic exploitation, red neck radical Christianity, blind patriotism, etc. etc. And how, at the same time, I think that big government, universal health care, Social Security, Medicare, taking care of our poor, our elderly... is the only humane, civilized thing a society can do if it has any chance to survive without the famous one percent exploiting the powerless ninety nine. I want to tell them that “plutocracy”, “oligarchy”, “internationalism”... will be the words that come to define the United States of America in the 21st century, its last of global dominance.

But of course, I keep my mouth shut. I don’t know what to say that hasn’t been said already, too many times before. To what end? Will I change their points of view? Their perspectives? Their politics? Will they change mind?

I think not. It’s taken 68 years for Big Rick and I to arrive at our views of life. And just a few less for Mr. Bobbha to arrive at his. We have our evidence. Our observations, insights, and proofs. We’re set in our ways. Dug in. Everyone knows “you don’t talk politics or religion with family or friends.”

“C’mon, Bro, whataya think?”

Big Rick really wants an honest answer. He wants me to join him on the O’Reilly side of the aisle, the only side that genuinely makes any sense to him. He and Mr. Bobbha, my two conservative, but kind and generous “friends” look to me — for an answer.

And I’m settin’ there... in my hard wooden pool chair... just on the verge of... half-expecting myself to... simply explode... as I am often wont to do, with all my well-reasoned, over-educated New York liberal, anti-Reilly invective... thereby and forever... ruining the day... hurting feelings... destroying the friendships, one old, one new, that have brought me and my family down to the conservative back waters of barrier island Florida... perhaps the very place that pushed the 2000 Bush-Gore election into the hands of the conservative Supreme Court which outrageously and egregiously handed Dubya the election that changed the course of American history.

I’m settin’ there, looking back and forth between my two friends, new and old, thinking of... the dinners that my new family has shared over the last several nights with Mandy and Bobbha. How they have unabashedly and without hesitation said “Grace” over each meal, while me, Surya, and especially Exsel, waited in a state of suspended animation, allowing for a ritual and a thankfulness that we were entirely unfamiliar with. I’m thinking of... how kind and generous the Bobbhas have been with us. How they have bonded with Exsel and offered to care for him if Surya and I wanted

to stay overnight in Miami.

And I'm thinking of... how Big Rick has vicariously stayed in touch with me, his "Big Brother", over all these 46 long years... with pride and admiration... how he has gone out of his way to "make our day" today with a Banana River fishing expedition that we will never forget... while he, and no doubt, Mr. Bobbha, well knew, and still quite know, all along, that I have always been, and still am... a dyed in the wool New Yawk Jew.

And then I look over to my new nephew, skinny, bare-chested Exsel, paddling a kayak in the middle of the long, blue-watered Mistuh Bobbha pool. And I say...

"Time fer lunch, Boys. Let's clean that three hundred dollar red fish. I'll bet Mr. Bobbha knows just how to do it. I mean, I don't know of damn thing that Mr. Bobbha doesn't know somethin' about."

And they both look over to me and... smile.

☒ And Mr. Bobbha goes inside and comes out with some kind of "cleanin' knife" and a sharpening stone... and we bring that skinny "300 dollar redfish" around the side of the house, lay it down in all its gory, on a flat tree stump... and Mr. Bobbha expertly cuts off its head, its scales, slits its belly, pulls out its entrails, and fillets us two beautiful, measly red fish filets....

....which Mrs. Bobbha fries up with "Uncle Bobbha's Ol' School Fish Rub" from the bayous of New Orlins.

And we all sit around the pool... and eat... and drink beers... and wile away the afternoon... until after 5pm, when Big Rick has to get up to drive himself 2 hours back to West Palm Beach... and who knows... to another 46 years of long distance, vicarious, and well-preserved... friendship... across the proverbial "aisle".

And friends, that's exactly the way it should be....



Mr. Bobbha & Big Rick

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