Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

My Father, My President

Jo Scott-Coe · Saturday, January 28th, 2017

I felt obliged to watch the inauguration last Friday, drawn towards the spectacle even as I squirmed. I am suspicious of crowds especially when I realize I can't so easily extract myself. Growing up, I remember the liturgies at the end of Lent when congregants had to read their part in the passion play. We were scripted to contradict the lector standing in for Pontius Pilate, who said that he wanted to release Jesus. "We want Barrabas!" went our line. What to do with the other prisoner? "Crucify him!" It was sickening to repeat, and yet it taught me some important lessons: masses can be dangerous, culpability is collective, and this ancient horror is also mine.

The inauguration returned me to those dark recognitions, and to the wallpaper of my Midwestern-Cold-War-military childhood. It wasn't just the display of wax-museum Reagan Era nostalgia, but the angry echoes of Phyllis Schlafly and Jerry Falwell, the perpetual Fourth of July air-show soundtrack of the Tops in Blue somehow drowning out the ominous rumble of nukes. The ghost of Anita Bryant was there somewhere, boycotting orange juice in a war against "the homosexual agenda," and I felt the shades of Mel and Norma Gabler, textbook crusaders against secular humanism.

Righteous faces everywhere, most of them white.

As I watched through the oath and the President's speech, I pictured my dad watching too, likely celebrating somewhere, probably with a giant flat-screen TV affixed to a big wall. He has been absent from my life for nearly twenty-five years, almost half the time I've been on this planet. I cannot say honestly that I miss or don't miss him, only that his absence has been a settled thing, like a tract of empty road that now looks as if it has always been paved.

The swearing-in unfurled its patriotic drapery, and I was transported to stomach-clenched body memories where I had been spectator and participant, feeling somehow to blame. My dad was like Trump without the fame or the billions—full of bluster, coasting on affability if and when he felt like it, a self-proclaimed guru or wizard (words he actually used), and ready to say to anybody: you-people-don't-know-what-you're-doing. He was also desperate to be liked, easy to flatter, and self-conscious about his receding hairline. The sad part to me now is that he often seemed to resent his life, especially with us in it.

There had to be punishment. Thus his extra disregard for "incompetent" others who, coincidentally, frequently happened to be people of color, women he deemed stupid or ugly, and institutions that didn't "get" him (the Air Force, the school system, the government). There were always plenty of denials: I'm not racist. I don't hate women. In church, I recall that he refused to

read the worst lines of the angry crowd when the time came, telling me once: I could never say that about Jesus.

Lucky Jesus, I guess.

My dad never ran for office or headed a corporation. But until he decided to leave, my mother, my sister, and I lived inside the disorienting tin-can border of all his frustration, bearing the brunt of it, weathering it, puzzling over it, or simmering alone. He was often detached, even when he was there. But sudden eruptions delayed or derailed dinners or board games or special celebrations, turned the car around, turned it back around again. Abrupt lectures—like extended Twitter tirades—on manners or curfews or exercise or parking spaces or, yes, feminists would seem never to end once they started. In later years, these diatribes subsided only after confusing and exhausting crescendos of questioned loyalty or love. There never seemed a way to reason, argue, or fight back.

I thought of this as I observed the president's son, just ten years old, descending into the official bleachers by himself, following a line of perfectly coiffed and detached grown-ups. He looked understandably fidgety and unmoored (do I sit or stand? here or over here?), his cherub face occasionally bobbing into view among a sea of chests and shoulders. At times, he searched the audience below, eyes narrowing: downcast, then numb, then impressed, then quizzical, a small smile making a partial curl at the edge of his mouth. I never saw him wave. Maybe he did. The beloved son. White as snow. Crowds at his feet already.

His father's voice filled the microphone with the loud and predictable words—"righteous" and "unstoppable", "protection" and "the color of blood"—and the crowd cheered and applauded. I wished then that the boy could tune it out and slip away, perhaps ushered gently by his mother who must know: there are other voices, other eyes to connect with.

Women's March Riverside

The next morning, against my own wariness, I disappeared into a different crowd, a peaceful assembly of five thousand people in the downtown of my city, one of more than five hundred cities that brought an estimated 3.3 million people into public view in the U.S. alone—a single event in a long history of demonstrations, where people speak truth to power with their bodies, taking up space to make room.

We had been instructed to stay on the sidewalks, but there were too many of us for that. We spilled into the streets—Mission and Lemon, University and Main—and we filled them all, wrapping around several blocks. I felt myself moved along by a family of strangers, together buoyed by the surprise of seeing so many of each other in one place: diverse women and men, toddlers on shoulders, college kids and grandparents, Spanish and English words buzzing amiably.

This was not a mob yelling for an execution. This was another kind of mass. In the best moments, when our voices rose occasionally to chant as we walked forward, we were not yelling to a Roman prefect or an American President, not to a perpetually disappointed warrior god raging from a mountaintop or at the head of the dinner table.

We were calling to each other. We were calling to people who didn't yet know how to join us: The ten year-old kid I was, the ten year-old boy on an inaugural stage.

(Reposted with permission from the author’s personal blog.)

This entry was posted on Saturday, January 28th, 2017 at 8:19 am and is filed under Discourse
You can follow any responses to this entry through the Comments (RSS) feed. You can skip to the end and leave a response. Pinging is currently not allowed.