

Defining Moments: Letter to My Children (27 January 2009)

The wind is making so much noise it has woke me up in the middle of the night (it's 3 AM) and I haven't been able to get back to sleep. Instead, I've been thinking (as I do a lot these days – and especially these middle-of-the-nights) of this and that. As for millions of others, this week has been particularly emotional for me, interspersed with many teary and nostalgic moments. As I was talking to Aurora after the inauguration about some of these feelings, it occurred to me that you. . . . as members of the "next" generation of Gregorys, might like to know some of my past that relates to these events. . . .

listening on NPR. . . . to part of the celebration concert the Sunday before the inauguration. . . . hearing Pete Seeger singing *This Land Is My Land* with Bruce Springsteen immediately after Obama brought tears to my eyes.

Hearing Seeger (or seeing him, as on the recent PBS special) always makes me cry these days (a beautiful man, still doing it at 89) but this time, with the conjunction of Martin Luther King Day and the Obama Inauguration, was especially powerful because it really brought back to me my own involvement with Seeger and King.

I think it must have been 1959 or 60 that I first saw Seeger. . . . I was on my first trip to New York, staying in the Bronx with a friend from school, Dave [who had told me he was a red diaper baby] whose (Jewish) family was very much involved with leftist politics.

It was an Easter Sunday, and Dave and I went downtown for the Ban the Bomb march (held, I think, by SANE nuclear policy, one of the most prominent – and probably leftist – anti-nuclear groups of the day). The march was led by Seeger, who played and sang all the way from Columbus Circle to the UN, then sang on the stage before all the speeches.

That night we went to Seeger's concert at Town Hall. I had never been at anything like that. (It was many years before rock concerts.) The place was packed with people who knew every word to every one of his songs, and who sang along with him (which is what he always wanted people to do). As I remember it, he was supposed to go to prison the next day for having taking the 5th before the House Unamerican Activities Committee, so it was a very special, emotional moment for everybody there. I had never experienced anything like that enormous power of group love for a charismatic figure.

After Dave's father threw me out of their house (I had been arguing, in a disinterested, "philosophical" way, that Hitler was right from his own point of view – really stupid, when I knew that his close relatives had died in concentration camps), I spent my last few days in the city with another TU friend and his family in Harlem. This friend and I had worked together (with Dave) the first sit-in in Toledo. That came about through a couple of events.

First, right after the Greensboro, North Carolina sit-ins (the first in the country), people from there spread out across the country telling their story and teaching others how to do sit-ins. Some of us TU students decided to try to integrate a popular rollerrink, one of the many supposedly

"public" places that were strictly segregated in those days. My involvement was minor, and I didn't actually sit-in (I think we had agreed that only the Black students would do that), and I don't remember the results (undoubtedly unsuccessful, I'm sure, at least in the short term). But in any case, that effort was the first of its kind in good ol' Toledo

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[BTW, it was a city-wide defense-fund campaign in April 1960 for those arrested in the Greensboro sit-ins which Dave and I other TU students help organize that led to my first front-page picture in a newspaper - the Toledo Blade , with James Farmer of the NAACP. The campaign raised \$2000, which was considered a goodly amount in those days.]

Before that, in high school, many of my friends were Black (among other things, another friend and I were the only White kids on a neighborhood basketball team). And my senior year (at Scott High) we (the senior class? or the whole school? – I don't remember how that was) elected the first Black homecoming queen in the history of the school (a clear indication of the changing demographics of the area). The morning after the election results were announced, several White boys hung her in effigy from a tree in front of the school. By the time the bell rang to start classes that morning, we were on the verge of a race riot.

It was announced over the PA system that there would be an assembly at noon and the dean of students came to me and asked me to address the assembly. I was some kind of student officer I guess (again, if I recall correctly: I really don't remember being on the student council, but I can't think why else he would have asked me).

He explained that the boys who hung the effigy had come to him in secret and apologized, were very ashamed and scared, and that we had to calm things down. I agreed to talk to the assembly. The gym bleachers were packed. After the dean and others spoke it was my turn. I had never spoken to a large group before (there were over 1000 kids in the senior class, if I recall: Scott was the 2nd largest high school in Toledo). I told them that I was glad the students were sorry and had apologized to the dean, but said I thought who they really should apologize to was us, the student body. Of course, the students cheered like crazy and the dean was later furious with me, and we never did learn who the jerks were. But that was the real beginning of my activist career.

The other big event in relation to all this was the 1963 march on Washington. I went to it with a carload of friends from Penn State (singing Woody Guthrie songs and singing along, incidentally, with an 8-track tape of a folksinger I had never heard of before named Bob Dylan). I don't remember how many people were there with us in front of the Lincoln Memorial (I always think of it as a million, but maybe that's an exaggeration), but of course no matter how many there were, it was one of the defining moments in our history and one of the most important moments in my life – and like everyone else there, I believed we would never in our lifetimes see a Black man elected President of this country.