

“Childhood’s End”

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From “Black Swan”, Essays on the Civil Rights Movement in
St. Augustine in 1963 and 1964

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It’s 2010. Just say the phrase “civil rights movement” and people’s eyes glaze over. They hear the same sound byte from the same speech every February. They recoil from the same video footage. They point to the color of the 44th President. No longer a living memory, the movement is filed in a folder named “before I came of age”. They say “yes, yes the movement was important but not as important as my 401-K”. Black and White is a kind of TV they don’t make anymore. Green is the color that preoccupies us at the moment and it’s not the green of the natural world.

So, what earthly difference does the civil rights movement make now and why should we try to understand it? Because now we can see enough of it – from this distance – to measure it and illuminate ideas that we can use now. Because the movement was more than a significant human achievement, it is a reminder that we have what it takes to survive our childhood. Because we do ourselves a favor when we recognize real heroes, not just the fictitious. Because we are in danger of forgetting what real leadership looks like and what engaged citizens look like. Because it may take more than voting for the lesser of two evils for this nation to survive the next half-century as a functioning democratic republic and if so, we would do well to study how we got here – like the Foot Soldiers did. Yes, the challenges we face now are quite different from the sixties, but we may discover – as the Foot Soldiers discovered – that we have all of the tools we really need to surmount them. From this distance, the movement appears to change in shape and form from something depressing into something strangely beautiful.

St. Augustine’s role in the movement is largely unknown but now is a good time to present it, the epoch of the movement having ended and the myth of race having been demolished by the Human Genome Project. Now science proves with certainty that the human species is one species with superficial differences. We carry within us no code that differentiates one race from another, just as there is no genetic marker identifying your political party or zip code. And yet we cannot escape the issues of race, pulled upon as we are by the gravitational field of race that was created before we were born by the slave-based agrarian economy that powered the birth of this nation and set us on this course.

As the civil rights epoch recedes from view we may see it now from another angle, as a step – like the steps implied in Jacob Bronowski’s imperishable book: “The Ascent of Man”; one step in mankind’s struggle up a long stairway, not to heaven and not to a utopia but up from the long fearful childhood of our species. In our childhood, the quest for social and political change is often synonymous with violence for which we have no proper name; rolling, staggering, catastrophic violence; violence that is too difficult to contemplate. But on this stairway, we may

– if we have the courage - set the stage for our own reinvention and emancipate ourselves from ancient, destructive myths and finally grow (as Christopher Hitchens put it in another context) “to something like our full height as a species”.

Deuteronomy reminds us that man does not live by bread alone. The 401-K may be intact, but it has no power to fill our inescapable need for the transcendent and the beautiful; the things we can't quantify but know we need. It may be found in the splendor of the natural world. Or, it may be delivered in a human invention such as a book or film of unusual power, extraordinary art and of course, great music. And we love our stories, reserving a special place in our hearts for stories of people who lived ordinary lives until they made the decision to do the right thing; people whose song was unsung until their epoch had ended and their actions were reviewed from a distance in the cool light of hindsight. When the story is true and delivered honestly, we weigh the story on our scale of human accomplishment and we note that our own problems don't weigh quite as much. We are given a sense of perspective.

Now American kids wear T-shirts sporting the image of cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin, the first man to travel into space. In addition to this credit as an explorer he was also an officer in the former Soviet military, our former enemy. This seeming contradiction does not trouble the kids. They wear their T-shirts because the epoch of the “space race” is over and we now benefit from a new perspective. Yuri has become emblematic of a profound human achievement in spite of the political forces that drove him into space. Now, we can see the entire civil rights movement as an endeavor that took about as long and may arguably be weighed on the same scale as mankind's journey to the moon and back.

A casual review of the civil rights movement may leave some people with the entirely false impression that it was a spontaneous series of protests organized by a charismatic black preacher. The elegance of the movement becomes self evident when one understands its origins and organization. Although I argue that it started long before King, history nonetheless records the movement as starting in 1954. King – the idea man and pragmatist – was the iconic leader, but he was surrounded by a group of exceedingly competent people like A. Phillip Randolph, a secularist who had the connections and the skill to manage large projects such as the march on Washington. And King's inner circle was likewise surrounded by a legion of highly disciplined citizens with a variety of religious and political views. Simon Sinek makes the following point: They didn't protest for King, they did it because they believed what King believed. King gave a voice to what they believed and then they executed tasks that supported their belief. And they did it no email, no fax, no cell phones, no computers and no internet. They did it under duress, under FBI surveillance and often under attack and credible threats of terror. First they won a major case in the Supreme Court, then they brought the City of Birmingham, Alabama to its knees without throwing a single brick. Then - after 10 years of relentless struggle - they brought the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to the threshold of law. Now in 2010, as the government (the only means that the public has of protecting its interests) is usurped of power in what Chris Hedges describes as “a coup in slow motion”; as the general public responds by eating more and thinking less, favoring entertainment and spectacle over literacy and discipline, having remembered how to disguise cowardice with cynicism and having forgotten how to stand up for its interests; we would do well to recall how a group with so little in the way of material wealth changed the American zeitgeist in a revolution delivered without violence.

To observe the movement from a distance is to watch a thing of beauty. Not the beauty of people holding hands and singing but rather, the beauty of a machine with a quarter million moving parts; a machine with parts that can be traced back a full decade before Rosa Parks refused to surrender her seat on that bus; back to black lawyers who believed with certainty that their arguments would prevail but never expected to witness the victory in their lifetime. To examine the movement closely - to peer into it - is to peer into the heart of human achievement and measure that small piece of iron that resides within the human heart; the iron that will not yield to fear or decay into hatred; the iron that resists the most corrosive belief in our short, brutal history as a species: The belief that the end justifies the means. And to know the movement is to know that it is within our power as citizens to change the zeitgeist again and also to know that while there may be limits to human achievement, we don't know what those limits are.