

A Loss of Memory? *W.E. Roberts*

In a recent *Esquire* article entitled “The Cold Open: Remembering, and Forgetting” by long time contributor Charles P. Pierce (2016), we are reminded of the power of memory, our mandated public witness to history and politics, as well as our obligation to join together to shape a better future for our nation and our world. Pierce invokes the prescient words of Czech author Milan Kundera who saw the struggle for independence from Soviet domination as one of “man against power... memory against forgetting” (Pierce, 2016, p. 3). It is a timeless cautionary tale to all who profess to be democratic. Pierce states that:

[S]ooner or later, the effort to forget and to unknow becomes too much of a burden for too many people and they force the collapse of the system. Humans are driven to remember. Humans can crack from the effort it takes to deny and forget. The consequences can be therapeutic or they can be catastrophic, for people and for the political societies into which they organize themselves... without memory, there can be no connection with the world, nothing salvaged or brought forward. Without language, memory is orphaned. Without both of them, history is mute... Language and memory must work together not only to preserve the past but to illuminate the present and to build a future” (ibid, p. 4).

Though I have not endured the brutality of a totalitarian regime, I have become a captive of my government and I cannot forget the prison experience. I will not remain silent, nor will I “unknow” the things about man’s cruelty which have been revealed to me. I will instead gather together our stories, language, and memory to unite our collective voices and give words to our anguish and sorrow, to ask your patience and understanding, to seek reconciliation and restoration of dignity, to demand that we are not forgotten.

The risk of ignoring each other and dismissing one’s humanity in the rush to judgement and punishment brings us far too close to the machinations of past and present authoritarian states that our government all-too willingly and easily criticizes, while simultaneously “forgetting” that which we do to our own citizens and to those who have no power to defend themselves. Suffering in the name of justice is a universal event that binds us together as humans. We will all be touched in our lives at some point, to some degree,

by forces beyond our control which bring tears and anger, as well as an intimate knowledge of helplessness. I beg you, as Pierce has admonished us, to “remember what we are capable of doing to one another if we lose faith in every institution of self-government, especially those into which we are supposed to channel our passions to constructive purpose” (ibid). Whereas Pierce was referring to the bloodshed of this nation’s Civil War and Abraham Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address to a people still torn asunder by hatred and violence, its message is no less imperative today as we witness political discord and our country’s growing public cancer regarding the perception of “other” within our borders. Even our neighbours have become suspect. Our hearts have hardened and our minds have narrowed concerning the communities behind bars we know so little about, yet turn away from in our revulsion and desperation to “unknow”.

Our prisoners deserve better things from us. They deserve hope and forgiveness, equally tempered with the need for discipline and self-responsibility. They deserve a fair and balanced sentence, which guarantees the offer to start anew without bias and intolerance. They deserve to be remembered for their goodness in spite of their failings and for their potential to achieve greatness, if given the proper opportunity. These thoughts must be foremost in our hearts and minds if we are to welcome them home into our society once again. Our prisons are legally bound to be institutions of promise and healing, not to be merely instruments of prejudice and division. Our prisons are expected to be centres of education and encouragement, not only sites of denigration and failure.

We must find the conviction we once had to believe in each other, to uphold our shared rights as a democratic people. We must stand together. Our courts and legislatures must be charged with the greatest responsibility of all, a duty which requires the vision to see beyond punishment and blame to offer compassion, to feel empathy and to build up human potential *in all of us*.

REFERENCES

- Pierce, Charles P. (2016) “The Cold Open: Remembering, and Forgetting”, *Esquire Magazine* – May, pp. 3-4.

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