

America the Beautiful?

H. D. Blake

When I was in grade school, we were appalled by the killing, unjust jailing, and blatant violations of human rights of people in far-away countries with names that were difficult to pronounce and policies even more difficult to understand.

“I am so glad I live in America,” I would say with a sigh of relief for the principles that made our country great. I could not imagine living in a country that had no respect for human life or a sense of justice toward its citizens. Here in the United States of America, things were different. We believed in forgiveness and in tempering justice with mercy. We helped each other and when one of us had a problem there was always someone there to offer a hand. Yes, America was a truly great place to live—the Land of the Free; the Home of the Brave; Truth, Justice, and the American Way.

It was not America, California, or Los Angeles, but my own distorted sense of right and wrong that had me believe I could live on the edge of social acceptance. I was not the best person in the world, but I was surely not the worst. I never intentionally tried to do anyone great bodily injury. I cried at certain movies, and waxed nostalgic when certain songs were played. I love animals, and the ocean. I love to read good books. I love helping people with their problems. I benefit whenever I repeat a message that I need to keep in mind for myself. All in all, I am not that much different from most other people in America. In some ways I might even be a lot easier to get along with—I am not racist or quick to anger, I love God, and I respect others’ feelings.

In a moment of confusion I resolved a situation in a manner that would have brought theater audiences to their feet had it been John Wayne, Charles Bronson, or Clint Eastwood righting a wrong. But it was me, acting out of a distorted sense of heroism. There was no investigation into my reasoning. I was a criminal and that was that—no ifs, ands, or buts. What I did canceled out everything else about me and left me in the vast and generalized category of those who had committed crimes before and after me.

In spite of the fear, depression, hopelessness, and frustration I felt deep inside, I was comforted by the fact that in America, the Bad Guy was always treated fairly and eventually, through example, was reconditioned, rehabilitated, and re-cycled back into society. After all, I was not in Russia or Communist China where people were put into prison and forgotten about. This is America where everyone gets a second chance to be all they can be.

Even though I had made a major mistake, I knew the Good Guys would allow me to redeem myself. That is what Good Guys do. Good Guys keep their word, look out for the underdog, and right wrongs through benevolence and understanding. All through childhood I was taught this in various ways and now that I had fallen from grace and tarnished my image, I was relieved that I could count on the Good Guys to be good guys.

The beginning of any long journey is difficult. It is even more difficult when the end is not clearly specified. However, I embarked on my odyssey determined to do whatever it took to demonstrate that my crime was not an indication of the kind of person I am but an apparition, a behavioural anomaly triggered by a set of circumstances that could never be recreated in a thousand millennia. In the course of proving to them that I was a “Good Guy in disguise,” I discovered some phenomenal things about myself. The most remarkable of these discoveries was and is: I *am* a Good Guy! In fact, in a lot of ways, I am a better guy than some of the “guys” I thought personified honour and dignity.

After nearly fifteen years of a fifteen-to-life sentence for second-degree murder (murder without premeditation), I have come to terms with my crime, my life, and my future. I have done things to correct those parts of my thinking that made bad choices or no choices at all. I have done more than what has been asked of me, only to find out that the good guys have changed the rules. They no longer feel obligated to honor their agreements because they make the rules and we have to follow them. The governor of this great State has expressed his intention to keep anyone convicted of taking another human life in prison without parole, regardless of the terms of their sentencing or their positive adjustments.

It frightens me, but more than that I am afraid for the people that think the way I used to think before I trusted in the Good Guys’ goodness. It is only through the belief in the principles of democracy that the guarantees can be perpetuated. The promises of a democratic society are not for those who can buy security, or ensure through force the welfare of their family. Democracy is to protect those who cannot protect themselves from the larger entities that seek to advance their own selfish agendas. When one set of people begins to believe that certain conditions in life favor some and deny others, they place themselves in the kind of blind naïveté that allows democracy to slip away unnoticed.

I have been the grateful recipient of some very amazing, cathartic revelations. The one that impacted me most is that people deal with other

people on a sliding scale of integrity based on how much power one has over the other. I, perhaps like most, believed that we as a people had evolved to a point in intellect and spirituality that allowed us to see past the actions of a person and/or group of people into the cause of those actions. One of the most fundamental propositions is that there is a cause behind every effect. People are not born killers, rapists, child molesters, robbers, thieves, and batterers. Their actions are an expression of what they have been taught, not a natural propensity. However, it has become a simpler task to identify the disease and excise the infected member than to research and isolate its etiology and produce a social vaccine. Perhaps the unconscious reasoning for this course of action is that finding the cause might reveal some common responsibility. We might determine that neither the criminal nor the judge could be in the position they occupy unless social support was given or withheld at crucial times in their development. Unfortunately, there are so many elements of our new world order that depend on and serve to establish a caste system that society has come to depend on the criminal element as much as physicians depend upon the diseased.

I grew up believing in the perfection of the democratic process. I believed people selected politicians because they had the people's interest at heart. I thought policemen were the cream of the crop dedicated to protect and to serve. I thought that with the exception of the most extreme cases, all prisoners were reintegrated into society to live happy productive lives because this was the blessing and advantage of living in a country founded on freedom and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Even the Constitution of the United States of America guarantees one's inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. In hindsight, I guess it was necessary for me to believe this, otherwise I would have been unable to tell the difference between the United States of America and those countries that practiced blatant violations of human rights and the unjust jailing of its citizens, that showed open disregard for human suffering and indifference to ongoing social problems. Those far-away countries with names that were difficult to pronounce and policies even more difficult to understand do not seem so far away anymore. It is America, as I once believed it to be, which is distant in my memory.

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