

THE SINGING BUILDING

Maria Alexandra Sayers, January 14, 2018

Recently I went to Washington, DC to spend a few days with my grandson Alex, who received an internship at the Smithsonian Museum. I enjoyed learning about his important research on mosquitoes that cause illness, such as the Zika virus. But the experience I need to speak of today was of a different matter. It made me angry, it made me sad, it made me laugh, and ultimately it lodged itself forever in my expanded heart, where it became unforgettable.

The newest museum in Washington is the National Museum of African American History and Culture. It has become so popular that, unlike the other Smithsonian museums, it requires entrance tickets which are free, but snapped up months in advance. We were privileged to be able to go in, as there were many disappointed people outside the building unable to visit the museum.

A lover of architecture, I had already been entranced by the building exterior, the award winning design in a fierce competition. It is a massive structure with three levels, meant to replicate the three-tiered crowns used in Yoruba art from West Africa. The entire building is then wrapped up in a caramel colored metal lattice that shines like gold filigree in the sunlight. This too, has a deeper meaning, it represents the beauty and intricacy of the ironwork crafted in the American south by slaves brought from Africa. The building is a stunning departure from the classical Greek style government buildings, monuments and other museums. During the day the bronze color is burnished gold, and at night the three tiers rise and float upward from the darkness, like gold tiaras.

The history depicted in the bottom level makes it the most painful section of the museum. It consists of documents, photos, life stories of thousands of Africans yanked out of their land and brought in boats to this continent to be sold, exploited, dehumanized. I was enraged reading the posters advertising the sale of slaves, with detailed descriptions of each person, or rather of each object to be used by the plantation owners in any way they please.

I spent a long time in this section, with the cliché we all have thought and said reverberating inside me: "How could this have happened?" There were statistics of how many people had come in boats, with images and descriptions of the conditions they endured, and how many survived the voyage. There were also many photos of lynchings, and even more of workers being lashed. Families were separated according to their physical condition and how they were to be used in the plantation. To look at these documents was painful but essential. And if you averted your eyes from the display because you could look no more, you saw heartbreak around you, in the emotional reaction of African Americans and other visitors. A teenage daughter crying on her mother's shoulder, families enveloping each other in their arms,

trembling with sobs, fathers squeezing their babies for comfort, other people of color shaking their head, incredulous, perhaps until now not having seen physical proof of the suffering of their ancestors. Sadness and outrage permeated all of us, from every part of the world. In my mind I could hear

the growl of the chains,
the hiss of the whip,
the thud of the blows,
the screams of those sold.

Easier on the eyes and on the heart was the next level. Symbolically and physically up from the lower level which depicted slavery, the second level concentrates on the survival and achievements of African Americans as time progressed, although, once again, anger and shock are provoked by the section on segregation and the race riots, with explicit photos and commentary from racist politicians. I had separated myself from the rest of my group deliberately. I knew that some things I had not comprehended when I came to this country in the 1960's would be in this section, and I had to prepare my heart and soul for the pain of revisiting those memories. I remember that some of the first events I had seen on television were of black children being hit by powerful water hoses held by police as the children walked to school, to the jeers and insults of a threatening white crowd. At that time, newly arrived in this country, I neither knew nor understood why. And now, I know, but I still do not understand.

This level of the building had much information that surprised most of the visitors, American or foreign, who had not realized the accomplishments of so many African Americans in every field of endeavor, in spite of the racism meant to deter then at every turn. It was emotional to see the sections on Rosa Parks, Stephen Douglas, Booker T. Washington, Sojourner Truth (Ain't I a woman?), Henrietta Lack, James Meredith, Martin Luther King Jr. and countless more. I defy anyone to see the display on the Tuskegee airmen without shedding a tear. And, being from Michigan, I shed many when I saw the section on Rosa Parks and on Viola Liuzzo, a member of the Unitarian church in Michigan, the only white woman killed by the Ku Klux Klan in 1965, executed while protesting for a cause that was vital to people of every color. Here I heard

the footsteps of protest marchers,
the explosions inside big cities
the ugly word that should never be said,
the beauty of a speech about freedom

I took a deep breath on the top level, and had to leave at closing time, but could have stayed days longer. The third level is metaphorically and literally the crown. Thousands of artists, singers, musicians, athletes (Muhammed Ali's robe!) film stars and directors, writers, politicians

and many other icons of African American culture. The outrageous attire of Motown groups, the unsubtle clothes of James Brown and Lil' Richard, life-size statues of The Supremes with big dresses and bigger hair, famous scenes from popular television shows. On this top floor the pervasive feelings are hope, laughter, and pride. There is a music room that plays any selection you choose. The verses of Langston Hughes and Maya Angelou (You may put me down with your bitter, twisted lies, but STILL I RISE!) brought me to tears, yet again, but here finally the crying did not last. The building sings homage and praise long overdue, containing struggles and achievements in spite of the struggles, of hate met with peaceful resistance, of racial prejudice that has not yet been obliterated. Here on the top floor of this building, where we are closer to the pure air, the sky, the sun and the stars, I heard

the rhythm of jazz and blues,
the beauty of church hymns,
spirituals, rock, rap, hip hop
the heartbeat of people whose music
is for people of every color.
Never out of tune,
THIS BUILDING SINGS.

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CALL AND WRONG RESPONSE

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Music was an important component of the Humanities college class I taught. I can't sing or play a note, but I can explain musical genres and their eras. I always enjoyed giving the lecture on Jazz and Blues and other types of music gifted to the world by African Americans. I mentioned one day in class the emotion-packed beauty of African American church services, with hymns and spirituals and beautiful melodies, with clapping, call and response, everyone swaying flawlessly to the rhythm. Right after class one of my African American students asked me if I would like to go to a service at her church, and I eagerly accepted.

My incompetence showed from the start. Each time I clapped my hands I was the only one doing so, all the clapping having already been done during some mysterious unseen and unheard clue. The choir and the congregation would all be swaying left and right simultaneously to accompany the music, and of course I would sway in the opposite direction and crash into the person next to me. It was an awkward and beautiful moment and I will never forget it.

My lack of coordination was once again sadly evident when I participated in the recent March for Justice in Washington DC, organized by religious leaders of all denominations. Before the March there was a large gathering outdoors, and speeches by many of the religious figures, including Al Sharpton and Martin Luther King III. The speeches were fiery and the audience reacted emotionally. I was standing amidst many African Americans, who knew exactly when to say “Yeah Lord,” or “Amen,” or “Uh, Uh,” or “That’s right!” clapping and swaying in unison. Neither my voice nor my movement matched theirs, and I was totally out of sync. Temperature was in the eighties and I was getting fuzzy. Once I thought I heard them say “Yeah baby!” but I don’t think that’s right, as that sounded more like a Motown moment.

The March itself started from the memorial to Martin Luther King. There is a beautiful massive statue of the Reverend, surrounded by a circle of big boulders on which have been carved some of his most famous sayings. Now, there was a man who knew how and when to speak, and I got misty reading his words, his prose being more beautiful than most poetry. This day was also the anniversary of his “I Have a Dream” speech, which made the March more meaningful and emotional.

Many marchers carried big signs saying “Justice for All” or “March for Justice,” making it clear that this was not a march against anyone but rather on behalf of a human right. There was no violence, and there was heavy security everywhere. The closest any of us came to a protest was when we passed the Trump Hotel and hissed at the rich oligarchs sitting at the fancy sidewalk café. We booed loudly, and energetically showed them our middle digits. Finally, I was able to use my voice and both hands simultaneously in beautiful, coordinated disrespect.

There were more speeches when we arrived at the Department of Justice, but I was too tired and hot to be as riled up as I was before the March. I sat on the sidewalk curb after buying a plastic bag with beautiful photos of Barack Obama and family on both sides. Hot and tired, I spoke to the bag: “I miss you,” I whined to the photo. I still couldn’t come up with correct responses to the speeches, but in my current condition I no longer worried about saying the right things at the right time. When a young African American woman standing by me voiced: “Uh, uh, that’s right!” I managed to mumble: “Uh, uh, that’s right. Whatever.”

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