

June 7, 2020

On Making Sense of History

Are you proud of your parents?

When one has buried many loved ones, lost the opportunities to create memories, and remembers too much of the suffering of living in a state that has distorted the very language of one's cause, it's easy to think that all was in vain. A lost cause. But time has a way of revealing truth. Time is perspective. It offers the necessary distance that one needs to see fully and clearly.

With the benefit that time has afforded me I tried to interrogate the history of the student movement. Why was it so significant? Why were all those bright minds ready to die for a cause that had shown mixed results in other places? Was it naivete? Was it arrogance? But more importantly, was it worth the body count? What good came out of it?

It's important to think of the context in which these students verbalized what they could no longer accept to see in their communities. They discussed, debated, articulated the conditions and the causes of the suffering of the many. Their frustration was borne out of what they each witnessed to be the order of the day. It

was informed by the peasants uprising, the arrested poetry that was told in private, it was in the faces of the poor farmers that honor their words even when it hurts them. It always hurt them. They dreamt of a better future for the voiceless. They diligently studied and debated the theories and tactics used by others the world over in a manner and discipline only students can. Ideas and ideals turned into conviction. They became a singular pursuit, not motivated by self-interest but the sense of responsibility to fight on behalf of those who cannot. When thinking of the students that grew up in a society that believes its rulers are ordained by God and claim lineage directly from biblical characters, to protest was an act of blasphemy. They didn't make simple demands but questioned the very premise of how society was organized.

There are some changes that happen in society that are taken for granted, that later generations see no need to attribute to a time or to a person. When reading some of the original writings from the students' movement, I came to the realization that perhaps the biggest achievement of the student's movement was in giving us the very language, the syntax for how we as a people, should demand a better future. They articulated the language that we can use to demand our basic freedom, our human rights, women's rights, rights of minorities, rights to demand representation.

Rights not because one is born of a certain group but for merely being a citizen of this country.

The success of the student movement is in bringing the ideals that we have now come to take as a given, universally accepted, to enter our homes, our psyches.

Have we achieved them? No. But the generations that followed, have inherited a firm place to stand on, and the lever to pull in creating their movement.

So, back to the question — are you proud of your parents? What an ironic question!

Every time I hear that question, I ask myself, what if my parents were the jailers and executioners and the people that we, now, have come to associate as the “the other”? Should one be asked if she is ashamed of her parents? Of course not. Because it's undeserved.

I find the question to be ironic because at the very core, what my parents protested was this very type of thinking, pride derived from one's parents, and the extent that one goes to preserve a family's pride that's always rooted to a place in society, of unearned privilege or power, and entitlement.

So, am I proud of my parents? I believe that I am very lucky to be born of these parents, in the family that I'm born in, in this complex, complicated and beautiful

corner of the planet. All of us are. And as a people, here is my challenge to all of us, let's not sit on our laurels from history, but let's be judged by how we fight the injustices of our own time.

Let me conclude my thoughts with a short poem, from the book "Sorry for your Troubles" by Padraig O'Touma written after the Irish Civil War. But I think it might as well have been written about us.

Its titled:

The North(ern) of Ireland

It is both a dignity and
a difficulty to live between these names.

Perceiving politics

in the syntax of the state.

And at the end of the day.

the reality is

that whether we change

or whether we stay

the same

these questions remain.

Who are we to be

with one another?

And

How are we

to be

with one another?

and what to do with all the memories

of all those funerals?

And

What about those present

whose past was blasted

far beyond their

future?

I wake.

You wake.

She wakes.

He wakes.

They wake.

We wake and take this troubled beauty forward.