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words

A LOSS OF MEMORY?

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In a recent *Esquire* article entitled "The Cold Open" by long-time contributor Charles P. Pierce, we are reminded of the power of memory, of our mandated public witness to history & politics, & our obligation to join together with others in order to shape a better future for our nation & 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." It is a timeless caution to all who profess to be democratic. He [Pierce] goes on to state: "Sooner or later, the effort to forget & to unknow becomes too much of a burden for too many people & they force the collapse of the system. Humans are driven to remember. Humans can crack from the effort it takes to deny & to forget. The consequences can be therapeutic or they can be catastrophic, for people & 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 & memory must work together not only to preserve the past but to illuminate the present & to build a future."

(*Esquire* magazine, May 2016 - pp. 3-4)

Though I have not endured the brutality of a totalitarian regime, I have become a captive of my

government + I cannot forget the prison experience. I will not remain silent nor will I "unknow" the things about man's cruelty towards others which have been revealed to me. Instead, I will gather together our stories - our language + memory - + unite our collective voices to give words to anguish + sorrow, to ask your patience + understanding, to seek reconciliation + restoration of dignity, to demand that we not be forgotten. The risk of ignoring each other + dismissing one's humanity in the rush to judgement + punishment brings us far too close to the machinations of past + present authoritarian states our government all-too willingly + easily criticizes while simultaneously "forgetting" that which we do to our own citizens + 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 + anger + an intimate knowledge of helplessness. I beg you, as Charles P. 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." (p.4) whereas Pierce was referring to the bloodshed of this nation's Civil War + Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address to a people still torn

W.E. Roberts

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asunder by hatred + violence, its message is no less imperative today as we witness political discord + our country's growing public cancer regarding the perception of "other" within our borders. Even our neighbors have become suspect + our hearts + minds have hardened to the communities behind bars we know so little about, yet turn away from in our revulsion + a reactive obsession to "unknown."

Our prisoners deserve better things from us. They deserve hope + forgiveness equally tempered with the need for discipline + self-responsibility. They deserve a fair + balanced sentence which guarantees the offer to start anew without bias + intolerance. They deserve to be remembered for their goodness in spite of their failings, for their potential to achieve greatness if given the proper opportunity. These thoughts must be foremost in our hearts + minds if we are to welcome them home into our fold + our society once again. Our prisons are legally bound to be institutions of promise + healing not merely instruments of prejudice + division, expected to be centers of education + encouragement not only sites of denigration + failure. We must stand together. We must find the conviction we once had to believe in each other, to uphold our shared rights as a democratic people. And our courts + legislatures must be charged with the greatest responsibility of all, a duty which requires the vision to see beyond punishment + blame to offer compassion, to feel empathy, + to build up the human in all of us.