

Last week, a friend asked me if I sometimes feel like giving up on justice.

Of course I feel despair, I said. My hope is like a few scattered tenements with warmly lit windows in the midst of a city of despair. My hope is a ladder that stretches flimsily from one stinging outcropping to another.

Tonight I took a jog down the familiar streets around South High School, where I graduated almost 16 years ago, and I explored my tenements with an endorphin flashlight. I found three kinds of despair.

I found an existential despair of death. We are, as the philosopher Alphonso Lingis put it, 'deathbound subjectivity' - beings on the way to death. Whether we lived in poverty or plenty, whether we got a bad loan, got fired unfairly, or lived in abject alienation in the midst of obscene wealth, we will all die. And the things we made will cease, as well. If there is a note of desperation (despair!) to so many of our pursuits, that marks our fear of death? The wiser among us (not myself) have shed this fear without shedding their ambition to create beautiful things on foundations of sand.

I found a moral despair of alienation. Who has not found herself not knowing the suffering of the other, not wanting to know, and turning away, even, from the awareness that there is terrible suffering, in terrible proximity? Better, easier, more rewarding, safer to serve the powers that be-- don't get involved, don't ask questions, don't talk to strangers. If we are all made in God's image, then this turning away is a kind of alienation, even if we find ourselves surrounded by friends. Liberation theology tells us to turn towards the poor and oppressed, calls us to enact "the preferential option for the poor". Gandhi wrote that "God can be served in only one way alone. To serve the poor is to serve God. What is the aim of life? It is to know the self. This realization of self, or self-knowledge, is not possible until one has achieved unity with all living beings, until one has become one with God. To accomplish such unity implies deliberate sharing of the suffering of others and the eradication of such suffering."

Finally, I found a political despair of superficialism (spellcheck tells me I've coined a new term). No matter who occupies the White House, or the State Capitol, our progressive politics is hamstrung unless we challenge the poverty of our common sense notions of individuals, communities and economies. Conservatives can tell a tidy story about individuals beating the odds, making good choices and achieving the good life. These stories don't reflect reality if they don't incorporate communities, and corporate and political systems that support or tear down generations of individuals; either a brisk wind to fill one's sails and a loyal crew on deck, or a tidal wave of oppression that tears down the lower 9th ward every 30 years, each time taking a different form but propelled by the same tectonic forces of racism, hatred and fear.

Sometimes all we can do is hurl sandbags in front of houses; sometimes we shake our fists at the sky, and sometimes we rage at the weathermen. Sometimes we grind our teeth at a political party riven by the contradiction between speaking for the whole and shying away from challenging the root causes of suffering.

Tonight I reminded myself that my organizing must choose a celebration of life over a dread of death; must make a moral choice for the poor far beyond the binding of their wounds, beyond speaking for them; must challenge the dangerous shortcomings of radical individualism and corporate/financial capitalism. Despair can be staved off with small, important victories; understanding and showing up for the larger struggle is also important.

-David Snyder, Community Organizer, Jewish Community Action
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Dave recommends the following resources

<http://www.bkconnection.com/ProdDetails.asp?ID=1576752372>

<http://www.corporation2020.org/index.htm>

<http://www.americanrightsatwork.org/>

<http://www.metrolyrics.com/underdog-lyrics-the-coup.html>

<http://liberationtheology.org/>

http://www.racialwealthdivide.org/color_of_wealth/book.html