

“Can I Get a Witness?”

*“Have compassion for everyone you meet even if they don’t want it.
 What seems conceit, bad manners or cynicism is always a sign
 Of things no ears have heard, no eyes have seen.
 You do not know what wars are going on down
 Where the spirit meets the bone.
 Forget your perfect offering.
 There is a crack in everything.
 That is how the light gets in.”*

Practice first: if I say, *Can I Get a Witness?* You say.....*Amen! Yes!*
 And because ours is a congregation where there is free pulpit and free pew,
 Where the preaching is a conversation, a sharing, a back and forth,
 And not just me talking and you passively listening...
 When you say back to your preachers *Can I Get a Witness?* (*say it!*)
 The preacher says *Amen! Yes!*
 Why? Because all of us deserve to be heard, to be noticed, to be seen,
 Which is why I’ve told us before that one of the most important and powerful
 Theological statements we can ever say to someone is *I see you...*
 If you’re black or brown, white or blue-collar, wealthy or depressed,
 Self-actualized or struggling to just stay afloat...I see you, I see you, I see you.
 You over there, over there, in the back, up front (name folks I recognize),
 I see you.

But sometimes in this world it’s hard to be seen by others, isn’t it?

And sometimes, depending on how sheltered, shadowed,
Or tunneled our vision is – It can also be hard to see others.

Can I get a witness?

I shared with us years ago that one of the first jobs that I ever had during summer
break from college

Was as a crew supervisor for an inner-city youth jobs program in St. Louis.

It was called Operation Brightside,

and the mayor's idea – who was white, embattled and facing a tough re-election
campaign – was to employ hundreds of under-privileged city teens,
all of them black, to help clean up and 'brighten' some of the city's most
blighted neighborhoods.

Sounds like a win-win, doesn't it?

Except that the kids knew there were being used as political props,

And not well paid political props at that, getting – if memory serves,

Not quite \$5 an hour, 8hrs a day, picking up crushed Bud cans and McDonald's
bag and pulling weeds surrounded by 95 degrees of humid, hot air.

Just standing would cause the back of your neck to bead up with sweat.

I grew up in what was the St. Louis equivalent of Brookline – big, brick homes,
Gates at the end of our street, giant sycamores shedding their shade

Down the criss-cross streets, many of our neighbors faculty at Washington

University that was just two blocks away – founded, did you know,

By William Greenleaf Eliot, great-grandfather to TS Eliot and first minister

Of First Unitarian Church of St. Louis, he not wanting to name the school

After himself because humility used to be a popular quality among our leaders,

And I mean that in a bi-partisan way.

It was lovely place to grow up, if sheltered, because the only way I learned to see people different me, witness people different than me was to travel
Outside the radius of home to Catholic school to home to
Catholic school – remember, Ferguson was 8.2 miles away west,
And downtown was 6 miles east, and I had yet to learn or even know of Unitarian
Universalism’s tagline – that we are a faith with a spiritual center, and a civic
Circumference.

Can I get a witness?

But come that first summer home from college,
My morning commute looked like this –
Getting into my black with gold trim and gold wheels Volkswagen Sirocco
hatchback (cool car),
Driving through said sycamore leafy streets,
Taking right down Delmer where, if you remember, my beautiful
BMX bike, years earlier, had its blue grips, number plate, and blue air-cap dice
stolen (but that you lovingly replaced for me at my 10yr anniversary),
And driving those 6 miles east....
The scenery only taking one mile (one mile!) to change from gentrified, college
Cool bars and bead shops and the first Ben and Jerry’s in St. Louis because FroYo
Wasn’t yet a thing...
To ‘All Nite’ (spelled NITE) liquor stores, and pawn shops, and homes wrecked
By fire years ago that now had graying boards bolted across the doors and
windows, the smoke-stained ornamental stone work revealing that these homes
Used to be where the wealthy white folks lived until the great white flight
Of the late 1800’s onward as black southerners moved into the city,

The legacy of all that still reflected by the fact that the city is still one of the most racially and economically segregated in the whole country.

Once at the end of Delmer I would take another right, and drive for 1.5 miles down Grand Blvd., and park at the MLK Community Center,
The drab, one story brick building caught in a matrix of shadows
From the St. Louis Arch behind us,
And the Grand Blvd Towers in front of us – the irony of the name not lost
On the hundreds and hundreds of people, again all black, who were residents
There in what was the city's oldest public housing project,
And the irony of the Arch, that Gateway to West, the symbol of unbridled freedom
And open-ended opportunity not lost on them either,
Because where could they go?

It would be tempting at this point to Hollywood-ize what followed
Day in and day out for me – how I, the white kid from the University suburb,
Was treated with contempt at first by my crew of 13 girls and boys, some
Of them only two years younger than me,
But then slowly earned their trust or at least their respect
As we brightened the city's down and out neighborhoods –
Hallmark movies we have my character find a romantic lead with a fellow
Staff member, and after a dangerous encounter on a drug corner,
The kids would defend me, and then on winter break from college
I would come home and share Christmas dinner with a couple kids at Grand Blvd.
Towers, and the music would que up...and later,
The white actor playing me might even get nominated for an Oscar,
And they would flash to that actor's face as Chris Rock, the Oscar host,

Says plaintively about the lack of black actors getting nominated: *all we want is opportunity! Just give us an opportunity!*

Can I get a witness?

But life is not a movie, and that summer was among the hardest 10 weeks of my life.

At the end of the first week I found my beloved Sirocco, at the end of the day,

With a smashed window and the entire dashboard gone, missing,

Taken for the radio I guess, with only a nest of wires left.

Ooooooh Mr. Nate's car got jacked! the kids all said, hands to mouths, grinning,

Laughing.

And when I took it to the repair place that weekend, and the white guy

With rolled up sleeves asked what happened and I told him,

He said: *'what you expect parking your car down there with those people?'*

A comment which left me silent, because such sentiments were (and are) common.

But what is that is often said about such moments?

That most days in our lives the battle isn't between doing good and doing evil;

It's between doing good and doing nothing.

Can I get a witness?

But it's worth asking: what *was* I expecting? What do we expect

When we go way outside our comfort zone? When we have to see people,

Witness people, whom we have never really seen before?

Maybe if I knew that's what I was doing I would have gone into the city

That summer better prepared.

But instead I was a surprised witness, and a resentful witness— surprised that

The kids didn't listen to me at all (hey, I'm a nice guy! I thought, never thinking how it must have felt for them to see their supervisor as some college kid With a cool, black car),
Surprised by roughness I saw on the streets that summer,
surprised by the dirt and the grime and poverty,
surprised by my own feelings of relief and then shame that I didn't live here,
surprised by the kid's playfulness, the irreverence,
surprised how much that \$200 weekly check meant, and how quickly they would burn through it every weekend (because...why not?),

and resentful that they hardly listened to me,
resentful how they made fun of me,
resentful of my dad for getting me this job because he knew someone in the city (one of my first lessons, Nathan, in showing me how privilege works),
and resentful that I couldn't quit this job because I needed the money to buy books that next semester, which included Statistics, which I needed to take before I took my intro to Sociology class where I would learn about things like race and class and privilege.

And resentful that – come later in the summer – that I knew I needed more experiences like this to open my eyes, to see the world as it is and not just How I wish it to be,
That the world isn't fair, the reason I have so much opportunity ahead Of me isn't because God blessed me, or I deserved it,
or because I worked hard,
and that instead I had advantages those Grand Blvd Tower kids Knew I had in ways I wasn't even aware.

What is the definition of privilege? Not having to think about your privilege.

Can I get a witness?

Yes, and what I needed was to be a witness.

I needed to learn how to see people different than me.

I needed to expand my circumference.

I needed to grow.

And now let me take away the past-tense, and invite you in.

I need to be witness. You do too.

I need to learn how to see people different than me. You do, too.

I need to expand my circumference. You do, too.

I need to grow. You do, too.

I know this because with you I'm watching the political cage match,

And I'm listening to the mood,

And what I notice is how easy it has become for us to avoid witnessing

People different than us.

I'm hearing with you the exit polls as people report to feeling angry,

Disenfranchised, afraid.

I hear people wanting to hunker down, or build walls,

Or make plans to flee to Canada.

I hear people freaking out all over the place, because freak out

Is a bi-partisan emotion!,

And I see us tempted to draw in, draw circles closer,

Civic circumference tighter,

Witnessing only our self-selected Twitter news feed, or pre-programmed

Radio dials, staying close to home in because we're uncertain...what do we do?

We hunker down! We isolate ourselves. We stare at ourselves in the mirror.
Can I get a witness?

But if we want to get a witness, then we're going to learn how to be a witness.
Which – you knew it was coming – is why we have church,
Because church is where we practice being the person we want to be,
Where we put down the mirror and turn to the person next to us in pew,
We learn to stop saying ‘*Yeah I love it here; I can believe whatever I want!*’
And learn to start saying “*Yeah, I love it here; I'm learning to respect someone's
belief I may not share.*”

Where maybe we come here for ourselves, but we learn to stay for someone else.
Where we pledge our \$\$ not because we get what we want,
But because by pledging \$\$ we ensure that someone else gets what they need.
Where we say to each other not: who are you? Why are you here?
How much you gonna pledge?
And instead say to each other –
You extroverted person – I see you.
Spiritual but on the fence religious person – I see you.
New person who sits all the way in the back as far from pulpit as possible – I see
you.
White person who is confronting white privilege for first time – I see you.
Republican voter – I see you.
Democrat voter – I see you.
Libertarian voter – I see you.
Person with little light to shine because of depression – I see you.
Person all glowing and happy and celebratory – I see you.
God-talker, atheist-talker, loud singer of hymns – I see you.

Rocker, classical, new-age – I see you.

Old, young – I see you.

Skeptic, true believer, doubter, faithful, grieving,

Relieved – I see you.

Rich, poor, in between – I see you.

All of us witnesses. All of us being witnessed.

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