Opinion

News



People in the Queens borough of New York City line up during a food distribution May 16. (CNS/Reuters/Eduardo Munoz)

by Rebecca Collins Jordan

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On one of my daily social distance walks, I went through the Upper West Side in Manhattan. Nearby, I saw blocks of buildings boarded up entirely, as well as many people, even more than usual, asking for food and money. Hordes of shoppers waited in long and loose lines outside of grocery stores to fill their carts and hurry back home. Weeds filled the cracks in the cobblestones at the American Museum of Natural History.

As I walked, cheers echoed through the streets, signaling that the clock had struck 7 p.m. People leaned out their windows with cymbals and drums. Cars honked nonstop. Pop music streamed out of speakers on fire escapes. Clerks clapped. People on delivery bikes waved. For five tear-inducing minutes, the city sprang back to life.

Then, once again, it sank back into a slumber of anxiety. The ghost of Alfred, Lord Tennyson spoke to me: "Tho' much is taken, much abides."

It always irks me that one of my favorite poems is also one of the poems of the English language that is most laced with irony. I have trouble appreciating poetic irony in the age of medical tragedy. There's no hope in taking the words of Tennyson's "Ulysses," the paragon of hubris, seriously, no matter how beautiful his words. Through the poem, Ulysses, the star of *The Odyssey*, rages against his age and against his still, quiet life back home in Ithaca. Entrusting the care of the island to his son, he sets off again to battle the seas and "to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield," because "tho' much is taken, much abides."

Tennyson's words read like a taunt to me. How do you quote beautiful verse when it comes from an unreliable narrator? How can these words be true when they advocate a quixotic, perhaps macho, dream?

While I am ambivalent quoting these Tennyson words, the famously ambitious and grandiose Sen. Ted Kennedy was not. At the 1980 Democratic National Convention here in New York City, mere hours after he had failed in his attempt to poach some of incumbent President Jimmy Carter's delegates, he delivered a speech that stopped short of personal endorsement of Carter and appealed instead to vague party unity.

"I have come here tonight," he said, "not to argue as a candidate but to affirm a cause." The cause was economic justice, economic justice as the guiding principle of a united party that would "keep the faith."

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He called the audience to courage and dogged pursuit of justice. "Let us reject," he boomed, "the counsel of retreat and the call to reaction. Let us go forward in the knowledge that history only helps those who help themselves."

Calling his campaign to a close, he summoned Tennyson, omitting the lines of weakness or equivocation for maximum emotional effect:

> I am a part of all that I have met
>
> To [Tho] much is taken, much abide
>
> That which we are, we are —
>
> One equal temper of heroic hearts
>
> Strong in will
>
> To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

I have no wisdom to impart about that primary; at most, I have a sense of unease about the lack of unity, both then and now, in my beloved Democratic party. Perhaps inherited from my parents, I have great nostalgia for Carter, both as a gentle yet forward-sighted president and as a dogged philanthropist.

My opinion about that particular primary doesn't matter much anyway, because I was not alive in 1980. But I am alive now, in the throes of another election that could sink or float the faith of a divided generation of progressives that many have likened to 1980.

I care less about the political drama of that particular convention and concern myself here with this message in a bottle, spoken brazenly by Kennedy: "The dream will never die." And as much as I am nervous to admit it, I think what the Democratic Party needs is the idealism of Ulysses, of someone like Ted Kennedy who said, "I am confident that … we will march towards a Democratic victory in 1980."

Perhaps because I know what happened in the 1980 election, I am not so confident about a 2020 victory. Still, I too believe that "much abides," and that now more than ever we must strive, seek, find and not yield policies of equality and justice that put people first.

Forty years later, we have no luxury of a sleepy Ithaca, only a sea of inequality, avarice and ignorance that threatens our very future. People wait anxiously every day, for this virus to end on the one hand, and for economic relief on the other. President Donald Trump and his companions set up false dichotomies between quarantine and economic health, putting people's very lives in the balance.

Local storefronts close, bereft of meaningful bailout money; people continue to contract the virus unnoticed, bereft of adequate testing; store clerks continue to work with few to no protections that acknowledge their human need for safety and health. No politician in 1980 would have seen this coming.

It is the time, 40 years later, to accept that no compromise can be made on people's welfare and health. It is time to talk not just about candidates but about sailing toward the impossible: a time of faith in the common good.

[Rebecca Collins Jordan is an educator in New York City. Originally from Oregon, she is a graduate of Union Theological Seminary and the University of Montana.]

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