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NEWSLETTER



Special Edition: 2010 New Year Resolution Edition

I watched something dying the other day. I was saddened for it. More so, I was saddened for myself, and I was ashamed for my part in killing it. It haunts me now. Since then, the vision has appeared to me each morning as I awake like a nemesis spirit taunting me.

I will tell you the story, if you will listen. It will take only a moment.

I recently began to take the subway train to work, and that is where I saw it. That is where it happened.

Like every other day, I entered onto the train at the first stop in the morning. Being the first stop, the train is always empty. I did what I always did. I walked in and took one of the first seats at the rear of the train. And, as always, I started to read.

You may know that, as it is on many subway trains, the seats are fastened in one direction, but, whether you are facing with or against the direction of movement depends upon the trip. In my case, I sat facing backwards, as usual, at the far rear of the train. With my head in my book, and engulfed within my business of reading as usual, I had no reason to look around. Maybe, deep down, I really did not want to look around.

But, I shudder to tell you, on this particular day, as I arrived at my destination, I saw it. I saw it because I just happened to look around. It might have been an accident, but it does not matter now; it only matters that it happened and I took notice of it. And, now, I am forever changed.

As I placed my book back into my briefcase, I looked back into the train. Here is what I saw: men sitting down and women with children standing. That is all. That is it. But, subtle though it may be, I think that is enough.

I need you to understand. The sitting men consisted of middle aged men such as myself, college students, construction workers, and apparent executives and managers. The standing women consisted of pregnant women, older women, women with their eyes closed such as trying to rest, and women who huddled their children in the mass of standing adults. I tell you now, I was sickened, and that vision continues to sicken me, deeply, to my heart and soul.

But, I confess to you that I am not sickened for what I saw of others, but for my shame in myself.

I asked myself what character of a man in days past would allow women with children to stand? What was the character of a man in America? What was, and what is now, the salt of a man in America that gives us our flavor?

A wise person once said, "If salt loses its taste, it is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure pile, but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot." There I had been in the dazed stupor of my convenient selfishness. If my sleeping ignorance was insipid bliss, then I am now in the awakened state of bitter self-awareness. But, at least I feel something about it, so I know that I am not yet dead.

I have now shared the situation with friends, who have kindly offered various excuses for the condition. However, any excuse for men who sit while women with children stand misses the point for me. I am awake now. For those who judge why they sit in relation to why the other person should stand is the wrong measure for me. I judge my own character, not by those who may stand, but by whether or not I choose to sit. Duty and character do not derive from the external, but from the internal. If a woman chooses to reject an open seat for any reason is not the issue. It is not an issue of why or whether another person should choose to stand, it is an issue as to why or whether I should choose to sit. But, looking to the future, such as I see it, I will not make the mistake again. I will do my best to regain the flavored character of my American heritage; I owe that to my history. I will stand up and not be trampled underfoot. I am awake now.

And, someday, if there is the occasion that I should take a seat on a subway train, because I must, then I will look up to the person standing, and I will say:

Thank you, my friend. For many years I stood when I could do so. I hope it made a difference for someone, as you do for me now. But, even so, it made a difference to me when I did it. I stood up when I could, where a could. It was not much, but that little thing reminded me each time that I am strong enough to do it and that my own extra fatigue was a petty little sacrifice relative to the men and women who struggled for me, and continue to struggle for me, with real sacrifices. Standing up made my spirit stronger, as I hope it does for you.

If I should live to see the new birth of a new day in America when the argument is to give a seat, rather than the rush with excuse to take a seat, then I think Lady Liberty would breathe free -- with a gasp -- that we have resuscitated a character now dying in America. That, if we have slipped, we took notice of it before hitting the ground with a catastrophic fall. I am awake now, so I stand up.

I stand up for America. Will you stand up for America? Will you stand up united, with me?

- Gregg Zegarelli

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