

Restoring a Masterpiece, or Master Peace

By Tim Buckley

Rain fell and froze the landscape to a depth of nearly an inch. Normally I can hear rain spattering against the window at night or trickling in the downspout.

But this storm hushed everything. Then I heard the first “cc-rrr-aa-cc-kk” and “whump” as a tree limb snapped, burdened by a coat it wasn’t designed to wear. The sky would flash as another utility line severed and sprayed electrons everywhere.

By morning light, only destruction. Roadways, landscapes strewn with broken wood. Houses hammered. Cars crushed. Overhead lines snaked across the roads, as if to emphasize how powerless we were.

Then, something wonderful happened, as we bent our backs to satisfy basic needs of those without. Without concern for cost, we shared batteries for long forgotten radios and flashlights, propane canisters and camp stoves for the old couple wanting that first cup of coffee, kindling and a wheelbarrow full of dried oak for the one with a cold hearth and three kids complaining.

Three months ago, nobody was talking, as campaign signs marked red and blue territory unlike any dog. A week ago, after an insurrection on the national Congress, a stony sullenness hung on the land. Our mutual enmity was thicker than the ice on our trees.

What allows us to melt deep bias and survive a natural disaster together? Empathy and generosity, once squirreled away, suddenly pour forth without thinking who’s first and who’s not. What was consequential last week is trivial or forgotten.

A recent BBC documentary examines how Da Vinci’s Mona Lisa has dulled and discolored over time, its pigments fading and the varnish cracked and yellowed. It reminded me of our American culture in the same way. As technicians digitally removed 500 years of abuse to reveal the enigmatic Mona, I wondered whether shocks to our systems have the same potential. The answer is yes, of course. The murder of George Floyd did it last summer, just as the invasion of the US Capitol did it in January.

Unlike fine art, however, our culture can quickly lose its restored vitality. Unlike how flesh wounds heal, our cultural wounds are laid bare for cleansing only for a moment, before the old scabs and cracks reattach.

Cultures have overcome such protracted mistrust in collective ways: look at South Africa's reconciliation after Apartheid, or Ireland's unification. Unless we, as individuals, decide to heal from the inside out, however, the fix will be temporary.

In honor of the recent storm, I fashioned an acronym to consider, a recipe to carefully remove scabs of bias and mistrust, then allow a permanent healing. ISPAC (pronounced icepack) stands for Intention, Skills, Practice, Awareness, and Consciousness. Permanent behavioral change (consciousness) happens only with dedication, discipline, and desire.

As we peel away the varnish of crippling mistrust, the masterpiece of each of us is revealed. Our original, restored selves, filled with hope and appreciation, can then go to work on our collective consciousness, helping to restore master peace.

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