

The Role of the Public Humanities in Kansas

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In the 1890s Kansans were not known for being shy. Men with beards and women in black did some serious shouting. It led William Allen White to ask “What’s the Matter with Kansas?” The United States, meanwhile, was about to embark on a war that would make it a world colonial power. The opponents of that war quipped: “We don’t want any more States until we can civilize Kansas.”

It puts me in mind of Marion Cott, and the mission of the Kansas Humanities Council. Cott is herself a product of the humanities, a civil and civilized person—rare and valuable. She has advocated civil discourse and humane civic dialogue on emotional, divisive issues. And she has realized that with our strong remnants of reptilian brains, fight or flight instincts, and “testosterone poisoning” it takes a lot of persuasion, and a lot of education to bring about dialogue as contrasted with strangling. We need tolerance and humility, something for which Kansans in their best moments are known, and in their worst definitely not.

A few weeks ago I dreamed that I was attending a business conference, sitting at an elegant table with members of the board. But all of us, although wearing suits, were actually apes. I was saying that before we got too hasty at making big decisions we should recognize that we had limited intelligence.

My research now is on an earlier time when Kansans were also loud, confident, and in the national spotlight—the 1850s. My book is a study of media spin in describing events in Kansas in a spectacular, simplistic, stereotyped, emotional and polarizing way. This sold newspapers, magazines, and pamphlets, and contributed mightily to the dissolution of the Union and the blood bath of the Civil War. Moderates at the time asked whether our culture and education are adequate for the challenging project of freedom and self-government.

There is a joke that Western Civilization might be a good idea. Just as now there are people that will kill over disagreements concerning abortion, in 1856, as Missourians were raiding Lawrence, Charles Sumner was attacked on the floor of the U.S. Senate and beaten senseless with a heavy cane. He had just given an incendiary speech entitled "The Crime Against Kansas," and another Senator had taken offense. It was the end of any civil exchange. But the provocation was only words. I had a history teacher in high school who said that the causes of all wars were the same, that someone called someone else a toad. Lenny Bruce, the foul mouthed but incisive comedian of the 1960s, used to talk about how everyone then was saying "How long are we going to take these insults from the Cubans and the Russians?" The response of Bruce, the World War II veteran, was: "I was at Anzio. I can take a lot of insults.

There had to be some counter to Rev. Henry Ward Beecher's stumping in the 1850s to raise money to send Sharpe's rifles to Kansas to deal with disagreement over a moral issue by putting a bullet in someone's head. "Nations, like man himself," wrote an observer of the Kansas struggle in 1855, "have certain ends or ideals of existence, which constitute the inmost ground or essence of their being, and when they depart from these, they either degrade themselves into some lower form, or grow into monsters. Men who cease to be men, become either animals or fiends."

The times then were out of joint and the "clamor of political and partisan journals" recorded a civilization characterized by "the war of religions, of races, of factions, of fanatics," full of "ominous portent." Could Freedom prosper amid "the shock of continuous collisions" among citizens and the "prejudices and passions which are fostered under its own beauties and blessings as poisonous plants and noxious weeds rankle under oaks or among roses, cherished and sustained by the same laws of light and vegetation which are the essence of the existence of both?" The bulwarks of American free institutions seemed "tottering and frail." The Nation,

said a New Orleans paper, “heaves and sways and tosses uneasily under the weight of its destiny.”

And the answer? Then and now, the humanities. The goal of the arrangements of living, an editor of the 1850s said, was no less than the “security, the elevation, the freedom of the individual spirit . . . regarded as the child of God, as the joint heir with others of the earth, as an immortal spirit, capable of an infinite growth in love, and truth and beauty.” Everything else was a distraction, ultimately an irrelevance, for all its seeming practicality. Martin Luther King well knew, as did his mentor Gandhi, that only “soul force” could permanently change the world for the better—not physical force, not legislation, but education, and spiritual transformation, and a change in the very way we talk about things. And he proved it.

We at the Kansas Humanities Council are involved in that kind of program. Tonight we honor a Kansan who had done great service in that direction, and who has single-handedly defined and illustrated the humanities for more Kansans than perhaps any other individual. She has our heartfelt thanks.