

## **THE MELTING POT**

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One of the many way cool things about serving St. Andrew's is brushing elbows with famous folks come to speak at The Omaha Town Hall Lecture Series. Here I am with *Wall Street Journal* columnist, Peggy Noonan. Some of the most inspiring words to come from the mouth of President Ronald Reagan were written by speechwriter Peggy Noonan.

There's Olympic skating champion Scott Hamilton. Nancy was all excited to hear George Clooney was going to be here. My otherwise photo-phobic bride might have had her picture taken with George. Wrong Clooney. Turned out to be George's father, Nick.

Cloris Leachman was very assertive as to how she wanted her picture posed. I don't normally get this close to people, but Ms. Leachman insisted, saying something about her "good side." While Cloris Leachman is best known for her role as Phyllis, on the old *Mary Tyler Moore* and *Rhoda* half-hour television comedies, it's her portrayal of the tragic Ruth Popper, in *The Last Picture Show*, that made it a particular honor to have my picture taken with her.

Billy Jean King's talk was followed by crowd-pleasing tricks with a tennis ball and racket. Next: one of my favorite political pundits, David Gergen, who has served in both Republican and Democratic administrations. David Gergen is a lot taller than he looks on TV; I remember him bending down for this photo so as not to tower too far above me. Ted Koppel seemed quite taken with Nita. I got a sermon out of my interaction with Henry Winkler, aka The Fonz.

The series has included authors, astronauts, celebrity chefs, historians, a journalist whose creds included a face-to-face interview with Osama Bin Laden--and, most recently, week before last, right here where I'm standing before you today: Rita Moreno.

Fun fact: The Big 4 Awards in the world of entertainment are Oscar (film), Emmy (television), Grammy (music) and Tony (live theatre.) Only twelve people have won in all four categories; Rita Moreno is among them.

According Wikipedia, she was born Rosa Dolores Alverio, December 11, 1931, in the town of Humacao on the island of Puerto Rico. Her mother was a 17-year old seamstress; her father a farmer. Mother and daughter came to New York City in 1936. "Rosita," as the child was called, took the last name of her stepfather, Edward Moreno.

She enrolled in dance class, landed her first Broadway role at age 13; her big screen debut was 1952, cast as Zelda Zanders in "Singing In the Rain." But when I heard Rita Moreno was to be at St. Andrew's, I immediately thought of *West Side Story*.

Opening on Broadway in 1957, the plot line is ripped from "Romeo and Juliet." Shakespeare's Capulets and Montagues have been recast as rival street gangs--The Jets and Sharks--battling for turf on New York's upper west side. The Jets are angry young white men whose neighborhood is undergoing demographic change--most particularly an influx of Puerto Ricans. Young males among these Puerto Ricans, themselves alienated and angry, have ganged together to form The Sharks.

Per Romeo and Juliet, Tony of the Jets falls in love with Maria, sister of Bernardo, leader of the Sharks. Adapted to film in 1961, the doomed lovers were played Natalie Wood and Richard Beymer, the latter hailing from Avaco, Iowa.

Rita Moreno would win Best Supporting Actress for her portrayal of Maria's best friend, Anita. Anita is a passionate young thing, gal pal of the aforementioned Bernardo. These Latin lovers have very different outlooks as to the American experience, one not necessarily more valid than the other.

**VIDEO: West Side Story--America**

**Chorus: I like to be in America!  
O.K. by me in America!  
Ev'rything free in America  
Bernardo: For a small fee in America!**

**Anita: Buying on credit is so nice  
Bernardo: One look at us and they charge twice  
Rosalia: I'll have my own washing machine  
Juano: What will you have, though, to keep clean?**

**Anita: Skyscrapers bloom in America  
Another girl: Cadillacs zoom in America  
Another girl: Industry boom in America  
Boys: Twelve in a room in America**

**Anita: Lots of new housing and more space  
Bernardo: Lots of doors slamming in our face  
Anita: I'll get a terrace apartment  
Bernardo: Better get rid of your accent**

**Anita & Gals: Life can be bright in America  
Bernardo & Guys: If you can fight in America  
Anita: Life is all right in America  
Bernardo: If you are white in America**

**BRD: Everyone dances for a while, then Anita comes back in:**

**Anita: Here you are free and have pride  
Bernardo: Long as you stay on your own side  
Anita: Free to be anything you choose  
Guys: Free to wait tables and shine shoes**

**Bernardo: Everywhere grime in America  
Organized crime in America  
Terrible time in America  
Anita: You forget, I'm in America**

**Look. Do you see her, out in the harbor?**

**I suppose I did more flying in August than at any other single span of my life. A quick grand-parenting trip to Park City, Utah, was followed a few days later by an epic baseball adventure: Five new east coast ballparks in six days, bringing stadium quest up-to-date. I've done them all, now--not to mention others Fields of Dreams, long demolished. This photo is from the next-to-last game played at Municipal Stadium in Cleveland.**

**The August 2017 itinerary had me flying out of Omaha via O'Hare into Atlanta and a long and winding route via public transportation to SunTrust Park; then from Hartsfield to LaGuardia for two games in the Big Apple: CitiField and Yankee Stadium. All aboard Amtrak from Penn Station to our nation's capital and Nationals Park; then back in the air to Miami and the resplendently colorful home of Giancarlo Stanton and the Marlins.**

The route back seemed fairly torturous: Miami to D.C. to Milwaukee to O'Hare, finally touching down in Omaha circa six hours later than originally scheduled; but then I pause to consider the experience of travelers in another era, immigrants steaming into New York Harbor after a long trek across the Atlantic, much of the voyage spent in the bowels of the ship. In that context, getting from Miami, Florida, to Omaha, Nebraska, in 15 hours doesn't seem like something to complain about—not that that stops me from complaining. I found myself wondering: Do airline pilots undergo training in obfuscation? *Ah, ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain, we'll have just a short delay....* Anyway.

A coach traveler, I generally try to reserve an aisle seat. It's a little less claustrophobic and I can get up and stretch as need be. But for the Atlanta/New York leg, I wanted a window seat, left side of the plane, hoping for a clear day and this precise view. I've been this way before and the sight never ceases to thrill me.

The lady in the harbor was originally conceived by Frenchman Frederic Auguste Bartholdi, formally christened: *Liberty Enlightening The World*. Bartholdi hailed from the French province of Alsace, lost to the Germans in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War, 1871. His homeland having been sacrificed as a pawn in the game of European thrones, Bartholdi drew hope and inspiration from America.

*Liberty Enlightening The World* was designed as a goodwill gesture from the old world to the new. Of course, it would take money to make it happen. Bartholdi personally spear-headed a fund-raising campaign that raised over a million francs. While Bartholdi served as architect, the actual building was done by Gustav Eiffel, whose next project would be a tower.

The statue arrived in New York Harbor on a French steamer, June 17, 1885, pedestal not included. Fundraisers on this side of the Atlantic approached poet Emma Lazarus, suggesting she write a verse to help capture the imagination of the American public. Emma Lazarus was herself of Jewish immigrant ancestry; she had been horrified at the persecution of Jews in Russia, actively involved herself in refugee resettlement efforts. That's when she wrote, "The New Colossus":

*Not like brazen giant of Greek fame  
With conquering limbs astride from land to land  
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand  
A mighty woman with a torch, whose fame*

*Is the imprisoned lightening, and her name  
MOTHER OF EXILES. From her beacon hand  
Glows world-wide welcome, her mild eyes command  
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame*

*'Keep ancient lands, your storied pomp!' cries she  
With silent lips, 'Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore*

*Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me  
I will lift my lamp beside the golden door.'*

I am not one to romanticize the immigrant experience. America's "welcome" of Emma Lazarus' century involved no small factor of national self-interest. There was a wide-open country out there, moving west, yearning to be populated.

Back in college, I was intrigued by Frederick Jackson Turner's "Frontier Thesis," published in 1893. The gist: American democracy had evolved out the frontier experience, the "west" serving as a social safety valve. The tired, the poor, the huddled masses of America's teeming cities could always pack up and seek opportunity in the open lands, and there was always room for more.

Conversely, Turner looked at the census of 1890, declared the frontier had closed and we could anticipate a change—and not a happy one at that—in the American character.

Given the angry and alienated times in which we live, I can see Frederick Jackson Turner nodding. *This is what I was afraid of.* For what it's worth, while it is beyond dispute that America has been and is a nation of immigrants, I do wonder sometimes about the wisdom of overlaying a romanticized version of the 19<sup>th</sup> century experience onto the 21<sup>st</sup>.

Of course, in 2017, there seems little room for nuance. You're either for open borders or building a wall. Got to choose. Which ideological gang will you run with?

Back to the Upper West Side. On the Anita/Bernardo continuum, I'm with Anita. "I like to live in America/Okay by me in America..." To which Bernardo would surely roll his eyes, "Life is alright in America, when you are white in America."

In certain circles these days, I am expected to "check my privilege." Okay. I am an abled cisgendered heterosexual white American male, absolutely aware of the advantages thus accrued. I don't have to look any closer than my own home.

You don't think there were doors wide open to me, as a male pastor, that my clergywoman bride didn't have to shoulder her way through? FYI: Some of the greatest resistance Nancy faced was from, da da, other women, including other women clergy. I mean, if Nancy took up with me, there must be something wrong with her....

You may well wonder: Surely there aren't "gangs" in the United Methodist clergy? Were that the case, we would not likely be on the edge of schism, same sex matters being only the presenting issue in what might be reasonably interpreted as...loathing.

While being quick to acknowledge my advantages, I don't have a lot patience with peers who want to be dismissive of my "privilege." I may inquire of their experience. Did you start in a five-church rural circuit, work your way up through blue-collar and old downtown congregations, then resuscitate a once famous but now moribund church on the edge of the inner city? I did. No brag, just fact. And that was just the first half. Tell me what you've done.... Oh, you didn't even try, because you just knew the deck was stacked against you?

Well, okay. Never mind. I will cheerfully agree that America has been very, very good to me. I've often thought of myself as "blessed"--though it will be argued now I not to use that word. If I'm "blessed," does that not imply God likes me better than God likes....whoever?

**VIDEO: CHUCK BERRY—Back In The USA**

Okay. If "privilege" sounds better to you, I won't fuss. I'll just sing along with my old neighbor from up the road on Interstate 70 in Missouri...

*Oh well, Oh well, I feel so good today  
We touched ground on an international runway  
Jet propelled back home from overseas to the USA*

*New York, Los Angeles, o how I yearn for you  
Detroit, Chicago, Chattanooga, Baton Rouge  
Let alone back to be at my home in old St. Lou*

*Did I miss the skyscrapers, did I miss the old freeway  
From the coast of California to the shores of the Delaware Bay  
You can bet your life, I did, till I got back to the USA*

*Lookin' hard for a drive in, searching for a corner café  
Where hamburgers sizzle on an open grill night and day  
Yeah, and a juke-box jumpin' with records like in the USA*

*Well, I'm so glad I'm livin' in the USA  
Yes, I'm so glad I'm livin' in the USA  
Anything you want, we got it right here in the USA*

I'm thinking perhaps Chuck Berry wrote that song out the same sense of wonder I myself have experienced, flying in and out of America, touring this great land—which is really what the ballpark adventures have been about. Even at age 66, the small town boy from Missouri is astonished to think that for the price on a combination airline ticket—a very reasonable price at that—I can pretty much go where I want to go, do what I want to do.... I call it freedom.

Goodness, if Chuck Berry, could be so glad to be “livin' in the USA” in our little 1957 racist neck of the woods, what would it say about me if I was anything but fall-on-my-knees grateful to living in this time and place. Oops.

There I go again: Does not gratitude imply blessings, which in turn implies God's favor, implies God likes me better? I don't know. 21<sup>st</sup> century thinking confuses me. In 2017, some might disapprove of me spinning Chuck Berry, calling it cultural appropriation. Not sure about that. I'll be the first to admit I don't understand the new rules. If I was a ballpark, I would have been torn down long ago. As it is, I can see the wrecking ball headed my way...

I've long been invested in an earlier vision of America: The Melting Pot, title of a 1912 play by Russian immigrant Israel Zangwill. “America is God's crucible,” affirms one of his characters, “where all the races of Europe are melting and reforming!”

**Note, it's the races of EUROPE that are melting and reforming. There was no place in the America of 1912 for the inclusion of non-Europeans in the pot. Certainly not for those who came over on ships that did not go through New York Harbor, but rather straight for the slave blocks of Charleston and Savannah.**

**FYI: In Atlanta, trying to get to and from the ballpark via public transportation, I realized, at one point, I was the only person of my ethnicity on a bus otherwise occupied exclusively by African-Americans. Given the hysterical racial climate of our times, one might have thought the other passengers would have seen the white guy and said, "Let's beat him up." No. In fact, if it wasn't for a couple of nice folks sitting around me, I wouldn't have known where to get off the bus. They didn't put me at the back, either. Not that that surprised me. My American experience: Most folks just want to get along...**

**But, to my main point—and do have one: I grew up with the Melting Pot ideal, seeing a corollary in Holy Scripture, Paul's letter to the Galatians, chapter 3, verse 28:**

**There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.**

**I have often used Galatians 3:28 to explain that there's no place for racism, sexism or other isms in the church. Christ makes no distinctions.**

**Imagine my surprise, then, in a recent clergy social network forum (which I have since left) to find Galatians 3:28 is now out of fashion, discounted now as the language of privilege and exclusion. Huh?**

Nevermind that Paul had himself forsaken the perks and privileges of a cushy life in the religious establishment for the sake of Sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ with all who would receive it, regardless of their ethnicity, class, social status, etc. Galatians 3:28 is out, replaced “identity theology,” the various groups having their own agendas, each against the other, looking a lot like Jets and Sharks to me.

With that, let’s hear another song from *West Side Story*. The hate-filled world of the Jets and Sharks (yes, both sides) has little room for love. If you’re not one of us, you are the enemy, and heaven forfend that any on either side should cross the line... The Tony and Maria story isn’t going to end well, and it’s hard to hear their song without a lump in the throat....

**VIDEO: West Side Story—Somewhere**

There's a place for us  
Somewhere a place for us  
Peace and quiet and open air  
Wait for us  
Somewhere

There's a time for us  
Some day a time for us  
Time together  
With time to spare  
Time to look  
Time to care  
Someday,

Somewhere  
We'll find a new way of living We'll find a way of forgiving  
Somewhere

There's a place for us  
A time and place for us  
Hold my hand  
And we're halfway there  
Hold my hand

**And I'll take you there  
Somehow  
Someday  
Somewhere**

**There has been nothing more important in my life in ministry, at every stop along the way, than creating communities of faith where there is a place for you. That's been particularly true of my time at St. Andrew's...**

**These are interesting times to be in parish ministry. Choose sides, I'm told. Well, I know people on all sides, and most all of them are pretty good folks, trying to make their way through this complex thing called human existence.**

**Paul was himself a one man diversity show: A Jew raised in Greek culture, resisting the demands of the home office that if Gentiles (and everyone who wasn't a Jew was a Gentile) wanted to join the club, that was okay, so long as the Gentile males went through the initiation by taking a knife to their private parts. Though nothing disheartened him more than to see congregations he himself had planted, at no small risk to himself, devolve into personality-driven conflict, and "I'm a better Christian than you are." It was out of such exasperation that he wrote to the church in Corinth:**

**If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have faith that can move mountains, but not have love, I have nothing. If I give all possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.**

**Love is patient and kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.**

To be clear: I don't for a moment claim to have gotten all this right. Neither did Paul: "For now we see in a mirror dimly...Now I know only in part..." Which makes it all the more important, I think, that we be patient and kind with those who maybe see things different than we do.

I hadn't necessarily planned it this way, but it seemed fortuitous that I was wearing my new Miami Marlins ball for my picture with Rita Moreno. FYI: Adrian Alvarez characterizes Miami now as the capital of Latin America, and from what I saw on this trip, that is hardly an overstatement. For that matter, it hasn't been that long ago that I wouldn't have been caught dead in a bright purple tee. I spent a good part of my public ministry in a buttoned down white shirt with a dark tie. My go-to Methodist ball cap was this Seattle Mariner's throwback: The Trident M representing Militant Methodism. But I got to tell you: the multi-colored logo is growing on me....

I count myself privileged and proud to be in the same pot with Rita Moreno, and, for that matter, Billy Jean King, and Henry Winker—whose story of growing up dyslexic without even knowing it (no wonder reading was so difficult for him), reminded yet again, everyone's dealing with something; and Ruth Popper, too. If you still don't understand how Donald Trump got elected, try explaining to Ruth Popper why she's supposed to feel privileged....

One more musical, this also set in Manhattan. From "Hamilton": The Schuyler Sisters :

We hold these truths to be self-evident  
And when I meet Thomas Jefferson (Ugh)  
I'm going to compel him to include women in the sequel

Look around, look around  
At how lucky we are to be alive right now  
Look around, look around  
At how lucky we are to be alive right now...

**History is happening in Manhattan  
And we just happen to be living  
In the greatest city in the world  
The greatest city in the world....**

**If you find yourself identifying more Bernardo than Anita, all angry and stuff, for whatever reason, I invite you to look around and consider how lucky we are. History is happening and we just happen to living in the most dynamic nation the world has ever known. Friends, if you have air-conditioning and cushioned toilet paper, you are living a lifestyle that would be the envy of kings in the not distant past.**

**I know there are issues. I get it. I personally think a lot of the present angst comes from loss of faith, spiritual malaise, but that's another sermon. Consider this: If it was really as bad as some make it out to be, why would so many from other places still, to this day, want to come to where we are? Better to live in a nation where people want to get in instead of desperate to get out. Seems to me, anyway.**

**BRD**