



by
F. Rutledge Hammes

While this year’s winner of the Nobel Peace Prize has already been announced, it’s still worth noting that countless people across this great nation of ours saw fit to mount quite a formidable push to see that the people of Charleston, SC and Mother Emanuel AME were nominated. Only the selection committee in Oslo knows for sure whether the campaign of petitions was successful or not. Still, it might be worthy of us all to pause for a moment and, at least, consider what obliged so many people to speak up on their behalf, seeing as there was indeed a rhyme to their reason and we owe it to ourselves to grant what we all were a witness to, this past summer, a place in our common history.

And it might be worthy of us all as well to mark this moment in our collective minds because the fact is the people of Charleston (and in particular, the congregants of Mother Emanuel AME) did indeed achieve something momentous in the aftermath of the church shootings, momentous not only in how overwhelmingly they all rallied to the causes of forgiveness and peace and the solidarity of hope, but in the example they set for the rest of us in how readily they addressed, almost unanimously, that which divides us still as a nation.

What stands out so clearly still in my mind is how the Charleston community — irrespective of race or creed or political affiliation — came together to march out arm-in-arm against the burden of this horrible pain they were forced to endure and, in so doing, proved to the rest of the world that good and decent people can still unite, set aside our differences and face down the hard and even ruthless questions of our time. What’s so clear to me still is that, in Charleston (here in the heart of the South, mind you), a people happened upon the happenstances of grace not by the

hundreds or even the thousands, but by the tens of thousands, as if the Edmund Pettus Bridge, all these many years later, had somehow become the Ravenel Bridge that day, spanning far more than the banks of the Cooper River and extending, if for a moment, out across the whole wide expanse of what this great nation of ours still promises to be. We did not riot or set fire to our city. We did not take to the streets and burn our own houses to the ground. We did not let our anger or our pain or the sheer volume of our collective rage get the better of us either. Instead, cooler heads prevailed, wise and godly voices rang out from our pulpits, and we, as a city, were reminded that a neighborhood only survives on the goodness of our neighbors. We were most assuredly angry, furious even, over what had happened, but unlike Ferguson and Baltimore and New York City before us, we funneled our communal anger into clean and justified and meaningful action, into righting where we were wronged, rather than meeting that wrong with more wrong.

However implausible it may seem, plenty of naysayers have come around to express their skepticism as of late. Even Reverend Joseph Darby, one of our own, was recently quoted in the New Yorker seeming to dismiss the sincerity of what brought the city together, stating, “You have a city

infected with raging politeness, relentlessly courteous to the point that no one’s doing much of anything. This courtesy is hardwired into the American South, but it’s hypocritical,” he said. “It’s a tradition draped in the antebellum lost-cause stuff, the old Southern chivalrous tradition.” And while he is right, in so far as politeness and gentility are indeed at the heart of Southern culture, what both the reverend (and the author of the article, David Remnick) fail to realize and/or acknowledge is that Southern culture is not one culture but rather a composite of European, West African, Native and Latin American cultures (See: our common folklore and culinary traditions) whose very fabric is wholly reliant on its habit of “raging politeness” as a means to civilize the hardships of surviving on the same plot of land. You see, having suffered enormously the effects of war and reconstruction (a quarter of South Carolina’s young men now dead and gone), these small civilities became our way of coping, a nod, so to speak, to the faith that would, in the end, see us through, and so we Southerners revert often to politeness not out of some idealized allegiance to some antebellum past, but instead out of a solemn respect for what, despite all our differences, binds us together. The simple civility in a smile, the subtle acknowledgements in a nod, it’s as if, inherent in the practice of these tiny gestures, we are greeting, really, the promises of hope, another chance to forgive and perhaps finally move on.

As history might tell it, Charleston could very well be the last place you’d expect to find such unanimous unity among its people. After all, the city’s own history is one of centuries of racial segregation and untold atrocities, of plantation owners who made their fortunes on the backs of the slaves they bought and sold and later argued fervently for keeping enslaved, to say nothing of all the many outspoken slavery apologists like John C. Calhoun. But look a bit closer at our people, and you will find that Charleston has long been home to a different kind of man as well, good men like Denmark Vesey, who originally founded the Mother Emanuel church as a place to congregate, worship and rebel, men too like Francis Marion “the Swamp Fox,” who fought and bled for our nation’s freedom, along with Middleton, Heyward and Rutledge, the three brave men who risked their very lives along with their fortunes to sign their names to the Declaration of Independence. Look a bit closer, and you will find that Charleston was home to Civil Rights pioneers Esau Jenkins and Judge Waites Waring, whose various rulings led to better voting access for blacks, equal pay for teachers and later laid the groundwork for the Supreme Court’s landmark ruling on Brown vs. Board of Education. And let’s not forget that Charleston was also home to one Reverend Clementa Pinckney as well as Tywanza Sanders, that brave young man who was shot trying to save his aunt. There’s no telling what would’ve befallen the city without the measured leadership of Mayors Joseph Riley and Keith Summey or all the many reverends who stepped forward in the wake of the tragedy and called for peace and forgiveness. Where would we be today, were it not for the courage of the countless women who dared too to take a stand, brave women like the Grimké sisters, our country’s first outspoken female abolitionists, or for that matter, our own state poet laureate Marjory Wentworth, who spoke out against the Confederate flag long before she helped lead the charge to take it down? Where would we be, were it not for the courage of my grandmothers, Jane Touhey Hammes who marched in Selma, and Ruth Champion Glover who, despite the many dangers she faced as a woman in politics in her day, dared to cross the racial divide and call a black woman her friend? Let’s not forget: they too are Charleston, good men and good women who have fought and continue still to fight the good and decent fight. And let’s not forget that, while many other cities (clothed though they were in the guise of racial harmony and a certain moral superiority)

were also faced with similarly trying situations, it was Charleston, in the end — a Southern city through and through — and Charleston alone that had the moral wherewithal to meet such horrific tragedy with the decency befitting a civilized people.

And yet this, I’m afraid, is not how most of the country viewed Charleston or its people until now, seeing as the vast majority of America set about, long long ago, to allay the burden of its own conscience, unable as ever to accept the culpability of our country as a whole for the atrocities of slavery and racism. So unforgivable is the fact that such a thing could even happen in a nation supposedly founded on freedom that the very fabric of who we say we are (and want so badly to believe we are) is wholly threatened by the reality that we are all to blame for the racial strife that still exists across our land, and so came America’s subconscious need to forgive itself the whole affair by placing the blame somewhere else, the South in particular. And it seems to me that, until our country learns to accept its own culpability for the sins it has committed and the problems it has, we will never get past the issues that still, to this day, divide us and will have us facing, time and time again, the same egregious acts, the same terrible tragedies, propagated by the same misguided boys armed with the same misguided anger, a few bullets and a gun. And yet what the people of Charleston, SC gave us, this past summer, was a glimpse of what hope we still have for reconciling ourselves, a feat so startling and so moving, in this day and age, that even our nation’s president felt moved to sing us a hymn. What choice did he have; how else could he put it but “Amazing Grace”?

For us, the first step is to praise the precious good we have witnessed, to be overwhelmed and even smitten by its very presence in an otherwise cruel world. Second is to act on the good we have seen, the grace it has fostered in our heart of hearts because, to truly win in the end, we must do more than mark this moment in our minds; we must learn from it and, more so, act upon it because the people of Charleston have shown us that, while we as a society will no longer tolerate such overt acts of racism, the real and pressing question has yet to be answered: what about the more covert forms it takes all across this country of ours, the awful injustices of gentrification and under-funded schools, the widespread inequality of what opportunities America affords to some but not all? In the South at least, the great unifier might well be our shared faith and mutual love of home-cooked meals, and perhaps now it is time to gather around the dinner table, say grace and then seek it out fervently together. Perhaps now is the time to remember how terribly small and inadequate we all felt upon hearing that they forgave him. “You took something very precious away from me,” Nadine Collier told her mother’s killer. “But God forgives you and I forgive you.” Perhaps now is the time to be guided by those words, by the strength it took even to say them. Perhaps now is the time to let her words give rise to the greatness in all of us.

Fact is, we have a long road still to walk, the length of which cannot be understated, and the fact is, the people of Charleston have just as far to walk. Still though, it is worthy of us, as a nation, to note this was a victory, a victory for good and for right, a victory for our nation as a whole (if not at its hopeful best), and it seems only right that we take a moment to pause and note the grace that we’ve seen here because, while we did not win any prizes for peace, we did win. We did; we won. And we won because the people of Charleston managed somehow to illuminate, however briefly, that single bright path through the darkness. And for that, we should all be grateful and mark this moment as a brilliant new chapter in the long and embattled history of our great republic.