

Police, “Now is the time for listening”

The Bethlehem Gadfly George Floyd killing June 23, 2020

 *Latest in a series of posts on the response to the George Floyd killing* 

*“Now is the time for listening.”
Councilman Colon
June 3, 2020*

What in god’s name was that **last post**?

In short, it was an example of how *not* to start a conversation/discussion on racism, especially in our upcoming Community Engagement Initiative.

And yet, and yet it is also an example, albeit perhaps exaggerated, of how, in Gadfly’s experience, many white people and especially people in power in general start a conversation/discussion on racism.

The default threshold position often is defense — not me racist, not me, not us — with an inventory of proof of my/our beneficent interactions with people of color.

We tend to distance ourselves as agents of the bad stuff.

Gadfly sometimes feels that whites and people in power generally have to get past a ritualistic protestation of personal and organizational innocence before a meaningful conversation/discussion about racism can hope to begin.

We can see that ritual playing out on these pages.

Gadfly told you of his myth of racial unity on the playground, **Dana** recalls participating in multicultural meritocracies on the ball field, the **Mayor** remembers the Southside melting pot of his youth and the mini social justice utopias in his inner-city high school classrooms, the **Chief** can show us files of comprehensive directives and training schedules, that is, his sacred scriptures of police department rectitude.

Examples of the no doubt natural tendency to distance ourselves from agency for the bad stuff.

But the **second part of Officer Audelo's presentation** at City Council last week is the premier example in these pages of this no doubt unconscious ritual protestation of innocence.

Officer Audelo's presentation was a rhetorical tour-de-force. It was passionate and powerful. You must listen to it. Must. It left Gadfly emotionally limp.

The thought of such acts as giving mouth-to-mouth resuscitation to a young woman with a gunshot wound in the head, the thought of such an act numbed to normality left me gasping with admiration for this selfless public servant, a man I could never be.

"I can't exactly start selling insurance after living this life," Officer Audelo told us with wry humor. And a man used to putting commas in the right places could never start doing your job, Officer. It takes a special breed. And Gadfly is grateful.

But — and this is hard for Gadfly to say, for it will sound ungently critical — the Officer's words were (mainly) about himself, no doubt unconsciously distancing himself from the bad stuff.

You are a good man Officer Audelo. No question about that. What would we do without guys like you??????

But if the Community Engagement Initiative is to be successful, the police must play a certain kind of essential role.

They must not be defensive, self-justifying.

They must, for the most part, listen not talk.

"Now I know there is a stigma in our minority communities with the police," Officer Audelo said.

Aye, there's the rub.

What Gadfly would like to have heard next was “I can’t wait to sit down with members of the minority community and truly understand why that is.”

Officer Audelo addresses Council and speaks of his willingness to work with them. But no mention of willingness to work directly with the minority communities. And that’s what we need to hear.

Perhaps Gadfly is unfair, and, if so, you will slap him upside the head.

But he feels we see troubling signs in the Officer’s presentation of the no doubt unconscious initial reflex to demonstrate that “we” are the good guys.

But the “we” of racial privilege and of political and legal power have, at this cultural moment, to aim that kind of talk at our images in the bathroom mirror — and shut up.

Our job — as Councilman Colon said — is to listen, to listen to the aggrieved.

Our job — as Councilman Reynolds said — is to provide a structure and a space for that listening to happen. (More on this later.)

Gadfly will be surprised if you don’t have a response to his words.

Homework for next time. What is the first question for the Community Engagement Initiative to answer? What is the prompt for the first meeting?

to be continued . . .