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I've Seen the Promised Land: A Letter to Amelia Boynton Robinson

Mauricio E. Novoa
Gettysburg College

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I’ve Seen the Promised Land: A Letter to Amelia Boynton Robinson

Abstract
You asked if I had any thoughts or comments at the end of our visit, and I stood and said nothing. I opened my mouth, but instead of giving you words my throat was sealed by a dam of speechlessness while my eyes wept out all the emotions and heartache that I wanted to share with you. The others in my group were able to express their admiration, so I wanted to do the same. [excerpt]

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Disciplines
African American Studies | Cultural History | History | Inequality and Stratification | Latin American Languages and Societies | Latin American Studies | Oral History | Race and Ethnicity | Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies | Social History | United States History

Comments
Surge is a student blog at Gettysburg College where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at surgegettysburg.wordpress.com Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that –isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

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January 20, 2014

Dear Mrs. Robinson,

You asked if I had any thoughts or comments at the end of our visit, and I stood and said nothing. I opened my mouth, but instead of giving you words my throat was sealed by a dam of speechlessness while my eyes wept out all the emotions and heartache that I wanted to share with you. The others in my group were able to express their admiration, so I wanted to do the same.

During our 10 days traveling Alabama, from Birmingham to Montgomery to Selma to Lowndes to Tuskegee, I listened to many first and second hand accounts of the horrors of the 1950s and 60s that African Americans had to endure while fighting for the most basic of human rights. I heard about the children’s march where kids younger than myself were hit with hoses and thrown in jail, among other things. I learned about Bloody Sunday where protesters were beaten on the Edmund Pettus Bridge. I saw the painful testimonies of the parents of the four girls who died in the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church, showing the nation just how far the injustices would reach into the communities of people seeking better for themselves. I heard all these stories, and they all touched me so deep in my heart I can feel their fingerprints drawn on my blood vessels, but for whatever reason talking to you brought out something I may not be able to either explain or comprehend. What I can say, however, is that something in me is changed.

Since birth I have felt and seen many of the plagues faced by the Latino community that keep many of my relatives and peers from reaching their full potential. Poverty has led my people into the depths of ghettos and farm trailers where they are subject to discrimination, inhumane environments, gang violence, drug addiction, and hopelessness. I was born into it, and my family has managed to narrowly escape, putting us in a slightly better position than most. Still, I never forgot where my roots began. For so long, I have seen my people slip and fall time and time again, barely being able to pick ourselves up and continue marching.
Because of this, I know the African American Civil Rights Movement paved the way for my people to battle for their own rights today. I understand the plights of the black community are so similar to those in mine that separating the two is impossible. I know I must understand this history in order for fight for a new history. Thus I found myself in Alabama in search of the education that was denied to me in school – an education of struggle in America. But still I wasn’t prepared for the effect your life story would have on me.

Your courage and determination is nothing short of inspiring. The opposition was enough to make most fall to their knees and crawl back to where they started, yet you did not falter. The most touching part of your story, however, is that you went to see Jim Clark buried, with no anger or hatred in your heart. You forgave a man who oversaw the beatings and tortures of your neighbors, friends, and fellow activists. You are the epitome of unconditional love, an idea that many claim but few truly practice to its full extent.

Love may be the very thing that has kept you 103 years on this Earth, and it emanated from you like I would not image it would from someone who had two husbands taken too early and who saw many pass.

Your caretaker, Mr. Leon, then shared a story that I will likely be sharing as well as I continue forward. The story was of you out in a boat on a river somewhere in Alabama with your second husband, the captain, and another woman. The boat flipped, and you saw your husband and the captain drown. Neither you nor the other woman knew how to swim, but you held her up and refused to allow the river to swallow you just as you refused to let anger or hatred swallow your heart and your mind. It was then that something awoke in me. It was then that I saw what I must dedicate my life to fight for – something greater than myself. I am not a religious man – my cross was thrown into the river long ago – but I do believe you walked on water. What I saw was love – the love you epitomized, the love for all human beings and the chance for everyone to make the most out of this life. Though I know very well I may not see that love come to fruition in my lifetime, I know I have to do everything I can to at least make sure the seeds are planted.

Though my tears kept me from articulating this to you, I’m not sure I would have been able to explain it at that moment any way. I saw the mountaintop, but the path upward is frightening and dark. I have a vision, but I have no idea where to begin. But, I know if I want anything to be done, I have to be ready to endure sacrifices and suffering. All the pain, confusion, hope, and ideas were so much I couldn’t hold them in so they trailed down my face and lodged themselves in my throat. I shook from the power of an epiphany I still don’t know how to realize. But I saw the mountaintop.

I hope that 100 years from now, my grandchildren will be able to say that their grandfather used his life the best that he could to force the universe to bend towards justice, but for now seek the first step.

I thank you for allowing my peers and I into your home to enlighten us on the hidden history of this country. As you know, many perceive crying to be a moment of weakness and a lack of manhood. In that moment, however, as I trembled like every muscle in my body was exhausted, I felt myself surge with strength and I knew exactly what kind of man I needed to be.

I thank you for your devotion and your love. For without it, I don’t know if I would be picking up the battle. Too many of us lack the willpower and understanding that it takes to soldier on, as many believe the war is over. Yet your generation believes it did not do enough, so it is necessary for the youth to come to the forefront again, equipped with the knowledge of today’s injustices and the drive to pursue true solutions.

I will return to Alabama someday, and I know you will be there, shining a little light of love, showing everyone that we will overcome.
Love,
Mauricio Novoa

Mauricio Novoa ’14
Contributing Writer