Unsetting the Mind

A friend challenges Jesse Cameron Alick with honesty.

September 1, 2009 By Jesse Cameron Alick

If you stick a knife nine inches into my back and pull it out three inches, that is not progress. Even if you pull it all the way out, that is not progress. Progress is healing the wound, and America hasn't even begun to pull out the knife." My friend quotes Malik El-Shabazz, a.k.a. Malcolm X, by memory. I can tell that this conversation isn't going to go well. He's one of the great many who believe life isn't getting better, the election of Barack Obama as president doesn't mean anything and the powers that be continue to oppress as always. He's great at a party.

"The knife is out," I counter by using his metaphor against him. "It was stuck in there so damn long, infection may have spread to every limb of American life. But it's going to get better. I hope. I pray. When mouths are shut, when fire burns, a man can pray." I give 99 percent of people that kind of answer, and the conversation is over. Not this time. My friend responds: "Someone says they hate blacks or gays or people who are HIV positive—what do you do?" I can tell he's got an argument waiting in the wings. I give the response he expects anyway.

"When people give me their bigotry, I give them my smile, my hand, my friendship. No other action is needed." My friend frowns at my subtext: You quote Malcolm X to me; I'm going to invoke Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy back at you. He asks: "How do you rationalize that?" A young revolutionary's blood pressure rises. I say, "A mind set is a mind fixed. There's no use trying to change it. You have to unset the mind first."

"I'm not asking your books. I'm asking how *you* make sense of that with your black, gay, HIV-positive ass? Or have you stopped reading the news?" He's on a roll, and I know not to interrupt. "[There's] inequality everywhere. Are you saying you can fix something by ignoring it? Will that help you get married or go on a date without fear of being instantly rejected? The knife is still in. You, sir, are bleeding."

I should take a moment to say why I like this man. He's uncompromising and never afraid to bring up sensitive subjects. I respect honesty above all.

"I know this as well as you, Malcolm." (My friend's name isn't Malcolm, but my use of the nickname isn't lost on him.) "A time comes when you have to decide whether to hate the world or live in it."

“And suffer?”

I say, “All life is—”

“Buddhist bullshit,” he interrupts.

“I was going to say work—and you can’t work on something you hate. There is work to be done. On us, on this, my country, my family.”

“Would family stick a knife in you like they all did?”

“But we pulled out the knife! I didn’t even think we’d get this far. And now our people—and I mean people in the broadest sense: women, people of color, queer people, poor people and the powerless—could wake up any second.”

He says, “Awake covered in sweat with a 100-degree fever, followed by a deep fall into the darkness of coma? Maybe?”

“Maybe. But we’ve already achieved a miracle. Maybe anything is possible. We [have] pulled out the knife.” The wheel of time turns in only one direction. Those who fight against the rights of others are on the wrong side of history. I believe all things will be set right with patience and work.

A smile crosses his face. No one’s mind is changed—and that’s alright. Every movement needs those who scream in righteous anger and those who employ peaceful tactics. Two sides of one coin slowly embrace. We continue to talk, all through the night.

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