

## The Angel on the Steeple

On the 9<sup>th</sup> of November 2009, at 5: pm in the evening I was with a group of graduate students from American University on the back lawn of Mount Vernon looking over a marvelous sunset over the Potomac River. Our group was there as part of a special "public history" seminar and we were lucky enough to have the grounds all to ourselves. November 9<sup>th</sup> was also the anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the West's triumph over communism. Being that it was November and a time for thanksgiving, I felt an immense pride at that moment in being an American. In addition, I also pondered just how lucky I was to have lived my life in "the land of the free and the home of the brave."

Later that week however I also took the time to see the movie "Precious." I don't want to ruin the movie for those who have not seen it, but if Mount Vernon is a testament to what is right about America, "Precious" shows that we still have a great deal of work to do in making the American Dream possible for all of our nation's citizens. The central character is Claireece, an African American teenager, who has recently been moved to an alternative school in New York City. Claireece is overweight, horribly neglected and abused by her mother and due to being sexually molested by her father, a teenage mother twice over who is HIV positive.

One would think that Claireece would be so beaten down that she would simply dig a hole and pull the ground over her to escape the neglect and despair that surround her, but somehow, despite the challenges she faces, she manages to maintain a glimmer of hope and faith in both herself and the future. She is an inspiration due to her refusal to give up. Claireece survives not only due to her own character but also through the help of teachers and counselors who help her to understand her potential and worth as a human being.

It is perhaps the truth that government will never be able to replace a good mother and father, but as Americans, we will never be able to consider ourselves truly great unless we find a way to help people like Claireece. Some say it is useless to try, and at the end of the day, that it is not society's job to fix broken lives. I respectfully disagree.

In the novel *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald uses the symbol of a giant billboard advertising the services of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg. The visage of the Dr and his thick glasses looms over the roadway on the way to Gatsby's palatial estate. But the billboard is much more than an advertising ploy. It is meant in fact to symbolize the eyes of God, which have the ability, despite the efforts of the characters in the novel, to see through their sordid attempts to hide the corruption and lack of concern for their fellow human beings.

In the same vein when one walks around the center of the village of Severna Park it is hard not to notice the imposing but inspiring steeple of Woods Memorial Church. Like the billboard in the great Gatsby, it looms over everything. No matter the time of year, many times during my trips to Dawsons or Behind the Back, I cannot help but notice its presence. At times, I have had the thought that the view from the Steeple allows one to see the entire area and that it would be a perfect place for an angel to sit and record the deeds of everyone who resides in and around Severna Park. The angel would always be on duty but would be particularly vigilant during the holiday season in an effort to ensure that our spirits, unlike Jacob Marley, "walk abroad among our fellow men, and travel far and wide."

So during this holiday season let us show the world and ourselves that the real essence of our country is not commerce and free enterprise but compassion, kindness and concern for those who desperately need our help to survive and reach their god given potential. If you happen to be one of the lucky people who have a good job and loving family take some time during this holiday season to seek out those who are hungry, cold, and neglected. Take some time to use your good fortune and talents and abilities to help those who need it most. Most importantly take care not to neglect the least among us; it is truly the mark by which we are all measured. Remember, the angel on the steeple is watching.

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Happy Holidays to One and All!