

The Danville News  
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"Selma"  
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The sign approaching Groom, Texas, promised a genuine spiritual experience. Groom. Population: 500. Plus the largest cross in the Western Hemisphere (so the sign bragged). It called me. A gigantic bone white cross, glistening in the sunlight. It was taller than the two silos in the center of town. A tableau of statues of black metal figures carrying crosses surrounded its post. A half dozen cars were parked. A few folks were praying. Prayer's a good thing. I prayed that the silos in town were full of grain and work plentiful.

Spiritual experiences come in various shapes and sizes. For some, it's the Groom Cross. For others, it's remembrance crosses you notice along roadways, oft decorated with flowers. Or it's the garish First Pentecostal Church east of Little Rock. Near Big Sur, it's the Eselon Institute for developing Human Potential. Reservations required.

For me, it was the spiritual experience of Selma, Alabama. Specifically, the Edmund Pettus Bridge. I visited it years ago partly to rekindle my sense of ministry, partly to atone for my sins.

Pilgrims and shrines. The sign along Route 22 between Clanton and Selma said, 'congested area.' I saw a church. Another church. There were several trailers, clothes hung out to dry. Their concept of congested was a little different than mine. Miles later came Selma. Entering town you pass the Oak Ridge Groceries Ice Cold Beverages and the Selma Curb Market We Cash Checks. Buildings sported fancy ornamentation around boarded up windows. But some storefronts seemed to still try to make a go of it.

I parked diagonally off the four lane road that runs through the center of town. Two ladies busily washed down the sidewalk in front of their beauty parlor. The sign for the Cahara Furniture Store was faded. Nearest the bridge was the Selma Times Journal. Two three foot high colorful sculptures of butterflies sat on the corners opposite the bridge. The bridge. I stood exactly where, on Bloody Sunday, 7 March, 1965, fire hoses blasted the marchers while police released German Shepherds to attack children and women. All they sought was the right to register to vote.

Some admire crosses. Others carry them.

Back in New Jersey, at the same time that this bridge became infamous (then famous), my brothers and I made weapons to protect our neighborhood from 'those not like us.' If my parents had known they would have been ashamed of us. We sawed off broom handles, drilled holes, looped lengths of rope so they could swing like policemen's nightsticks. We excused ourselves by pretending it's all a game. Was it more juvenile thrill than racist fear? We were picking up the atmosphere of venom, like antennae picking up radio waves. Sin, hatred, can be very infectious.

Clearance on the blue gray Edmund Pettus Bridge is 14' to 10.' It's got a hump to it arching over the Alabama River. Which means that the marchers couldn't see what awaited them until they crested the bridge.

What awaited them? More than the ferocity of fire hoses and dogs attacking children. What awaited

them was what awaits all persons of courage and conviction: fear, ignorance, the selfish choice of the privileged. I realized from my pastors, and more so from these marchers, how progress comes from a change of heart and mind. A change of your soul.

In Memphis, Tennessee, I, weary pilgrim, visited my second shrine. You walk down West Main. You turn left at the tiered grassy mall down toward the Lorraine Motel near Huling Avenue. You come to a fence. You look up at the second floor of the motel, where, at room 306, the railing cuts left. Classic cars were parked below, representing the cars that would have taken Martin Luther King, Jr., and his co-workers to dinner at 5. I wondered where they were going to eat? The night before at the Mason Temple he preached, "I may not get there with you, but I want you to know that we as a people will get to the promised land." Sad, for the white working poor never understand his cause was theirs. He marched for them too. It's appropriate that today, both MLK Day and Donald's Inauguration, our flag remains at half-staff. We mourn America.

A large white wreath with red roses hung at the railing in front of Room 306. For that is where Martin Luther King, Jr., my colleague, my brother, was assassinated on April 4, 1968. Some admire crosses. Others carry them.