



REFLECTIONS AFTER THE ROAD TRIPS

I met John Barry, Larry Connors, John O'Neill, and honored my parents' service in World War II by visiting the World War II Memorial in Washington, DC, but my listening tour also introduced me to many other "relatives" that could be "bronzed."

First, the women.

Commodore Barry's wife Anne, who probably did more to instill family values passed down generation-to-generation in my family than the naval hero honored at Independence Hall in Philadelphia.

Lori Connors, wife of the famous riverman honored in Bangor, who survived a girlhood as an indentured servant, a fate suffered by so many hundreds of thousands of other Irish immigrants and their children in the United States in the 19th Century.

My grandmother, Elizabeth Sullivan, who gave up her artistic aspirations to raise nine children and fed and clothed her brood plus two grandmothers and her husband's brother during the Great Depression.

All my female descendants who wanted to be an artist, company executive, professor, lawyer, businesswoman, athlete and any number of dreams they conceived of but never achieved because of their gender.

I hail my mother for intentionally failing the typing test provided by the Army so they might give her something more to do besides secretarial work.

Here let me place a bronzed statue to their wily and resourceful ways.

Next, unsung kin.

Let my Uncle Terry Sullivan stand as an example, since he served for years on a naval ship in the Pacific in World War II—with no shore leave—and saw his comrades burn in the flames that ripped through the decks when a kamikaze Japanese pilot flew into the ship.

Next, people who are not kin of any kind, just fellow citizens.

The Black people in Philadelphia who pushed relentlessly to finally have a statue to an African American civic leader installed near City Hall.

All the people working for the Sullivan Paper Company that have helped make it one of the few successful producers of paper left standing in the United States, despite fierce competition from overseas.

All the government workers, like Eric Pominville from the National Park Service, who do take pride in their jobs and in working for our democracy.

I allow them all in now, like a radio show I have on all of the time, as I move through the political discourse in American society. The white male factory worker who supports Trump has air time just like the African American male city employee tasked with empowering other African American males.

My listening tour has shown me that tuning anyone out who comes from a place of reasonable intent risks exacerbating stereotypes and faulty assumptions. Defining “reasonable intent” remains a difficult proposition when we talk about things like race, gun control, and rights for all citizens no matter their gender, sexual, religious, ethnic or racial orientation, but we all share one thing: this country and its government.

We all share a collective responsibility to improve where we’re all headed as a society.

It should start by knowing our past as accurately as possible. If that means adding a fuller narrative to places like Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello in Charlottesville, Virginia, then we need to add those chapters. As professionals like Professor Max van Baloogy from George Washington University showed me, adding more context does not negate other key facts. Thomas Jefferson was a primary author of the Declaration of Independence; he sent Meriwether Lewis and William Clark to explore the West. Nothing can erase those story lines as true.

In a society where we can look up any piece of information in real time on Google or Bing on our cell phones, we can’t forget we still

need to know things by embedding key narrative lines in our hearts and minds. Think of how much gets lost when visitors stop by the World War II Memorial and don't even know that we fought wars on two fronts. They see arches, water, gold stars and have a vague sense this was yet another huge war. Even if they look up information about the Memorial on the spot while someone like National Park Service guide Eric Pominville gives a tour, they will walk away with the thinnest of narratives, the equivalent of a ticker tape news flash on the bottom of some screen instead of an account shared with them via many media and in many venues and classrooms over years.

What do we know? What do we think about it? What should we add or detract from that established narrative?

We don't need robots but professional human beings on the ground in museums and historical places and on the public air waves—spaces the American public still trust—to ask these questions and coach citizens through a story-sharing process and constructive political discourse.

Towns across America chose to honor some of my relatives with bronze statues in public spaces. There they all stood, waiting for me, a phrase I borrow from Walt Whitman's poem "Song of Myself," their sheer presence the impetus for a conversation with myself and others about race, class and politics in the United States. I might have chosen to bronze different relatives if given a chance, but, as National Park Service guide Eric Pominville made clear, how each generation chooses to honor previous generations says more about the builder of the monuments than those being honored.

What does it mean that in 2019 the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond installed African American artist Kehinde Wiley's 29-foot bronze of an African American man dressed in a hoodie and Nike sneakers riding a steed and planted the statue on its front lawn just a block away from the headquarters for the Daughters of the Confederacy? The scale and style of Wiley's "Rumors of War" intentionally mirrors that of other enormous bronzed statues to Civil War Confederate generals, such as J.E.B. Stuart, on the capital city's Monument Drive.

A white couple provided most of the funding and, according to Susan McElhinney who attended the unveiling, more than half of the crowd was white, which means the "builders" were not just Wiley, famous for painting President Barack Obama's official portrait, but also a major cultural institution and white citizens of the South. Their edit to the narrative in Richmond intentionally involved an addition, not a subtraction, a way forward that many experts in the field of public sculpture and monuments often celebrate.

“It feels like it was always there,” Susan told me in a phone interview after her return from the unveiling.

Whether or not Wiley’s statue survives the coming years unscathed by vandalism, or if some (or all) of the Confederate generals get removed remains to be seen. By the summer of 2020, national outrage over the murder of George Floyd and other African Americans at the hands of police contributed to the most successful and aggressive push yet to remove Confederate statues, flags and other commemoration from public spaces, at military installations and even at NASCAR. Bronzed heads literally rolled and people dragged metal bodies through streets.

As we all weather these changes in the national narrative, we must continue to listen, adjust, process and reflect.

