

Monastic Scribe VIII: August 9, 2021

The Summer of Soul

I recently went to the Hingham theatre to see the new film, *The Summer of Soul*. It is a two-hour documentary that covers the Harlem Cultural Festival, which took place on six weekends in the summer of 1969 in Mount Morris Park in Harlem, New York City. It is a joyous celebration of music that includes such artists as Mahalia Jackson, Maple Staples, Nina Simone, Gladys Knight and the Pips, The Fifth Dimension and the very young Stevie Wonder. The Festival never got much coverage at the time in the media for that was the summer of Neil Armstrong landing on the moon, and then the Woodstock Festival.

The director has forty hours of film coverage which he tried to interest the networks at the time to show. PBS did a news item and all the other networks just refused. The tapes have sat in a vault for fifty years until this film.

Some of the music became popular and I remember it and liked some of it. Some was new to me and somewhat alien to my taste. But, as I watched and listened, a deeper understanding and appreciation came upon me. This was not just about music but involved black history, black identity, culture and tradition. The music felt right in context. The people in attendance, over 300,000 by summer's end, seemed very happy and proud of who they were and what they shared.

There were a number of white people present, including a number of New York Policemen. But all seemed relaxed, safe and so glad to be together to share these riches. I had tears in my eyes at times as I watched.

Am I a racist is a question I have had to ask myself. I roomed with an African-American in the seminary. I taught in an all-Black middle school in New Orleans and socialized with many Black adults. But I am a member of the dominant American cultural group and have imbibed all its cultural values until someone has helped me bring to awareness all that is in my soul. What discomfort, what fear do I harbor towards others? Last summer, when Black Lives Matter became a dominant message, I did little to further my better understanding of minorities in our culture. I had the pandemic to be concerned about and a forthcoming surgical operation. Eventually I reacted to the fear evident in "All Lives Matter" or "Blue Lives Matter" which seemed a defensive reaction against the Black Lives Matter movement.

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It still disturbs me. My brother and nephew were New York Policemen and I appreciate the good men and women who serve to guard and protect. But racism is deep in the psyche and the police, as well as all of us, live out of fear and mistrust at times.

What to do about this? The first thing, I am told, is to learn to listen to the voices of African-Americans, as well as Latino and Latina people, Asian Americans, and the Indigenous Natives of our country. We have to know the truth. Our history, since its foundation, is built on white supremacy. This not a question of who is to blame but how it can finally change. Once we understand more fully the situation, then we must act to try to make a difference in our society and culture.

My monastery is in the town of Hingham which is an old colonial village founded in 1635. In its earlier days Catholics, Jews and Blacks were not welcome. (We have a local brewery which distributes a beer called "Entitled." I hope the owner has a good sense of humor!). Most of our neighbors now are good people and so many are concerned with matters of justice. I personally find the absence of Blacks and Latinx people in our church rather a limiting poverty. I suspect that the future of the Catholic Church in our country will depend on the presence of these minority groups, as well as of women.

Whether you agree or disagree with me, I would be glad to hear from you at joycet@glastonburyabbey.org In the meantime do try to see The Summer of Soul. You too may be touched and enriched by it.

Fr. Timothy Joyce, OSB, STL

Please note that I do not speak on behalf of Glastonbury Abbey, the Archdiocese of Boston or the Catholic Church, though I hope my faith is in harmony with all these. Any error in judgment should be credited to me and not anyone else.