

Blowing in the Wind
By
Daniel E. White May 6, 2024

A young man of whom we think a great deal had a constructive career in state politics, rising to the level of the leader of his party in the state Senate. He worked with legislators and governors of the other party to pass useful legislation that benefited a significant number of people.

When he sought to advance his career, at least two things torpedoed his efforts. First, members of his own party held against him the fact that he had worked with the other party for any reason. Secondly, that fact led to “dark money,” that untraceable scourge on American politics, entering the scene to fund his opponents, who won each time.

Then he became the head of a large not-for-profit organization. In the years under his leadership, the organization expanded significantly, both in terms of its services and its financial strength.

He was blindsided by an action taken by someone below him on the organization chart that became an item in the news. The leaders of the board held him accountable and fired him. A stream of nasty postings on social media began, throwing doubts upon his heretofore spotless reputation for effective service to others.

There might yet be an outcome that helps to restore completely his good name. Even if it does, it will not negate the fact that the injustice happened.

At lunch one day, our friend wondered why such things happen, why we as a species haven't gotten beyond character assassination and condemnation of people whose only offense has been trying to collaborate with others with whom they do not see 100% eye to eye to make things work.

Then he told us that he is still optimistic that, to use Lincoln's imagery, our better angels might prevail.

A few days before our lunch, I had heard the 1963 recording by Peter, Paul, and Mary of “Blowing in the Wind.” I remembered how popular it had been when I was in high school. Later, I learned that the song is rated #14 in Rolling Stone's top 500 hits of all time and is enshrined in the Grammy Hall of Fame.

How did that happen in a year when the top six hits, ranging from “Surfin' USA” through “He's So Fine” to “Hey Paula,” were about teen love or seeking the best waves, and the #9 hit warned that “My Boyfriend's Back?” “Blowing in the Wind” was tied for #12 with “Puff the Magic Dragon.”

People of a Certain Age, how did such a serious song penetrate our consciousness and become so popular? It was so obviously a critique of the world of 1962 as seen by Bob Dylan, composed **before** the trauma of the Vietnam War and the fractiousness of the Civil Rights movement was in full flower in the 1960s.

As our friend expressed his optimism, my skeptical interior self was congratulating him for his hopefulness while, at the same time, I was hearing in my head “how many:” roads, seas, cannonballs, years, times turning one's head, ears, deaths,”

The answer, my friend, is blowing in the wind. Likely, it has always been this way.

Some musical historians see verses from the Old Testament book of Ezekiel reflected in the words written by Dylan. “The word of the Lord came to me: Son of man, you dwell in the midst of a rebellious house, who have eyes to see but see not, who have ears to hear but hear not, for they are a rebellious house.” (Ezekiel 12: 1-2) According to an essay by W.L. Wardle in *The Abingdon Bible Commentary*, Ezekiel was called “to the prophetic work in 583 B.C. by way of a vision.”

The sentiment is similar. Seeing but seeing not; ears to hear but hearing not. Apparently, humankind has been averting seeing or hearing what is unpleasant to hear or see for a long time. Ezekiel, of course, has a remedy in the form of adherence to a religion, a set of beliefs.

Dylan seems less sure. The answer is not clearly available but ephemeral: real but always beyond reach.

Yet, I wonder if the appeal the song held for us in our youth—and perhaps persists in our later years—is that it captured the uncertainty we surely all felt at some point in our younger years, asking hard questions that we, in our youthful idealism, might have wanted to be asked. And then the lyrics actually provided a roadmap to answers by suggesting that there were limits to the “how manys.” We just needed to find them.

Perhaps humanity has been a rebellious house from the start. Still, we have survived more than 3000 years beyond the time of the prophet. Perhaps our rebelliousness has led us to ignore unpleasantness. Has rebelliousness also been the primary driver of progress, the notion that the way things are is not forever cast in stone? Did we, in 1963, recognize that the life that lay before us did not offer easy answers very often, that there would be winds to navigate?

Did Dylan not just critique but challenge us to hold on to the hopefulness that might be blowing in the wind?

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