

Daily Meditation 05-23-23

Fear & Guns in America

We continue our meditations on courage as a sign of the Spirit and sign of holiness. And today's meditation is reflecting on the sad state of fear. A state of fear in our culture today seems to be behind a lot of the attachment to guns and the gun culture. And of course, courage is standing up to fear, as knowing the difference between healthy fear and unhealthy fear.

Now let me share with you an interesting article that came my way a couple days ago, because it is about courage, and it's about courage from an artist. And I've said that one learns courage by hanging out with courageous people. And one thing about artists is that they often share their work, and so you can hang out with them even long after they've died.

So this particular article is about Eugene O'Neill, the playwright, now deceased, but I didn't know this story about him at all. There's a new biography about him by Robert M. Dowling entitled Eugene O'Neill: *A Life in Four Acts*. And it turns out that in 1924, when O'Neill wrote a play, put on a play called *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, there was tremendous uproar and controversy over the play.

Why? Because it is about a love affair between an Irish American woman (of course O'Neill was Irish) and an African American man. Again, in 1924.

One esteemed professor at Columbia University, named George Odell, said "O'Neill is responsible for the profanity and insanity on the American stage today." And he addressed those words to the Society for the Prevention of Vice and Crime at the Ku Klux Klan. And the Salvation Army was also up in arms about it. The Long Island chapter of the Ku Klux Klan (and there was a Long Island chapter, in fact; I believe we've all seen pictures of Donald Trump's father as a member, marching with the Ku Klux Klan in Long Island).

The Ku Klux Klan in Long Island threatened to blow up the theater on opening night. Again, back in the Twenties the Ku Klux Klan was not restricted to the south. A Texas Klan member demanded the immediate dispatch of O'Neill on the grounds that he was a Catholic, and hence doubtless trying to stir up the Negroes to arm and march on Washington and burn down the Nordic White House. That "Nordic White House" was built, by the way, by slaves, but he doesn't mention that, this Klan member.

And the Klan stood not just for anti-black but anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic along with the racist message, and of course, many of the immigrants were Catholics from Europe, certainly from Ireland, but others were Italian of course, and from many other countries.

The Klan was 5 million people in the 1920s. And of course, that's not out of 330 million total that we have today. That's 5 million out of whatever the population was then; I think it was 100 and some million. And the Klan were serving as state senators, governors and lawmakers.

How did O'Neill respond to this attack from the Klan? He emphasized his Irish background. And when he got a letter that threatened to kill his son, he wrote back, go F yourself to the Klan, and signed it.

It turns out it wasn't just the Klan who were angry at O'Neill for his play. As the writer puts it, "it seemed as if all the feeble-witted both in and out of the KK were upset. Included were Irish Catholics who threatened to pull his ears off as a disgrace to their race and religion."

So this article about O'Neill came out in a newsletter I didn't know about. Someone mailed it to me. It's called Irish Central. So it deals with some of the history of the Irish in America.

But again, I share this story because there's one more story about courage and about the role of artists, who often have to be courageous to speak truth to power, even when that power is 5 million organized Klan members, to stand up and be counted.

Thank you. We'll see you tomorrow.