Reunion with a Photojournalist and a Family Counselor

After posting plans for Neil McGahee’s photography exhibit “In Ordinary Times” at the Falany Performing Arts Center at Reinhardt University, Karen and I were thrilled when Neil accepted an invitation to stay with us. He was among my very first students when I began my career as a college professor and was a couple of years ago chosen the Outstanding Alumni at Georgia Southwestern State University where we met. He was kind enough to invite me to accompany he and his wife Sharon to the ceremonies.

Neil lives in southwest Georgia on what was once his grandparents’ family farm near Cordele. A stayover gave us a chance to catch up and afforded an easy drive over to Waleska to set up his exhibition and attend an opening night reception. Flyfishing likely would be high on the list of conversation topics, as would an account of the challenges of editing a local newspaper (Neil is editor the *Cordele Dispatch)*. Instead, Neil, who spent his early career as a photojournalist regaled us with stories of his years in war-torn parts of the world.

Over breakfasts and evening meals, Neil recounted some of his adventures -covering the “Troubles” in Northern Ireland, the bombing of the US Marine Barracks in Beirut, flying on Air Force One with President Bill Clinton, getting wounded in a firefight in Nicaragua’s civil war when combatant forces shifted and left him in the middle. I had to ask, “Weren’t you scared out of your mind?” Yes, he admitted but he was also propelled by the adrenalin rush. Always the teacher at heart, I urged Neil to get these stories down on paper. I think many people would find his account well worth reading. I asked how he reconciled those early violent images with the work he has done since. Perhaps visitors to his exhibit would benefit from his thoughts on this.

The images entitled “In Ordinary Times”, Neil says over breakfast in our sunroom, are solace and refuge from years of serving as a witness to violence. Those photos that make up “In Ordinary Times” capture faces of people going about their daily activities. Most of our lives are spent in unremarkable circumstances. Neil’s choice of individual subjects is revealing: a mother and child at a tent revival, men hanging out at a barber shop; a Hattian man and his small son smiling out of darkness illuminated by a joyful strand of light; a clown preparing for this next performance.

In most images, the subjects seem to ignore the presence of the photographer altogether. In others, they stare back at the camera as if it is simply another familiar face. They ask no quarter or favor from the camera or the photographer. Neil has captured something of the dignity, the inner light, that shows effortlessly on the faces of those who have dealt with the unrelenting challenges that the world heaps upon us all.

The show turned out to be a “coming out” party for us. Karen and I have had few guests in the past two years of the Covid epidemic. Nor have we ventured out to our familiar restaurants or to family gatherings. We have endured two years of drive- through lunches at Chick-fil-A following Wednesday haircuts and trips to the grocery store. The food may have been great, but the scenery was uninspiring as we ate from a sack while sitting in our car. We learned the menu by heart.

To celebrate our “coming out,” I called to invite my old friends from Atlanta, mates from my college days at West Georgia, Jerry and Susan, who had been hoping for a get together. Neil’s exhibition provided a great reason for the couple to drive up and Neil gave them a personal tour and commentary in the beautiful gallery at the Funk Performing Arts Center. It was an emotional and very satisfying reunion reviving memories from across decades.

Luncheon at the RCB Grill in Canton for the five us was great fun. We had all missed the satisfaction of good conversation in a convivial and lively setting. Neil is a fly fisherman and the descendent of a Creek Indian Chief: Jerry is a family counsellor and lover of many kinds of music, so Karen and I enjoyed the day like kids out of school, or prisoners just released from the county lockup. Everyone had stories. Politics were forgotten. The food was great, the friendship so welcome.

Jerry was my advisor on all issues arising from being a naïve kid who had seen nothing of the world. When we were undergraduates at West Georgia, Jerry seemed like the most sophisticated guy I had ever met. He was -and is- a reader and music enthusiast, full of keen observations about the ironies of everyday life and the inevitable fixes in which we all find ourselves -all told with a charitable sense of humor. In college Jerry and I shared the fear that swept the campus during the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the grief of John F. Kennedy’s assassination and funeral, and, at Jerry’s urging, attended concerts by Bob Dillon and Joan Baez.

Now on this beautiful day in March, decades later and as the epidemic seemed at last to be losing its hold over America, the sun was shining, and all seemed right with the world in that moment of recollections. Thank God for friends and memories.

“In Ordinary Times” continues through April 8.