

Democracy From The Perspective Of A Time Traveler

Adrenaline rushed through my veins as I stood before the vibrating frame of the time-travel portal. I could feel the metallic humming deep in my core, and with every step I took towards the threshold my heart quickened, matching its pulse. In mere minutes, I would be transported to arguably the most crucial era that laid the foundation for modern-day America. I hesitated before stepping towards the portal, mentally flipping through the pages of my history textbook at home. The air surrounding the portal seemed to shimmer more and more the closer I got to the portal, until suddenly I felt myself being sucked into it, a kaleidoscope of colors and lights engulfing me. The world around me warped and twisted, and it felt as though all of my limbs were being pulled in a different direction all at once.

The pulsating hum of the portal slowly faded as I took in the world around me, the air seeming distant yet familiar at the same time. I stood up from the dirt road that I was deposited on and swerved away from a horse wagon that was coming in my direction.

“Watch where you’re going, miss!” the horseman said.

I stared at the wagon in shock as it continued off into the distance, unable to get words to leave my mouth. I stood there on the side of my road, feet planted into the ground as I gawked at the people walking down the streets, dressed in the fashion of a time long past. As I stared dumbfounded at my surroundings, I noticed a small bundle of newspaper that had fallen off of the wagon from earlier a few feet down the street. I walked towards it and unraveled it, flipping through the pages and skimming the paper. The very top of the paper read *Hartford Weekly Times* in a big, bold font. Underneath the title read MARCH 15, 1870.

My eyes widened in disbelief. I was really here. I was standing on the soil of a period of societal transformation, the Reconstruction Era, the years following the pivotal conflict that was

the Civil War. The years that shaped the America that I had spent my life in. A period of time that I had spent hours and hours reading about in my books. I was now experiencing all of these developments firsthand, and my heart raced at the thought of the journey that I was about to embark on.

The cool breeze of spring swept specks of dirt onto my face, and I looked up towards the gray, overcast sky. I observed the world around me. The street that I was on was lined with a variety of shops from beginning to end. Snippets of conversations could be heard from the people walking up and down the street, all of them browsing the shops, all running their errands. Most women were wearing long and billowing pastel dresses, their hair pinned up in complicated and intricate patterns. Many wore hats and bonnets adorned with bows, a style that seemed to be in fashion. The men wore three-piece suits and bow ties, many of them sporting full beards or long, drooping mustaches.

My stomach rumbled. Adventure can be saved for later. I needed something to eat. I spotted a small restaurant further down the road. I walked towards it, taking in all of the architecture around me, in awe about how different the world seemed to be over a century ago. The closer I got to the restaurant, the more I could smell the light aroma of garlic and bread coming from it. My mouth watered out of hunger.

I stepped into the restaurant and sat at one of the wooden tables, noting that the quaint place was empty except for the waitress who had been working there. I caught her eye and she hurriedly walked over to my table.

“Welcome in,” she said with a sweet voice. “What can I get you today?”

I was about to look back down at the menu when I caught a glimpse of the name tag pinned onto her chest. It read Mary Biddis.

Marry Biddis. I could've sworn I'd read that name somewhere before.

"I'll take the potato leek soup, please," I said, choosing a random dish off of the menu.

"I'll get that to you right away, dear," she said softly.

I continued to ponder her name. Mary Biddis. Where was it from?

And then it clicked. I'd read an interview of hers before. She'd done an interview for the *Federal Writers' Project*. She was a former slave.

I racked my brain for any information that I could recall from her interview. Although the narratives were a collection of thousands of first-person accounts about life in slavery, I remember studying her interview extensively.

She walked over with my bowl of soup, steam rising from the top of it.

"Enjoy, dear," she said.

"I know you from somewhere," I blurted out.

She stared at me curiously.

"I'm sorry, what?" she asked.

"I know you," I repeated. "You're from Florida, right? You were born into slavery. You learned how to cook and make soap and make quilts and do all sorts of things since you were very young. Your owner's wife treated you horribly, didn't she? She would chase you with a boiling pot of water. And your father, he would go to... to... where was it again?" I stammered.

She continued to stare at me blankly.

"Cedar Keys! Cedar Keys in Florida, where he made salt from ocean water with the person who owned you. After the war, you and your family were set free and you moved to other states before settling in Connecticut."

She was silent for a while. She opened her mouth as if to speak, but then closed it again. She sat down on the chair across from me.

“How do you know all of this about me?” she asked, her eyebrows furrowed.

In fifty years, you're going to do an interview published by the Federal Writers' Project and share your story with the world, I thought to myself.

“Tell me more about your life,” I said, avoiding the question. “What is the world like now that you are free? What stories do you have to tell?”

“You are a strange little girl, aren't you?” she asked quizzically.

I stared back at her, not knowing what to say.

“Well, if you insist. Where to start? Ah, well, I guess it's nice not having your master's wife running after you with a boiling kettle anymore, isn't it? But in all seriousness, sometimes I wonder if things really have gotten better or if it's just all in my head. How people view us folks hasn't changed. We're still looked down upon the way it had always been, before the war and after.”

It took everything in me not to grab my pen from my pocket and write everything she was saying on the napkin placed next to my bowl of soup.

"There's all this talk about equality and justice, yet at the same time, I doubt myself that the number of people that want to help us outweigh the people that want to harm us. Attacks to terrorize us and keep our mouths shut have been frequent, and at this point, I don't know how things will improve."

She paused for a second.

“Well, I guess some things have gotten better in some ways. I got myself a job here, it pays little to nothing but at least it's something right? I learned how to read and write. I went to

Shaw University in North Carolina a few years back and got myself a good education. Do you know what the key to change, real change, is?"

"No," I responded.

"Knowledge. Education. Only by having intellect will you be able to change the world in the right way. I'll tell you something I haven't told anybody before, not even my mother and father."

She leaned in close and lowered her voice.

"You wanna know what my dream is? I want to be just like the priest at my church, just down the street. He's a bit of a celebrity in my town, but he preaches about his faith that the world will change and compensate for our struggles one day. I admire his optimism so much, you know? I can almost feel my heart swell with hope every time he speaks. With the state of things right now, maybe what America needs is to listen to his perspective on things. I want to be able to instill that hope in other people. I want to have an influence, maybe run for office one day, but right now that'd be like putting a target on your back with the attacks that have been going on."

I sipped my soup silently, hanging on to every word that left her mouth.

"Oh! I forgot about the bread in the back, it's probably burned to a crisp right now," she said frantically. "Are you done with that soup, dear? I'll get it for you."

"Thank you," I said. "You don't understand how much everything you just told me means to me. Genuinely, thank you for talking with me."

"Well, thank you for listening. It's very nice to have someone listen for once," she said, holding my hand. "Don't even worry about that soup, I'll cover it for you. I'll see you around," she said, hurrying towards the back.

"I'll see you, Mary," I said.

I left the restaurant, her words still echoing in my head.

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I walked back outside, looking at all of the buildings that lined the street I was standing on. My interaction with Mary had energized me and left me wanting to discover more about the world that I was in. I decided to take a stroll around the area, studying the people and the businesses around me. Bookstores, markets, vendor booths, it seemed like everywhere I turned there was a place to be explored. After walking in and out of a handful of stores, a small souvenir booth caught my eye. It seemed to be made of wood, and it was propped up under the shade of a tall, sprawling tree that stood at the end of the street.

I came towards it and saw that on the base of the booth, there was a sign that read "Pierce's Engravings," the letters handwritten in chalk. I approached the booth, examining the various displays of silver engravings that covered the surface of the stand. They were all different shapes and sizes, all different patterns and designs.

"I'll sell you one for half the price," a voice said.

I looked up and saw a middle-aged Asian man of average height on the other side of the stand.

"I'm Joseph Pierce," he said, extending his arm out for a handshake. "You're not from around here, are you? I don't recognize you."

I shook his hand. "No, not at all," I responded. "I'm just visiting. Are you?"

"You could say so," he shrugged. "I've lived here for years now. But I'm an immigrant from China," he said.

"China?" I asked. I didn't realize there were Asian immigrants during this time.

"Yes, there are very few of us. Most other immigrants that are here came from Europe, but there are a very small number from Asia as well, most of which are Chinese.

"When did you come here?" I asked.

"I came to America when I was eleven years old, from Guangdong. I immigrated here on a ship, where I created a new identity. I stayed here in Connecticut until the outbreak of the war."

"What was your life like during the war?"

"Oh, I fought in the war myself," he said

"You were a soldier?" I asked incredulously.

"You don't believe me?" he asked. "Hold on."

He bent down to one of the drawers in the stand, scrummaging for something. I stood there waiting. After a few minutes, he handed me a newspaper, and the headline read in bold letters "Corporal Joseph Pierce: Highest Ranking Chinese Soldier in the Union Army ". Underneath the heading was a portrait of him sitting stoically in uniform, one arm resting on the side of his chair, his face stone cold looking directly at the camera.

"I enlisted in the Connecticut Volunteer Infantry in the summer of 1862. I stayed in the army until the end of the war. Then, I came back here." he said.

"What was it like during the war?" I asked.

"It was horrible," he said bluntly. "I was in and out of the hospital more times than I can count over the years of the war. But that wasn't even the worst of it. The worst was when I was ordered to gather the wounded after the battles. There were bodies that had their limbs torn off, some of the dead men still clutching onto photographs and letters sent from their families. Those who managed to stay alive writhed in agony and begged for the end of their suffering. It's one of those things that never leaves your mind."

"How are you doing now?" I asked.

"I'm alright. This is my life now," he said, extending his arms towards the stand.

I motioned my head towards the collection of souvenirs. "Why did you become a silver engraver?"

"Well, I learned the craft two years after the war and I quite enjoyed it. It gave me peace of mind, especially after everything that had happened."

"Do you regret anything from your time in the war?" I asked.

He paused for a moment.

"No. The war taught me a lot about the core values of America. Before then, I was just a kid living here on a farm. I had no care for how the country was progressing, I just wanted to live and adjust to the culture here. I remember as a kid everything about life seemed so drastically foreign from life back home. It's funny now looking back and seeing how much I've gotten used to living here.

"Anyway, I was focused on just surviving. I lived with the family of one of the people on the ship that brought me here, and they treated me well, fed me, sheltered me, and took me to school. But I don't think I was seen as part of the family. My whole world was so focused on just getting through as much school as I could and becoming a farmer when I grew older.

"But the war came, I enlisted, and I don't regret it one bit. I hadn't realized how pivotal and revolutionary that time was. Of course, I'd heard about the conflicts brewing before the war here and there, but to truly understand it, to understand the weight of the changes first-hand is invaluable. The result of the war was such a drastic shift in American society and culture, which I guess explains why everything is so polarized even years after the war ended. The abolition of slavery, for example, was a huge shock for many people that I'd known. The slight shift of the

social ladder changed everything, especially because of how much the structure of American society is based on race."

"How do you fit into everything that's going on now? I mean, with the state of things now, I feel like everything is so focused on integrating former slaves into society and the effects of the shift of the social ladder as you said. Where do you lie in all of it, especially being an immigrant?" I asked.

"I don't, not particularly at least," he said. "And I don't think I ever will in my lifetime. Even as an immigrant, I am a minority of a minority. Most other immigrants come from Europe, like Ireland and Germany. I am from *China*," he emphasized.

"After the war, I know America started receiving a lot of attention from foreign countries and gave it a much larger influence on the global scale," he continued. "But I don't believe that America will reach its greatest potential on the global stage until the way our society is structured works in a way that accommodates everyone who lives there. The accommodations that former slaves are receiving are very limited, accommodations for me are not even considered. America is growing more diverse by the day, especially with the influx of immigrants coming in. The culture should reflect that."

I nodded, in awe of the wisdom of his words. I realized that much of what he had said at the moment was still relevant over 150 years later. So much had changed, yet some things still stayed the same.

"Well, I rambled on for long enough," he said with a chuckle. "So, would you like to buy anything?"

I browsed the souvenirs he had on display, and one that had been engraved with an intricate spiral-like design caught my eye. It reminded me of a snail's shell. I lifted the cool piece of metal up, admiring how it gleamed in the sunlight.

"I'll take this one, sir," I said. "How much is it?"

"It's a dollar, but I'll sell it to you for fifty cents," he said.

I reached into my pocket and gave him the money.

"If you ever need someone to talk to, stop by anytime," he said with a smile.

"I'll keep that in mind," I said.

I waved at him and walked away, still admiring the spiral design on the metal. I ran my fingers over the engraving, happy that I had something to remember my journey with.

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It wasn't until that evening that I realized I didn't have a place to spend that night.

After meeting Joseph, I went almost everywhere that my legs could carry me. I visited flower shops, bookstores, bakeries, libraries, and a handful of others. Although it was springtime, by sunset my hair was slick with sweat and I needed somewhere to rest for the night. After forcing myself to walk some more, I came across a building labeled Broad Brook Hotel. From afar, it seemed more like a large house rather than a hotel. The exterior was lined with deep red bricks. The doors of each of the rooms, each painted a different, vibrant color, could be seen through the balcony which ran across the entire middle part of the building.

I walked into the lobby. The room was lit by dim, yellow lights, and the floor was lined with a vintage-patterned red carpet. There was only one small window in the room, but it was closed off by a thin, yellowed curtain with frayed edges. The place smelled of boiled cabbage, and the air in the building felt slightly damp.

I walked up to the receptionist, a tall man with blond hair and big, round, thick glasses which magnified his brown eyes. He looked surprisingly young, as if he was in his teenage years.

"Good evening," I greeted. "Do you happen to have any rooms available?"

He reached over to the thick book beside him and began flipping through the pages.

"It looks like we do," he said with a big, toothy grin. "Room 18. I'll look for your keys. You'll pay at the end of your stay," he said. He began rummaging through the drawer in the desk.

"Are you from around here?" he asked.

"No, just visiting," I responded.

"Where are you from?" he asked.

"California," I lied. "I just arrived here in Connecticut today. It seems like a wonderful state."

"Why would you come here?" he asked skeptically. "California seems like the best place to be at the moment, no?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"What do you mean, 'what do I mean'?" he asked incredulously. "It's the land of silver and gold! The land of booming business. The land of *opportunity*. Rockefeller, Carnegie, it's where all the big names live!" His eyes seemed to bulge with enthusiasm from behind his glasses.

He was right. America was in its Gilded Age, and states like California were thriving economically during the years that followed the Civil War. I nodded in agreement, overwhelmed by his excitement and not knowing what to say.

"California has been my dream for what feels like forever ago," he said wistfully. "I quit going to school so that I could work here and save money to move West."

“How old are you, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“I’m seventeen,” he said. “Why do you ask?”

“I was just wondering, that’s all,” I said. “You seemed very young.”

“I know,” he sighed. “My mother nearly had a heart attack when she found out I quit school so early so I could start saving to move. But I just can’t help it! I dream and fantasize every night before I go to bed about living there. And I know school is important, don’t get me wrong, but I could just continue my education when I settle down in San Francisco. Imagine me in the future, living in a mansion, being the leader of my own business, drowning in money. I could be the next Andrew Carnegie!” he exclaimed. “Imagine that, my name in headlines across the nation: Connor Mitchell, the Youngest Founder of the Biggest Corporation in America,” he said zealously.

I couldn’t help but smile at his enthusiasm. “When do you plan to leave?”

“In three days, actually,” he said. “I’ve worked here at this hotel for years now, and I’ve saved enough money to buy myself a ticket to paradise. But there is no better time to leave for California than now. America is changing! Now, anyone, and I mean *anyone*, could be the next billionaire. With that kind of money comes status and influence. Even someone like me could have a voice that’s big enough to speak to the entire nation one day. I think I could offer something of value, something to help our nation mend the wounds of the war, especially if I had that kind of power. I want to help our nation grow in the right direction, and I want people to look up at me and think ‘If he can do it, I can do it too’.”

“Well then, I wish you good luck on your journey, Connor. I hope to see your name and face on the front page of my newspaper one day.”

"Why, thank you," he said. "I'll escort you to your room," he said, handing me my keys over the counter.

I entered my room and immediately sunk into my bed, my legs aching from all the walking I'd done today. My mind wandered to the people that I had met and spoken to today, relishing in the satisfaction of the success of my journey. I thought about how different each of them were, yet how perfectly their experiences were all able to fit together like puzzle pieces in this crucial time in American history.

I thought about Mary Biddis and how much she valued education, and how with her education she would be able to evaluate and explain the complexities that make up our democracy in order to teach others who were not given the same opportunity. By being educated, citizens can be informed and are better equipped to engage in critical thinking, ensuring that they can contribute to the resilient democracy we are striving for today. I remembered how she felt that her dream of running for office wasn't plausible because of her race and the situation that she was in, and I reflected on how far we as a country and the structure of our democracy have progressed over the past century.

I thought about Joseph Pierce and his wise words about how the structure of American society should reflect its diverse nature, and how it was still incredibly relevant 150 years later. Only with proper accommodation will diverse perspectives be fostered, and with it, a kind of inclusivity is a key element in our democracy, one that values representation and participation from all citizens regardless of their background.

I thought about Connor Mitchell and how he embodied the concepts of opportunity and the American Dream.

These ideas are integral to how our democracy is seen today as they encompass the belief that everyone can achieve any level of success they desire through determination. Through Connor's enthusiasm and aspirations, I saw in him the core principles of equality and the pursuit of happiness in a democracy.

Although each of them had vastly different stories to tell, I observed in all of their experiences and identities the most crucial aspects of the American democracy that I had grown up in and was taught about in school.

I was about to drift off to sleep when I heard a familiar metallic humming noise coming from somewhere in my room.

I sat up from the bed, trying to locate the sound before I realized that it was coming from the closet door in the corner of the room. I got up and walked towards the closet, extending my hand and twisting the knob.

I stood there, standing before the vibrating frame of a time-travel portal, feeling the metallic humming deep within my core. If I stepped through the portal, I would be transported back to my ordinary life. I closed the portal for a few seconds and opened it back up again, making sure that it was still there.

Was I ready to go back? I thought to myself

I took one step forward, and then another, and another...

And I closed the portal and went back into my bed to sleep.

I needed a good night's sleep to be ready for the rest of my journey.

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