

10/25/2007

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COMMENTARY

Palaima: Austin will be fine if we just focus on what matters

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Austin American-Statesman Thursday, October 25, 2007

When Bob Dylan sings about the despair that hits most of us sooner or later, "I can't even remember what it was I came here to get away from," he should strike a chord with anyone who moved to Austin before Bob recorded those words 10 years ago. Lots of what we came here to get away from is now here or coming here. The song's refrain should resonate, too: "It's not dark yet, but it's getting there."

The ancient Greeks had a philosophical conundrum about the famous ship that king Theseus of Athens sailed when he returned from Crete after slaying the Minotaur. Theseus' ship was later preserved by repairing it whenever any piece rotted away. When the last original part was replaced, the question was posed, "Is the ship still the ship of Theseus?"

Austin is undergoing a similar identity crisis that poses an even trickier question.

Austin is not simply being renovated; it is being transformed. Look at the downtown skyline. Sit in the traffic jams. Intensive urban in-fill projects are causing protests in city residential neighborhoods. These projects threaten how we want to live our lives in our city.

In other words, worse than getting from point A to point B is the points themselves vanishing.

Keeping Austin weird these days means valuing Austin's quality of life more than enhanced consumerism.

Many points in Austin have already vanished: all kinds of small businesses and eateries, some with long histories that served as repositories of human memories.

The Greek general Nicias said: "People make the city, not walls or ships." Here is where hope lies. Modest successes like the work of the Austin Tree Task Force and ordinances restricting the size of houses that can be built within traditional neighborhoods point us in the right direction. But it takes collective energy and collective voices.

Willie Nelson, when he was honored by the nonprofit Humanitarians Engaged in Respectful Dialogue on Friday, said something profound about his own commitment to humanitarian causes: "It's something I picked up in the Air Force. Police your own area. If you see a problem, figure out what you can do to fix it."

That happened recently with Mother's Cafe in Austin. Mother's was destroyed by fire in March. It is on the verge of reopening. Mother's won't be the same physically. But as a place of social gathering, Mother's was so meaningful that individual Austinites offered generous help that brought tears to the eyes of co-owner Cameron Alexander when I talked to him recently.

Alexander told me about exhausted firefighters who tried to rescue the goldfish from the old garden pond. He recalled Laurence and Roseanne Becker bringing cookies and kind words on the day of the fire. Eric Johnson and the owners and staff of Threadgill's put on a benefit performance. Emmett Fox, owner of Asti's restaurant, donated a percentage of sales to the Mother's employee fund. Twice, chef Opart Udomsatapol of Ka-Prow Pan Asian Bistro donated portions of his restaurant's revenues to the rebuilding of Mother's.

Throughout Alexander's chief concerns have been for the employees the fire put out of work and that the spirit of Mother's be preserved. The many people who voluntarily gave their time and money were "policing their own area" just like Nelson.

I heard an even more moving story last November at a MacArthur fellows reunion. Lorna Bourg of the Southern Mutual Help Association has been working tirelessly in Louisiana with victims of hurricanes Katrina and Rita. A restaurant owner in the town of Jean Lafitte lost the roof of her building to Katrina and then \$200,000 worth of equipment to Rita.

When Bourg asked her whether she needed help in restoring her business, she said yes: "This is our life, this is our business and our community, and the people who work here depend on us. We can't just walk away." But she then pointed to a restaurant 50 feet down the road. "He had 8 feet of water in his place. He needs help even more than we do."

It won't ever be dark in Austin, or anywhere in our country, if we police our own areas with such generous hearts, and take time to value how we want to live.

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