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OTHERS SAY: TOM PALAIMA

Regular Contributor

Girl's diary reminds us of our common journey

Before Christmas, I read slowly a new book, "Home Front Girl," selections from the diary the late Joan Morrison, a distinguished oral historian, wrote between 1937 and 1943, when she was 14 to 20 years old.

Joan died in February 2010. But her spirit lives on in her two extraordinary oral histories, "American Mosaic," about the immigrant experience in our country, and "From Camelot to Kent State," about what we somehow lived through in the 1960s.

Her spirit emanates, too, from the pages of "Home Front Girl," carefully edited by her daughter, Susan Morrison, a professor at Texas State University who lives in Austin.

I remember how Joan got across what she saw, felt and thought, to my students as a guest lecturer, when doing a public reading in San Marcos, when being interviewed by John Aielli on KUT, and, most indelibly, when we showed up together at a solemnly deserted Barnes and Noble for a book signing on the evening of Sept. 11, 2001.

In December 1937, when Joan was practicing for Christmas choral performances, she wrote in her diaries the following thoughts about the meaning of our lives.

"In the still church singing the aged songs – (we sang one plainsong written in 348 A.D., can you believe it?) – our voices sang the same notes that other voices sang 1,500 years ago – before our language was spoken or America thought of. It makes you seem so nonexistent – we're each so important to ourselves, but in 1,500 years, will those same notes be sung in tongues and places now unknown – How many ages hence shall this our / lofty scene be acted over in states / unborn and accents yet unknown? Shakespeare (in "Julius Caesar") had the right idea. I'm scared; where will I be in 1,500 years?"

Six weeks later, Joan wrote, "You know the trouble with us is that we really look at each other too seldom."

In summer 1938, looking back on two years of high school, Joan wrote, "(T)he moments that stand out in my mind are the quiet ones. The moments that mattered because they mattered so little." She describes standing outside her school building,

alone with her thoughts as snow falls. "(F)or a moment, I was utterly alone in the world and had a great peace. Such are the moments that really matter."

Her thoughts are deep for a 15-year-old. Most of us have something like them, sometimes as fleetingly and accidentally as Joan did. But how do we make such momentary insights real in the lives we live?

Public figures can have moments of revelation. But how many translate their feelings into action?

The most notable such moment in my lifetime was Martin Luther King Jr.'s pronouncement on April 4, 1967, "I knew that I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today – my own government."

I have thought about King's statement for years and think I am finally coming to understand it. It is the flip side of Joan's coin. Joan saw the positives in grasping how small and powerless we each are in the natural world and in human history, how important it is for us to preserve and transmit our shared humanity, how we have to look seriously at ourselves and at others.

King saw that the negatives were also tied together, that the violence of war was inextricably linked with economic and social violence, that both were failures to recognize and act upon our shared humanity.

Read the following Statesman headlines and think over what Joan Morrison or Martin Luther King Jr. would say about them.

"Jobs are back in Austin, but not high paying ones" (Aug. 7, 2010); "Austin jobless rate drops to 4.9 percent, lowest level in 4 years" (Dec. 21, 2012); "School-age poverty remains stubbornly high in Austin: At 28 percent, school district tops national, state averages" (December 17, 2012); "Scores of recent Texas veterans have died of overdoses, suicide and vehicle crashes, investigation finds" (Sept. 29, 2012).

They might put forward the challenge found in these words by Albert Einstein: "A hundred times every day I remind myself that my inner and outer life depend on the labors of other men, living and dead, and that I must exert myself in order to give in the measure as I have received and am still receiving."

Tom Palaima is professor of classics at University of Texas at Austin: tpalaima@sbcglobal.net.



'Home Front Girl' by Joan Morrison