

## Message from the President

John Sloan ('98)

[jsloan@sloanfirm.com](mailto:jsloan@sloanfirm.com)



**I**ncreasingly I am dismayed by the sins of our fathers.

Not just the sins of our fathers, though. I am concerned about our own sins as well. Really, I need to own my own sins. Try though I may, I cannot sit comfortably in my easy chair and call what is happening in America someone else's issue.

What atrocities are my government conducting in my name, funded by my tax dollars? What am I doing to make the situation better? How can I sit silently by?

We are constantly bombarded by the news from our U.S.-Mexico border. We are tearing children away from their parents and placing them in inhumane detention centers. We are excoriated by the world for our hypocrisy. Our most famous statue, the Statue of Liberty, that stands in our best-known harbor implores the world to *"give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to be free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me, I will lift my lamp beside the golden door!"* But when those huddled masses appear at our border, literally running for their lives and the lives of their children, we ignore their pleas for asylum and lock them up.

From ultra-conservatives and religious right activists, we hear the claim that we are a "Christian nation." These groups often comment that the United States was founded to be a Christian nation. The way we are treating our brothers and sisters at our Southern border does not look like any form of Christianity I want to be associated with. Fr. James Martin, who is an author and a Jesuit priest, recently wrote, "What Jesus never said: 'feed the hungry only if they have papers; clothe the naked only if they're from your country; welcome the stranger only if there's zero risk; help the poor only if it's convenient; love your neighbor only if they look like you.'"

Some of our leaders have had the temerity to use the Bible as justification for our sins at the border. Former United States Attorney General Sessions used a verse from the Book of Romans to justify our abhorrent policies. "The passage he cited has been used to defend everything from slavery to Nazi-era laws," Fr. Martin wrote.

We all know our sad history of slavery. Sadly, we are familiar with the racial injustice that has existed in our country since its founding. Astounding to me is the pervasiveness of racism that still persists.

I have been convicted with the need to do something to atone. I believe we as a Tribe need to take further action, but I know that I must do something myself. I don't like being passive. I

know when cobwebs are plenty, kisses are scarce.

So how does one attack a problem so large, so pervasive, so entrenched in our society? How does one eat an elephant ... one bite at a time. One step is to stop accepting things the way they are.

I want to tell you three stories:

The first is about two historic cemeteries that have existed side by side for many years in the southeast Texas town of Dayton. The two cemeteries were divided by only a chain link fence. On one side was the whites-only Linney Cemetery. On the other, the Acie Cemetery, for black people. An 85-year-old white volunteer, raised to be racist, took it down. Now local residents are thrilled that it has been removed. One of the ladies that ran the Acie cemetery said that when she saw the fence was down, it felt like freedom. She said, "we can move forward."

This ugly fence was not removed until April of this year. The two cemeteries had operated separately, and as of 2019 will now be operated and maintained together. A little piece of segregation died a long overdue death.

The second story I want to tell is about a man named Earl Gipson. Mr. Gipson is 85 years old. He graduated from Hill High School in 1953 in Henderson, Texas. Hill High School was the traditionally black high school during the years of segregation. It was called Henderson Colored High School until the early 1960's, when the name was changed to honor a longtime principal. It closed in 1970 when the government finally integrated the schools.

Growing up in Henderson, Earl developed a love for golf. The only golf course in town was the private Henderson Country Club. The Club did not admit blacks. Earl would walk about three miles to the Club and offer his services as a caddy. He would earn enough money to buy school clothes, and he would get to play a little when the members were not there. He soon discovered that he had a talent for the game.

A young black man in East Texas could not get a good paying job in the 1950's. So when Earl graduated from Hill High, he quickly left town and moved to Chicago. He found work in a factory and had steady employment.

While in Chicago, Earl's love for golf blossomed. His abilities increased to such an extent that he twice won the city championship.

Upon retirement, he moved back to Tyler, Texas. Tyler is about 35 miles from Henderson. One day, while driving through his old neighborhood, Earl was struck by how bad it looked. There was trash and junk everywhere. He decided to act. Earl started driving over from Tyler early in the morning to pick up trash. Eventually he moved back to Henderson, and he still goes around the neighborhood daily helping to spruce up things. All the while he has shunned any praise or publicity concerning his efforts.

What Earl has noticed is how many of the residents now contribute to beautify things. Some of the residents will now tell him, "thank you, but we made this mess and we will take it from here."

Finally, I want to share the story of another remarkable man. His name is Reverend Steve Miller. He too was born, raised and educated in Henderson. He was in kindergarten the first year that the schools were integrated. He graduated from Henderson High School.

He went on to earn degrees from Texas A&M and the University of Houston. He also earned a Masters of Divinity degree from the Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary.

While Rev. Miller was in seminary, Michael Brown was shot and killed by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. Rev. Miller traveled to Ferguson to try to understand. He walked around the community, observing and listening. When he returned to class the next week, a professor asked his class, "where is the Church?". Rev. Miller answered that he had observed firsthand that the Church was nowhere to be found in Ferguson.

Rev. Miller believes that if the Church would become involved in the fight to end racism, victory would be assured. He wonders how much further along we would be as a nation if Church leaders had descended on Ferguson and, without judgment, sought healing and common ground.

He is taking action.

One of the things that he has started is called a Truth and Reconciliation Oral History Project. He is working with eleven historically black colleges and universities in Texas to hold listening sessions. His belief is that through story, people can better understand the devastating effects of racism. He has also observed how telling one's story helps the victims to heal.

He is planning a caravan of Church leaders and laypersons to travel to the Texas border over the Labor Day weekend to advocate for humane treatment for those incarcerated there. He is looking for others to join in this effort.

These men are all inspirational to me. Reverend Miller is convinced that he will be able to make a huge difference in the fight against racial injustice in the country. I have no doubt he will do just that.

While the other two gentlemen will never make sea changes in the lives of a large group of people, they have definitely impacted the lives of many.

They remind me of the story of the boy and the starfish. You may have heard it, but it bears hearing again.

One day a man was walking along the beach, when he noticed a boy picking up starfish and throwing them into the ocean. Approaching the boy, the man asked, "excuse me, but what are you doing?"

The boy replied, "Throwing starfish back into the ocean. The sun is rising and the tide is going out. If I don't throw them back, they'll die."

The man laughed to himself and said, "But there's too many starfish on this beach. You can't possibly make a difference!"

After listening politely, the boy bent down, picked up another starfish and threw it into the ocean.

Then, turning to the man, he said, "*I made a difference to that one.*" 🍎