

Innocence: Building Houses

By Donato (Danny) Pietrodangelo

I'm sitting here listening to the soft, gentle whisper of a child sleeping, my granddaughter.

It's rhythmic, comforting and terrifying. She fell asleep after I told her a story, an imaginary adventure where she, and my dog Max, not slay, but befriend a dragon - no Prince Charming needed - and then lived happily ever after.

Were it so simple. And, that's what's so terrifying.

As I enjoy the warmth of innocence, I'm haunted by a question: How do I protect her from all of the ugliness. How do I protect this little angel - whom her dad jokes, is a little hippy, like her grandfather - from the hate that, several weeks ago, had four and five year-olds walking down the sidewalk, hand-in-hand, with a police escort, away from their Jewish preschool following a bomb threat.

It was a hate crime, against little children. One of the horrifically, increasing acts of evil, byproducts of a toxic atmosphere, fostered by the leader of the free world - the person whose job it is to protect them.

How do I protect her now and teach her how to protect herself later?

I teach martial arts. But there's no technique or tactic I can offer to fight back against these kinds of assaults. No kick or punch to defend against systemically promoted intolerance and discord.

So, here I am on my birthday, after a wonderful day of waking up to a tissue wrapped, Crayon-drawn rainbow card, giggling, building a bed-sheet tent, drinking sugar packed slushies, just hanging out with she and her little sister - and I want to scream

or hit something, somebody, for stealing innocence.

Before leaving, I take a second to watch her tiny chest rise and marvel at the perfectly formed, tiny eyelashes and the smooth, contours of this little face, silhouetted by the dim blue nightlight. But my mood gets darker; when older, will women still be subjected to grab-ass at work? (Okay, teaching her how to punch an assailant in the throat would be handy.)

Sadly, this happened on our watch. Our abundantly entitled post-war generation, talked-the-talk during our draft-deferred college days, but rarely walked-the-walk after leaving the safety of school.



We were going to change the world, rearrange the world. I'm haunted by a line from the Big Chill, when Glenn Close says, "I'd hate to think it was all fashion."

Instead of the co-ops and collectives we've delivered a dystopian nightmare where holy places are defaced with swastikas and slurs and the tired and poor are enemies.

Last visit, partially as a bedtime stall, she announced she wanted to have a meeting. Then she started a serious and upbeat monologue, about how we needed to help people, get them food and clothing and build them houses, going into detail about how she'll build the walls, put

on a roof and paint the rooms pretty colors. She never mentioned toys for the kids; just life's basic necessities. Ones she has and they don't.

Thinking about this later, over a big glass of wine, I smiled and realized I'm looking at this all wrong. I'm thinking defense when I should be thinking offense.

My job isn't to protect her or shield her. It's to put the bad into context, to help her see that goodness is responding. My job, with her parents, is to guide and nurture the depth of good and desire to help she already has.

It's to encourage her to build those houses.

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