

I don't know what motivated me last fall to make plans to return to Kent State on May 4, 2020 for the 50th commemoration of the shootings. In hindsight I think my reasons may have been to be with those, like myself, hoping to engage with our similar emotions and discuss other perspectives. Or maybe it was a need to demonstrate solidarity to the concept that this was a tragedy we should never forget.

Like many events this spring, all activities for the 50-year commemoration at the University were cancelled due to the Corona Virus. I can't honestly say I was disappointed primarily because I did not have a clear understanding of why I was compelled to be there. When the planners of all of the events made changes to make virtual activities on the web, I became aware that the specific milestone of 50 years is really no different than any other day since that spring day long ago. No answers would have emerged; no epiphanies would have been unveiled.

For families and people that knew Allison Krause, Sandra Scheuer, Jeff Miller and Bill Schroder this occasion, even virtual, will add another layer of grief to their deaths as media attention to the events that happened 5 decades ago are renewed. The stock footage with legacy sound bites along with the requisite clichés will fit somewhere into the daily news cycle. What will be missing from that coverage news now will be the ubiquitous footage of crowds along with sound bites from people on site.

For most that have not thought about the overall impact of what happened there as much as I have, the University itself has become a resource where anyone can explore this dark moment in my generations history. After a few years of trying to turn attention away, KSU has done a respectful job of trying to document this important history and not ignore or cover it up. This in itself gives me some degree of solace. With a little bit of Goggle you can easily find the wealth of information Kent State University has curated.

On a personal level, I still try to understand why May 4th 1970 is a lingering event I continue to explore in the context of my life. The 4 years I spent going to school at Kent no doubt are part of the roots of my continued interest in the chaos that happened a few years before I stepped on campus. However, the branches of events in the history I have lived thru seem to have some level of connection to the otherwise non-descript Midwestern College. No aspect of the shootings defines me. But, it is a touchstone to my insight into much of what has happened during my lifetime.

My diploma from Kent State accredits me with a BS in Speech with an Area of Concentration in Visual Communications. Indeed visual images have been the source of much of how I process the events I experienced and learned from.

Years before the shootings, President Kennedy was assassinated when I was 8 years old. As a young child I couldn't grasp the overall significance of his murder.

However, I knew this was a violent event that had enormous influence on our country. During the middle of the decade the violence and killings during the Civil Rights Movement were sources of many questions about life outside of my teenage world. At 13 Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy were assassinated which even further skewed my understanding of society. Riots in major cities were not uncommon and during the Democratic National Convention in Chicago that same year violent emotions took center stage. Mixed in with all of this were conflicting ideas that dominated everyday life about a war that was escalating half a world away in Vietnam where young Americans were being killed

AS a child, I no naive but was well aware of death and the emotions it has on people when they loose close friends or family. However these events in the 60's were very different than personal loss. They had an impact on millions of people. My coming of age during the time when these events happened was a prelude to the more personal impression that the killings at Kent State would have on me.

There is no doubt that magazines and TV news coverage of these and other events during the 60's were the seeds of my interest in the media and the power of visuals to tell a story. The footage of crowds lining the street in Washington DC as Kennedy's casket was taken to the Capitol, the photos of the civil rights protesters in Birmingham being attacked by police dogs, the image of men on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel pointing to where the shots that killed Martin Luther King Jr. came from, pictures on TV of brutal confrontation on the streets of Chicago during the Democratic Convention, the breaking news that Robert Kennedy had been shot in LA and the Life Magazine issue with pictures of all 242 American soldiers killed in Vietnam during one week that resembled the format of a HS yearbook are all etched into my memory.

On May 4th 1970 I was in 10th grade and my brother was in Vietnam. I was well aware of the division within the country, primarily young vs old, about our involvement in this far-off war. Just 2 years earlier over 16,000 American soldiers were killed. Naturally I was worried about my brother. I was also thinking that in a few short years it was possible I might be drafted into a war many of my generation saw as completely unnecessary.

Although my interest in going to college to get an education that would help to find a career in TV or radio was an "outside the box idea" to my parents ideas of a career for their son, they supported me. Initially I wanted to go to The University of Toronto primarily because Marshall McLuhan taught there. I guess there may have also been some attraction of avoiding the draft by going to Canada. On the night my brother came home from Vietnam, my father said to me, "If you want to go to school in Toronto it's fine with me." He had served in WWII and said very little about either that war or Vietnam. But after watching my brother sleeping on the couch while clutching an imaginary M16 in his hands my dad let me know that only one of his sons would have to go to Vietnam.

I found out that to go to the University of Toronto I would need to go to the equivalent of grade 13 in Canada then 4 years at the university. I knew I couldn't deal with 5 more years of school. Four would be a challenge. Also, in January of my senior year of HS they stopped taking young men for the draft. They still drew the numbers in case it was needed. But those born in 1953 were the last to be drafted into service. I never had to make the decision about going to Canada to avoid the draft.

At the time Kent State had a recognized program in radio and TV. I don't recall the shootings 3 years earlier had any influence on my decision to go there. It was close to home and affordable when compared to NYU, UCLA or Northwestern. Also my major required no foreign language and only very basic math. It was easy for me to get accepted there. It did upset my grandmother I was going to go to a school that in her mind had a reputation of being radical but my parents supported my decision and my goals even though the out-of-state tuition was an added expense.

The dorm I was assigned to in the fall of 1973 was less than 500 feet from the pagoda where the National Guard had tuned and fired on the unarmed students. Initially it was a strange, dream like feeling realizing I was standing on the ground where the shootings had occurred. Yet again images I had seen of the National Guard troops invaded my memory. I realized I shared a unique sense of place with those that had been there that day in May. At times it was surreal, but it became somewhat commonplace for me to walk up that hill and thru the parking lot where the massacre had occurred. However, the image of the girl kneeling over the body of Jeffery Miller as he lay there dying was never far from my mind. The song Ohio, written by Neil Young and recorded by Crosby Stills Nash and Young, would often float thru my head.

We did have a draft party my freshman year the night the numbers were drawn on TV for those born in 1955. My number was 32. Those of us with numbers under 100 drank without having to pitch in for booze.

In my sophomore year, the jurors of the Federal Grand Jury that indicted 8 of the low ranking enlisted men in the Ohio National Guard visited the campus to get an eyes-on perspective of where the shootings took place. As I walked along side their trek up Blank Hill in my mind I questioned if it was possible to find justice. If so what was justice. If these young men were found guilty what would be the appropriate penalty? The facts of 4 students being shot and killed while 9 others were wounded was undisputable as was the fact that the Guardsmen had been the ones that had done the shooting. No ruling by a court would change that. In the aftermath of the shooting there had been numerous theories as to why 28 of the National Guard had fired their weapons. Some rifles were loaded with steel piercing bullets. I couldn't imagine any punishment that would be more severe than knowing you had been involved and possibly responsible in a fatal attack on unarmed young people. A guilty conscience seemed more appropriate than legal guilt.

April 30 of 1975, a few days before May 4, the remaining Americans were evacuated from Saigon bring the war in Vietnam to an end. Yet another photograph, people climbing stairs to the roof to get on board a helicopter, became a visual that would be registered in my mind.

In May of my junior year the University had a "secret" mini Woodstock on a beautiful spring day. Some local bands preceded the main act of J Giles and the commons was filled with a few thousand students to do, as Uncle Murray of WMMS radio would say GET DOWN and party. In a moment of contemplation I realized that we were partying where the Nation Guard Troops had been staged a little of 6 years ago. I wonder if Allison, Sandra, Jeff and Bill had ever partied and enjoyed themselves like we were doing. The shadow of the shootings was never far away.

During my 4 years at Kent I knew I was not alone in my musings about where I was and the impact of what had happened there two and a half years before I arrived. However, I was indeed in the minority. Apathy and overlooking what was in the past was a more common attitude among the majority of students. I didn't become involved in the Center for Peaceful Change, which evolved from the shootings as a resource to teach and promote peaceful mechanisms of social and political change. I did attend lectures they sponsored from visiting authorities like Julian Bond and William Kunstler that reinforced my perception of what had happened at Kent had significant impact on society. I did however go to one of the CPC seminars to teach you the safe way to deal with police and your rights when being detained. That has proved useful on a few occasions. My feelings and thoughts I kept mostly to myself as I felt I really did not have anything to add to what had already been said.

All 4 of my years at KSU I attended the candle light vigil on the eve of the anniversary of the death of 4 young people that were my age when they were killed by bullets fired by the National Guard. When I attended the first vigil my freshman year the communal silence of the crowd was something I had never experienced. With no words spoken it had a dramatic impact that enhanced my reflection of what little I knew about what had happened. By my senior year the vigil became a time of personal solitude where the crowd was less of an influence and my own personal contemplations dominated the experience. It was a sobering experience to realize that I had been lucky to have avoided Vietnam and also young enough to have not been in a position to be part of the crowd of students on Blanket Hill. To this day I embrace alone time where I can quietly reflect on my life.

The higher education I got at Kent was more a maturing process than a learning process. I did what was necessary to pass and got a good foundation of understanding visual communications. Most importantly I feel I learned how to examine life from different perspectives. As I was graduating I knew my time at Kent would be partially defined by the events that preceded my college experience. In the 70's and early 80's when someone asked you where you went to college and you told them Kent State, the next question was always "Where you there when the students were shot?"

As the decade of the 60's was ending with Woodstock's dream of Peace Love and Music it was somewhat of an anomaly of what was truly happening in the broader culture of the US. The previous years of turmoil, riots and protest demonstrations had set the stage for numerous divisions and raw emotions to divide society. In late 1969 the country became aware of the My Lai massacre the support/opposition opinions of the Vietnam War became even more toxic. In the spring of 1970 President Nixon's decision to send troops into Cambodia was a sign of an escalating conflict that sparked even more protests to get out of the war in Southeast Asia. Somewhat overshadowed by the Vietnam War the fabric of our society was being frayed by continued racial inequality. The killing of 2 black students at Jackson State in Mississippi by police less than 2 weeks after the deaths in Kent was mostly ignored in the news. The success of the civil rights movement did not reveal how much of the hate had gone underground.

I look back now and see that the roots of our current polarization were seeded in the conflicting perspectives of how things had been and how others wanted them to be. That divisiveness was laid bare by the reactions to the Civil Rights Movement, amplified by our involvement in Vietnam was then fertilized that fateful spring of 1970 in Kent Ohio.

Over the years, as my life and career took me places I never dreamed possible. I have seen a lot documentaries and articles which the events of May 1970 are used as significant markers of historical change. I also have read a number of different books that gave more in depth analysis and a timeline trying to describe what and why. I was shocked to learn that some people thought that the National Guard should have shot more students and that some of the families of the wounded blamed their own children. I still have a hard time trying to put that into a perspective I can understand.

"The Killings at Kent State", "When the War Came Home to America", "The Loss of Innocence", "Thirteen Seconds", "A Challenge to the American Conscience" "Fire in the Heartland". These resources and countless essays do a good job of telling parts of the story and the impact it has had on our society. Anyone that wants to learn more I encourage you to explore the diverse and in-depth material that exists.

But for me they are cliché. None can capture the impact from my perspective. I wasn't there and I did not know any of the dead or wounded. But for me it is and always will be personal because it could have been me. Today, 50 years have passed and it is really no different than any other day since then except I am alive and they are not. I am more powerfully reminded that we should never forget innocent people are often the ones that suffer when anger boils over to violence.

My personal emotions and understanding of history continue to develop more layers. When I stood in Dealey Plaza in Dallas and the Lorraine Motel parking lot in

Memphis I had a rush of passion that took me back to Kent. When talking with an old-time CBS cameraman I asked him about his most memorable shot he had in his viewfinder. He paused and told me it was the shot of JFK's horse drawn casket and I was almost brought to tears. Working at the 1996 Democratic convention in Chicago I saw T-shirts saying "We kicked your fathers ass in 68. Wait till you see what we do to you." As a chaperon of teenagers on a bus of teenagers headed to New Orleans to help the victims of Katrina I saw the sign welcoming us to Alabama. My minds eye immediately went into a time machine and I saw the images of the burning bus the freedom riders had been in. When I met John Filo, the photographer that took the Pulitzer winning photo of Jeffery Miller's body, I had a difficult time thinking of what I could ask him. To me history is not just information on a page. The impact of events in my life, either direct or indirectly, are something I cannot ignore. To me the students killed at Kent are much more than just numbers associated with a date. They have names.

Since graduation I have only been back to Kent a few times. The most recent was about 20 or so years ago. I had heard about a more fitting memorial that had been built to honor the students. I was curious to see what and where it was. Although it was away from the spot where the shootings had occurred, it is in a serene location among a grove of trees overlooking the commons. While the granite carvings are the most dramatic visual and symbolic parts of the memorial, for me the engravings in the stone walk way carry the most powerful message. The 3 simple words INQUIRE LEARN REFLECT describe exactly how I look at May 4th 1970.

I am not an expert by any means but I do know that even after 50 years, the events before during and after May 4, 1970 are worth trying to understand. The one big conclusion I have had over the years is that if 3 words, "Lock and Load", had not been spoken, Allison Krause, Sandra Scheuer, Jeff Miller and Bill Schroder would not have died that day.

Even if the events commemorating May 4, 2020 had not been cancelled and I would have been able be at the events in Kent I would not have found new insight. More than likely I would only have discovered more questions. What I do know is that even though my questions will never have answers I will never stop asking them nor will I ever forget.

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