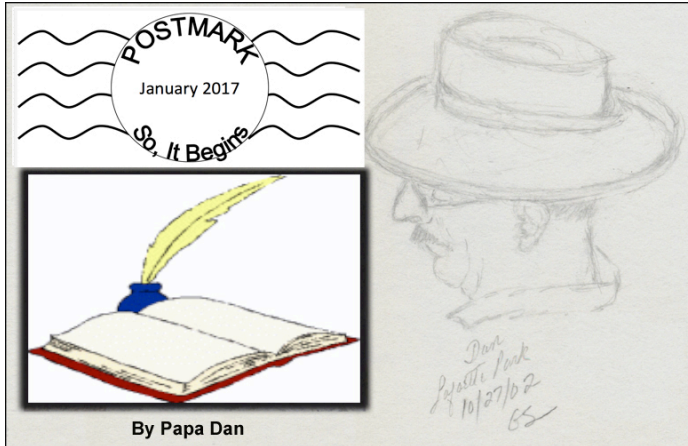


How Lucky We Are . . .

By Dan Sapone



**"Look around, look around,
look how lucky we are
to be alive right now."**

— Eliza Schuyler (from Lin Miranda's "Hamilton")

. . . To be alive right now

These days, like so many others, I am immersed in "Alexander Hamilton." The musical play has been all the rage — a roaring success on Broadway and now it's coming to San Francisco! So, in our house, we have been listening to the brilliant hip-hop soundtrack; reading Ron Chernow's biography of Hamilton (which inspired the musical); reading Lin Miranda's script and commentary about the creation of the show; AND, yes, we have tickets to the show in May.

When I first heard about the show, I admit to being skeptical — a Broadway musical about the first U.S. Secretary of the Treasury ("the ten-dollar founding father") set to "hip-hop" music (What is 'Hip-Hop'? I asked). But once I heard the soundtrack and felt the spirit, I have become a convert. The music and lyrics combined with our founding story and spirited characters are nothing short of thrilling. At its core, "Hamilton" is a classic story of a poor immigrant who showed up at a critical time and made a powerful contribution to American history. In a useful lesson for today's leaders, he did it by acknowledging his ignorance and educating himself. It is also a story devoid of a 'Disneyland' ending (*spoiler alert*: the hero, the former Secretary of the Treasury, gets killed in a duel by the sitting Vice President of the United States, Aaron Burr, at the dueling ground in Weehawken, New Jersey in 1804, no foolin'). Twenty-eight years before their duel, as they prepared to join forces in the revolution, Burr gave Hamilton some advice:

**"Talk less. Smile more.
Don't let them know what you're against
Or what you're for."**

And then, more to the point, in a much faster rhythm:

**"I'm with you, but the situation is fraught.
You've got to be carefully taught.
If you talk, you're gonna get shot!"**

In the summer of 1776, Hamilton and Burr met in New York as the revolution was in full swing. It was an exciting time. Eliza, one of two Schuyler sisters destined to fall in love with Hamilton (yes, it's a love story), sums it up:

**“Look around, look around
at how lucky we are to be live right now.
in the greatest city in the world.”**

How lucky? The excitement and optimism of the time was swirling all around them:

- talk of freedom and independence was everywhere on the streets of their city,
- revolutionary ideas (including the publication of Thomas Paine's "Common Sense" in January of 1776) were on everybody's lips (both for and against), and
- it was a time when young people could step forward and make a difference.

It also had a very dark side.

- War was brewing against an empire with the most powerful army and navy in the history of the world, and winter was approaching.
- Slaves were being bought and sold on the streets and wharves of their own city. Slavery had turned out to be the necessary political compromise among the colonies that made the union possible; so, abolitionists like Burr, Hamilton, and their New England compatriots had to swallow hard to believe that they could bend the future to match their principles, but ... later.
- New York harbor would soon be flooded with 260 British Navy warships and thirty-two thousand British soldiers. Thousands of their neighbors would be killed and maimed in battles fought in their own towns and farmlands. Many would starve during the harsh winter that arrived with the well-fed British army and navy.

So, while these American patriots were optimists, their optimism came at great cost. The King was determined to show no mercy to his disloyal subjects and reclaim his valuable property on the American continent. In the show, the comically mad King George character sings,

**“You'll be back, soon you'll see,
You'll remember you belong to me.
And when push comes to shove,
I'll send a fully armed battalion to remind you of my love.”**

These revolutionaries knew that many of them would personally suffer the ultimate cost for securing a future for their descendants. And they did.

To be alive right now

How lucky? Fast forward to now — here in 2017. What about us — you and me: the 21st-century descendants of those wild-eyed optimists? What can we learn from reflecting on their experience and ours? Have we preserved their vision of America? Is our vision of the future as bright as theirs? Are our challenges greater? Do we have reason to be hopeful, *right now*?

- Today, as 2017 dawns, many of our friends, neighbors, and ourselves are doing pretty well. Most statistics say that, overall, our economy is doing OK; the stock market is soaring. Isn't it?
- Technology and other 21st-century advancements are improving our lives in exciting ways and many aspects of American life give us reason to believe that the future is bright. Right?
- After eight years of an African American President, shouldn't race relations be encouraging?



- America has the unique distinction of being the world’s dominant superpower. Shouldn’t the founding fathers, and we, be proud and satisfied with the outcome of our revolution?

We are the heirs of the ideals, the optimism, and the governing principles that those brave folks earned for us, right? So, *today, can we* repeat what Eliza sings early in Act One of “Hamilton?”

**“Look around, look around
at how lucky we are to be alive right now.”**

Well, sure. That was in Act One. But, before we romanticize the optimism of the revolution, let’s not forget that Thomas Paine had to publish his famous pamphlet encouraging American independence *anonymously* (see Aaron Burr’s advice to Hamilton, above). The threat was real.

How lucky? Today, as we read the hard, frightening, depressing news of *today* and listen to each other talk about it, there are growing fears lurking in our future.

- The news media, long the principal vehicle for ensuring an informed electorate, is threatened with access limitations and credibility challenges,
- Long-held American foreign-policy positions and international alliances are now in doubt, apparently without the careful study and decision-making processes we have come to expect,
- The conclusions of science, long held to be the bedrock of our understanding and the foundation of our policy decisions, are being devalued by those taking the reins of power,
- Progress in securing the safety net for retirement income and health care is threatened,
- Human rights, regarding race, gender, and national origin are being weakened by those who seem to have forgotten our long struggle to eliminate discrimination and inequality of all kinds,
- The long-held bipartisan goal of reducing the nuclear danger is now threatened by new leadership that speaks of pursuing a new arms race,
- The goal of government, to support the well-being of all Americans, is now called into question by those who are lining up to run our government for the benefit of the few.

Optimism, Hope in 2017?

In my own fear of what lies ahead, I am reminded to be confident, *but patient* – in words that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. borrowed from a sermon delivered in 1853 by an abolitionist named Theodore Parker, who borrowed it from others before him:

**“The arc of the moral universe is long,
but it bends toward justice.”**

But patience, while necessary, is not sufficient. Success — as illustrated by Hamilton, Parker, King, and others — is reserved for those who work actively to bend that arc. Those words were used, not at the end of successful struggles but at the beginning of hard times, when success seemed unlikely. Even when we think we’ve made progress, we do not often complete that progress without detours. If I try to replicate the optimism of the American revolution, in the face of likely defeat; or try to emulate the hope of abolitionists, in the face bitter compromise; or support the efforts of those pursuing justice, in the face of bigotry, I conclude that 2016 must be considered a **detour**. It doesn’t have to be a reversal of our progress or an abandonment of the path we thought we were pursuing. We can make it into a detour – but we need to find our way back to that path. The administration of Donald J. Trump is not the end of this story nor the name of a new path to the future; it must be identified as the name of a detour.



OK, I apologize. I thought I could avoid using his name, but I decided that we must name the challenge if we are going to defeat it. We must not treat Trump like Voldemort (“He-who-must-not-be-named” or “The Dark Lord”) in Harry Potter. The ideas he represents must be faced head on, opposed, and defeated before we get too far off the path we were on and lose our way. So, as we approach the 2017 inaugural address – let us recall the words of another inaugural address from another time, a time in my youth characterized by more optimism and confidence (and patience) than we might be feeling today:

**“All this will not be finished in the first one hundred days.
Nor will it be finished in the first one thousand days . . .
nor even perhaps in our lifetime on this planet.
But let us begin.”**

— *John F. Kennedy, January 20, 1961*

So, now the real work begins.

Along with that work comes some frustration. Those of a certain age remember marching on college campuses and engaging in political action to bring important American values into the light of day — values, among others, like these: equal justice and opportunity under the law, women’s health and reproductive rights, racial integration and civil rights, and decisions about America’s use of military force and the draft. Those battles were successful, in their day. The disappointment, and perhaps the reality, is that they must be fought all over again.

So, today — what will it take?

Remember: we know how to do this.

- Some will welcome those who are not welcome, in their own communities.
- Some will contribute time and dollars to help those who will suffer during this detour.
- Some will join movements to influence votes.
- Some will march, when the need arises.
- Those with influence — teachers, lawyers, bartenders, parents, grandparents, neighborhood leaders (you know, you and me) — may find a way to encourage compassion, common sense, and unity in small places among those who will take over when we are gone.

We know how to do this. Let’s start. (The forces on the other side have already started.)

“The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.”
— **Edmund Burke (and others)**

