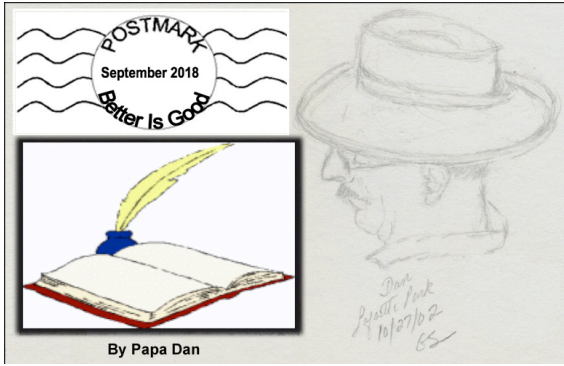


Two Guys Speak To Us About Optimism (and other stuff)

By Dan Sapone



“What can I do to make things better, not only for myself, but other people?”

— Herbie Hancock
September 3, 2018

“Better is good.”

— Barack Obama
September 7, 2018

Herbie Hancock & Barack Obama

Let's start with Herbie. Jazz enthusiasts of a certain age got to know about Herbie Hancock as a member of the Miles Davis Quintet in the 1960s. Since that time, he has played his piano with a distinguished list of collaborators with energy, enthusiasm, and inspiration. After winning twenty-some Grammy Awards, he is now at an age (78) when performers of “his time” have announced their retirement. BUT, it appears that “his time” still includes the present and the future — he just announced a new album and a set of tour dates through 2019 (including one here in the Bay Area). OK, that's the musical story. But in an interview with Aidin Vaziri of the San Francisco Chronicle on September 3, 2018 ([read the complete interview](#)), he had other stuff to say that extended beyond the music. With President Obama's inspiring speech at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign still ringing in my ears from yesterday (September 7), Mr. Hancock's answer to one of Mr. Vaziri's questions got my attention. The question was about “optimism.”

Aidin Vaziri's Question:

“Given the current climate of the country, are you able to remain optimistic for the future?”

Herbie Hancock's Answer:

“Yes, because I can see past that part of it. What is happening now and showing its ugly head is not about just one person — namely the president — but with a lot of people that have fears. Fears breed anger. How that expresses itself in many cases is what we haven't built into our human society, which is the ability to avoid looking for a scapegoat for our sufferings. There's a tendency for human beings to always point at something outside of themselves. In many cases, there are things outside of yourself that are part of that equation. But it's more important to take a broader view and realize that if something is happening to me and not other people, what can I do to make things better?”

“In Buddhism, we call that living a life of cause, not a life of effect. It's easy to point fingers. It's not easy to see how one is contributing to our own suffering. I think so much of that has been hidden under the rugs anyway. If you really want to clean house, you have to pull the rug back to see it.”

“Well, we've had the rug pulled back and now we can see it. What we have to do is not let it become a virus that spreads. We have to pour our compassion and understanding into that and use the best of our humanity to show there's a better way to find a better life. It's not the

immigrants' fault. It's not the Jews' fault. Or black people's fault. Or Muslims' fault. Or the Mexicans' fault. Or whoever you may be blaming at the time."

"You have to look first within yourself and think, 'What can I do to make things better not only for myself, but other people?' "

Barack Obama & Herbie Hancock

From PapaDan: On September 7, Former President Obama gave a formal address at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign ([Read the complete transcript here.](#)). The occasion was his acceptance of an Ethics in Government award. The audience included students and their families, faculty, and a national television audience. It was a preview of the messages he plans to deliver to the nation during the coming election campaign. He began: "Some of you think I am exaggerating when I say that this election is more important than any in our lifetime. Just a glance at the recent headlines should tell you that this moment is really different ... the consequences of any of us sitting on the sidelines are dire."

Observers in the press described his speech as a "call to arms" to Democrats, especially of the younger generation, to do something they haven't done in sufficient numbers: → **VOTE.**

The most widely reported themes from his speech focused on the dangers to our Democracy — trends in politics and government that threaten the values America has promoted around the world, the behavior of Republicans that have deviated from long-standing Republican values — values like their historic opposition to communist tyrants, anti-deficit fiscal conservatism, and preservation of American institutions. "What changed?" he asked. To answer that question, he reminded the audience that only one in five members of the younger generation voted in 2016, and asked, "if you don't vote, is it any wonder this Congress doesn't reflect your values and your priorities?" Does it matter? He answered by reminding us that, when he was elected, he won some precincts by 5, 10, 20 votes — not percent, votes! Also widely reported was a host of specific criticisms of the Trump Administration and those who support it — on immigration, budget deficits, voting rights, gun violence, women's rights, corruption

→ → **BUT**, these are not the features of the speech that are ringing in my ears. The message in the speech that I hope everyone will take to heart, and the message that Herbie Hancock used to justify his optimism for the future of this country, is this — in Obama's own words:

A key paragraph from Obama's speech:

"Better is good. I used to have to tell my young staff this all the time in the white house. *Better is good.* That's the history of progress in this country. *Not perfect* — **better**. The civil rights act didn't end racism, but it made things better. Social security didn't eliminate all poverty for seniors, but it made things better for millions of people. Do not let people tell you the fight's not worth it because you won't get everything that you want. The idea that, well, you know, there's racism in America, so I'm not going to bother voting, no point, that makes no sense. *You can make it better. Better is always worth fighting for.* That's how our founders expected this system of self-government to work. Through the testing of ideas and the application of reason and evidence and proof, we could sort through our differences, and nobody would get exactly what they wanted, but it would be possible to find a basis for common ground. And that common ground exists."

"Better is good."



The Path to “Better”

Observations From PapaDan: Even the important things we consider “better” are usually achieved in multiple steps, not in large, dramatic policy initiatives intended to change the world in one stroke. Changes in the behavior of our government, for example, would require multiple steps to address deficiencies in all three branches of government. That, in practical terms, would require multiple election cycles at all levels of society — starting with local governance *upward* to the national. It would also suggest significant educational efforts to restore attitudes and values across the generations — values regarding topics like immigration, race, public education, economic security, healthcare, and individual rights. History tells us that these values have been evolving in a fairly singular directional, albeit with alternating periods of back-sliding and recovery, within our social fabric over the past seven decades.

his past week, both the former president and the award-winning musician affirmed three essential messages (there are always three). 1) Progress comes as a result of building on “Better,” not giving up when we are likely to fall short of “Perfect.” 2) They also reaffirmed that a path to “better” must begin with the way we treat each other right now and right here, in our own neighborhoods and in our own families. Finally, 3) Both Herbie Hancock and Barack Obama carried one message underlying their words: *Make a Difference*. They both described ways we can do that and powerful reasons why it matters. In the final analysis, many of us are not sure that WE can make a difference. If we listen to the wisdom of these two guys, we can come to a conclusion we’ve heard before: Can we make it better? — “*Yes, we can.*”

Optimism isn’t easy.

It isn’t sufficient (neither jazz nor optimism).

But both are required.

Oh, yes, and ... well ... by the way ... vote.

→ [And listen to some Herbie](#) ←