

THE UNCONVENTION

Chicago, 1968

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In early August 1968 I left home for college. I was the first in my extended family to attend college other than priests in seminary and nuns in convents. The University of Michigan started early, and freshman started a week or two before returning students. The summer of 1968 was a time of great turmoil: protests against the war in Vietnam; marches for civil rights for Blacks; and, rioting over the April 4th assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the June 5th assassination of Bobby Kennedy. There were raw nerves and polarized opinions across the country. I was profoundly shaken by the war protests and counter protests; the civil rights demonstrations and the violent response to them lead by George Wallace and his white supremacist followers; and, the public assassinations and resulting rioting. I felt a sense of vast forces in the world moving out of control.

I was 17 years old and would soon have to register for the draft. I came from a conservative farm-oriented family and twelve years of Catholic education. I had never lived away from family. Now I was in a dorm room with a complete stranger. Jonathan had boarded at Andover for high school, was completely comfortable with dorm life, and seemed so sophisticated and worldly. He made me even more uncertain and uncomfortable. In every hallway, dining room, sidewalk, and classroom there were only strangers. I both desperately wanted to connect with some people and feared to do so.

I ended up meeting and spending time with some kids who were involved with The National Mobilization Committee To End The War In Vietnam. They seemed nice, and I certainly did not disagree with their cause. While some of these kids were a bit scruffy, I was not. I was on the Michigan wrestling team, in top physical condition, and extremely clean cut. In just a few days I was asked if I would travel to Chicago for the Democratic National Convention and call in reports

every evening to a student run radio station. It seemed like a way to be useful, to ingratiate myself with my new friends, and it would certainly be an interesting adventure. I had never been to Chicago. I had never been to a protest and did not know much about the politics of the Vietnam War.

I did know that in my senior year of high school, when I was captain of the wrestling team, the boy who had been captain my junior season, a boy I had known for years, was already dead. Jim had joined the Army immediately upon graduation, been sent to Vietnam and was killed before my senior wrestling season had even begun. The entire team was in a state of shock; Jim had been such a vital, lively presence. He was the first intimate contemporary to die in Vietnam. I had followed Jim as team captain; I did not wish to follow his path beyond.

So, off to Chicago in a car driven by strangers. I had no hotel and no contacts. I was completely on my own, without even a city map. I did have a phone number to call “collect” each evening to deliver my report on air.

My first clear memory is of being in Lincoln Park in the afternoon and evening. That is, I was told I was in Lincoln Park; I did not know where that was in the city. There were lots of trees and grass and glimpses of the lake. There were large and small groups of people; there was music and the scent of grass and hash in the air. Various speakers, some amplified and some not, were addressing different groups of people. I wandered among the groups. In the evening I came upon a crowd gathered around a tree. I wormed my way in toward the center and saw Alan Ginsberg and Jean Genet answering questions. I knew Ginsberg was a famous beat poet. I knew Genet’s name and

that he was a famous French writer but had not read any of his work. I asked no questions, but I felt it was significant that I had seen them and listened to them discuss art and current events.

Later that evening police bull horns announced that the park was closed and everyone must leave immediately. Of course, I had no place to go; and, it appeared that many others were in a similar situation. While there was a general movement of people towards the street, there also was a lot of standing around and asking about possible places to sleep. Suddenly, the police formed lines and entered the park, swinging billy clubs, kicking, and punching anyone who could not or would not get out of their way. I remember being surprised at the suddenness and violence of the sweep. They were not encouraging lingerers to leave; they were beating the crap out of anyone in reach. There was a lot of panicked running. I managed to find someone who said I could sleep on their couch. I followed them. I had no idea where the apartment was. Once safely inside I called in a report, very proud of my sighting of Ginsberg and Genet. I described the police action as unexpected and bewildering. I was astonished that the first reaction to lingering was clubs and kicks.

I have a clear memory of standing on what I now know is N. Michigan Ave. and seeing the unfinished Hancock building rising out of a pit. The enormous exterior black beams, the criss/cross design, and the sloped sides were all things I had never seen before. It was by far the tallest man-made structure I had ever seen and it was difficult to imagine the finished building. My imagination was not big enough.

I have kaleidoscope memories of more couch surfing and miscellaneous protests and rallies. I recall seeing a very clean, small pig being held up before a crowd and receiving the Yippie Party

nomination for President. The Pigasus nomination occurred in front of a few hundred people. After Pigasus was formally nominated, the police moved in and arrested a few Yippie leaders. Apparently the police did not get the humor, or appreciate the satire.

I had no knowledge of what was happening at the actual DNC. It was only later that I learned of Mayor Daley's manipulation of the convention floor, of his "Ribicoff" moment, or of his orders to the total of 24,000 police, active duty military, and National Guard troops in the city. It was only later that I learned that President Johnson had ordered the FBI to tap the telephones of his own Vice President, Hubert Humphrey. Or that LBJ had pressured the convention to adopt a plank that supported his Vietnam war policy, which was directly opposite of what the majority of Democratic primary voters wanted. I knew none of this at the time. Out on the streets I just knew that the government line on Vietnam made no sense and that what I was experiencing in Chicago was eerily similar to the television footage of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia that summer. The sight of tanks, armored vehicles, and thousands of soldiers occupying Prague was shocking. It recalled the carnage of WW II newsreels.

How similar was Chicago to Prague under Soviet occupation? Let me tell you about August 28, 1968. I am in Grant Park on a beautiful summer day with a lovely sorority girl from Northwestern that I had just met. Donna is cute and well dressed in a dark skirt, matching short jacket, and a white blouse. There are thousands of young people in the park east of the railroad tracks that separate the main body of the park from Michigan Avenue. All of the bridges over the tracks are filled with military trucks and tanks. In front of the armored vehicles are rows of soldiers in full battle gear with rifles and bayonets. In front of the soldiers are giant loops of barbed wire about

five feet high blocking the bridges from edge to edge. On the roof of the Field Museum to the south are sandbags with soldiers with rifles peeking over the top of each sand-bag nest. It looks exactly like Prague under Soviet military occupation. I wonder whether our soldiers will start shooting protesters, as the Russians did in Prague. I feel like a tiny mouse in a behavior modification experiment that is about to get ugly.

Donna and I wander up and down the park. There is nothing really organized happening. It is hot and I do not see any food or water available. Peter, Paul and Mary are singing folk songs in the band shell. Various people are speaking to small crowds in different parts of the park. We learn that while Mayor Daley had refused to issue any permits to any antiwar protesters that week, somehow this gathering in Grant park on August 28 did have a permit.

Up close the soldiers look just like me, except for the combat gear, helmets, and the rifles with bayonets they hold in front of them. They also are very young and many of them look pretty uncomfortable. They look as scared as I feel. Like me, they do not know what will happen next, whether they will be ordered to fire on their contemporaries.

There are occasional scuffles. A U.S. flag in the park is lowered to half-mast and the police charge in, beat up some kids, and put the flag back up to the top of the flag pole. A couple of protesters climb up on a statue of a soldier on a horse and a phalanx of police run in, club some people, pull the fellows off the statue, and arrest them.

Donna and I comment on all of this: the music, the speakers, the scuffles, as we wander the park. But my eyes keep coming back to the snipers on the roof of the Field Museum, and the tanks and rows of soldiers on the bridges. I can't stop talking about how it feels to be surrounded by so many guns. I grew up hunting and we did not go out of the house with a gun unless we intended to use it. It feels very dangerous.

Because all the east/west roads are blocked off at the bridges there are massive traffic jams on the outer drive, Columbus Avenue, and the streets going west to the blocked bridges. At some point in the afternoon either the police, the soldiers, or both start lobbing tear gas into the Park. Huge amounts of tear gas, clouds of it float everywhere. And this is a permitted protest gathering. There is a lot of choking, coughing, crying, and faintness. Amazingly, many of the folks in the stopped cars caught in the traffic jam open their doors and let us in. Many, many cars open their doors. We get some relief sitting in the closed cars, especially if they have air conditioning. However, there is no water for washing out eyes. Over what seems like a couple of hours there are several tear gas bombardments. My friend and I are let into several cars and the drivers offer what help they can. The police and soldiers all have gas masks on and make sporadic charges into the park and among the cars. They order drivers to open their windows and stick their rifles with fixed bayonets into the cars. This terrifies the people in the cars. I feel a profound sense of the goodness of people, of total strangers who may or may not agree with the politics, but simply want to help a fellow human being in a scary situation.

In the early evening the crowd starts to move. A bridge over the tracks has somehow been cleared of tanks, barbed wire, and soldiers. The crowd moves like a river through a burst dam. Donna and

I are carried along over the bridge and onto Michigan Ave. We are thousands packing the Avenue curb to curb for blocks. It is getting dark. Donna and I are about 5 or 6 rows back from the south end of the crowd and we start walking south. As we walk down Michigan we are chanting: "If you agree with us, flash your lights". Lights in the windows of the buildings fronting Michigan begin to flicker on and off. Cars stuck in the east/west streets flash their headlights on and off. Thousands cheer the support. It is now full dark. Donna and I, near the head of the marching crowd, are in front of the Hilton Hotel. That is where many of the convention delegates are staying. The Hilton room lights flicker on and off all over the building. There is more cheering and a new chant of "The whole world is watching. The whole world is watching."

A very large number of police are massed across Michigan Avenue on the south side of Balboa Street. They are about 12 or 15 lines deep, from curb to curb. They have their helmets on and their night sticks in their hands. The march is stopped. We cannot continue south. Balboa also is blocked off with stopped cars and police. The crowd's momentum presses into our backs. It is hard to maintain position against the pressure and avoid bumping into the police line. We stand like this for a while, with sporadic chanting and slogans. At that intersection, in front of the Hilton, there are two freight trucks parked at different corners with T.V. cameras mounted on tripods on top of the trucks. The police all look very angry and irritated. The warm, night air is thick with tension. I certainly feel anxious; based on what had happened in Lincoln Park a few nights earlier and in Grant Park that afternoon, I fear another violent attack. Donna and I are just a few rows away from the police. But we cannot move in any direction, the crowd is so tightly packed by the police surrounding us on three sides. We are both scared but reassure each other that it is a peaceful march and nothing bad will happen.

We stand this way for what seems like a long time, the Hilton room lights flickering on and off overhead. Then there is a shouted order and a simultaneous surge of the police lines into the crowd, night sticks flailing. Boys and girls crumple, blood is flying through the air, splattering me and Donna. We had been 5 or 6 back from the front, but as kids go down we are quickly 2 or 3 from the front. We are seconds from being hit. But the crowd pressure from behind eases in reaction to the police charge and we can move side to side and even back a little. It seems a miracle that we both get off the street and onto the grass on the park side uninjured. The grass holds many bloody kids, some unconscious, that have been dragged off the street. Some people are putting cloth bandages around the bloody heads, splinting arms, and otherwise tending to the wounded in the middle of shouting, screaming chaos. I admire those with the presence of mind to tend to the wounded, but also note that they appear to have come prepared for just such an eventuality. Most of all I feel relief that Donna and I have made it out uninjured.

Wild is an understatement. I am totally unprepared for the police charge. We are peacefully marching down the street, chanting slogans and getting support from flashing room and car lights. It is a political protest, during a political convention, in election season; the First Amendment protections of assembly and speech do apply to us citizens. I did not hear any call to disperse or warning of an assault. It was a furious, violent charge into a peaceful, unarmed crowd.

The sudden violence, the terror, the many injuries, the screaming, shouting, pushing, shoving and crawling were a vision of pandemonium in the dark. But, looking back, I now know that there was some light. The lights for the T.V. cameras mounted on the trucks illuminated discrete areas. Some

of what happened was broadcast over the networks that evening. It turns out that the world actually was watching that one place, at that singular time.

So, Donna and I are out of the chaos. It is dark, and we are hungry, thirsty, tired, and speckled with dirt and blood. As we walk around the loop looking for an open place to sit and eat we talk about the many experiences of the day, most of them unexpected and difficult to comprehend. Because of all that we went through together that long day and night, I feel close to Donna. As we stroll and talk we are relaxed because we think all of the violent chaos is finished. We come to overhead train tracks and we turn the corner. Just then a group of police come around the corner at the other end of the block. They point their billy clubs at us and shout “There’s a couple of ‘em, let’s get ‘em” and start running towards us. We reverse, running back around the corner and immediately encounter the back of a crowd waking slowly and chanting “Walk, don’t run. Walk, don’t run”. We are penned in and the police are on us. The last thing I remember is a shattering blow to the back of my head. I wake up under a tarp in Grant Park being tended by a hippie in a headband. He winds a cloth bandage around my head and tells me not to fall asleep. There is water, but no food. I try not to sleep. There is no call to the radio station that night. I do not know what happened to Donna. I never saw her again. I do not recall how I got back to Ann Arbor.

Looking back on those few days in Chicago, I must acknowledge their impact on me. Up until then the world was something I read about in books, saw on T.V. or in movies. It was big, dramatic, beautiful, ugly; but it was not real to me. Chicago that week was real. The people demonstrating, the people in their cars, the police, the soldiers; I felt the impact of all their realities. They mattered, what they thought and felt mattered. I had to take them all seriously because all of them impacted

my life. And, what I thought and felt mattered too. I now felt an integral part of the world. I needed to accept the responsibilities of citizenship and exercise the rights of citizenship. Yes, vast forces are moving in the world; and, I am part of those forces.

Since 1968 our country and other countries have continued to experience periodic unrest and turmoil. Vast forces continue to move across the world. All I can do is decide what kind of person I want to be, what kind of society I wish to live in, and then be part of the forces moving in that direction. I can be a full citizen. I can voice my opinions and preferences. I can peacefully protest. I can vote.