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LOCAL COMMENT

Sitting shivah for Detroit's promise

BY KEVIN BOYLE • DECEMBER 21, 2008

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I'm sitting shivah for Detroit.

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I'm not Jewish. But it's the only way I can describe what I've been doing the past few weeks. Day after day, I pick up the newspaper or turn on the news, and there's another congressman, another businessman, another expert explaining why the Big Three auto companies have to cut thousands of jobs; why they have to slash their workers' wages and benefits; why they must, as South Carolina's Sen. Jim DeMint put it, slice through "the barnacles of unionism."

I hear them, and I mourn for the amazing promise of a once-great city. Not the promise of ever more cars rolling off the assembly line, but something deeper and more profound: the promise of opportunity.

It was a promise made at the depths of the Great Depression. In those terribly dark days, President Franklin Roosevelt's New Dealers joined with a surging labor movement to pledge that working people wouldn't have to live on the edge of poverty, scrambling from paycheck to paycheck, fearing the illness or accident that could ruin them forever. They deserved the same chances middle- and upper-class Americans enjoyed. For two generations, from 1940 to the mid-1970s, the nation tried to live up to that pledge. The results were extraordinary.

Anyone who grew up in Detroit in those years saw the transformation. For the first time, working-class men and women -- not just autoworkers but plumbers and mechanics, police officers and firefighters, secretaries and teachers -- earned enough to imagine better futures for their children. They raised their kids in comfortable homes they bought with help from the VA and the FHA. They sent them to schools made decent by their own local taxes and the infusion of federal dollars. When their sons and daughters came of age, they brought them into the factories so they could get a share of those good wages. Or they sent them off to public universities like Wayne State, to be launched from there into the middle class or even higher.

And if something went wrong, they knew that there was a safety net, ready to catch them should they fall.

God knows, the system wasn't perfect. Lots of people slipped through the cracks. Others were denied their shot. Until the late 1950s, most auto companies wouldn't hire African-



Kevin Boyle mourns lost opportunity.

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American women. Only in the mid-1960s did the Detroit Police Department begin to employ black men in any numbers. Gradually, though, such blatant discrimination was beaten down. And thousands upon thousands of working-class Detroiters got to see the dreams they held for their children fulfilled.

I think of my friend, Joe, grandson of an immigrant autoworker, son of a union electrician. Joe's an engineer at GM, helping to design the hybrid that is the company's last, best hope. I think of Marty, son of a Detroit cop, now an acclaimed teacher and scholar at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. And I think of Rudy, the son of Chinese parents who came to Detroit in the 1950s. Rudy's folks ran a storefront restaurant in a poor neighborhood on the east side, relying on the trade from the nearby Chrysler plant to make ends meet. They worked incredibly hard. They shouldered burdens no one should be asked to bear. And they handed their kids a boundless world. Today Rudy's the chief executive officer of a company in California. His son's a midshipman at the U.S. Naval Academy.

That's America at its best: a nation transformed by the vision of its leaders and the ambition and courage of its people. A nation that, through opportunities, was made more open, more diverse, more equitable, more just than it had been before.

Then, during the last great economic crisis in the 1970s, the country started to shred its promise of opportunity for all. Over the past three decades the public sector was slowly starved. Much of Detroit -- much of urban America -- started to crumble. Unions hemorrhaged members. Working-class wages stagnated. Inequality spiraled upward. For a while the nation hid that harsh reality behind a mountain of cheap goods bought on cheap credit.

Now we're paying the price. And here come the politicians and the pundits, proclaiming the need for more cuts, more retrenchment, more pain for working people. They're profoundly wrong. We shouldn't destroy what's left of the great promises made all those decades ago. More than ever we need to renew them, to make opportunity real again.


But I fear that we've lived with inequality for so long, we've forgotten that it doesn't have to be this way. And I find myself mourning what we've lost.

KEVIN BOYLE, 48, is a Detroit native who teaches American history at Ohio State University. He received a BA from the University of Detroit in 1982 and his PhD from the University of Michigan in 1990. Boyle's 2004 book, "Arc of Justice: A saga of Race, Civil Rights and Murder in the Jazz Age," is based on events in Detroit and won the national Book Award for nonfiction. Contact him by e-mail at boyle.145@osu.edu.

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SITE INDEX

Home

- Photos
- Videos
- Add your photos
- Lottery
- Print edition
- Contact us
- Frequently Asked Questions
- Help

Local

- Detroit
- Wayne
- Oakland
- Macomb
- Metro
- Michigan
- Election 2008
- Driving & traffic
- School closings
- Columnists

Nation/World

- Top stories
- Lotteries
- Election 2008
- Nation/World
- Business

Sports

- Lions
- Pistons
- Red Wings
- Tigers
- U-M Wolverines
- MSU Spartans
- High School
- Sports
- Scores
- Columnists
- Shock
- Outdoors
- Olympics sports
- Golf
- Auto racing
- Detroit Marathon

Entertainment

- Search for events
- Things to do
- Celebrities
- Movies
- Music
- TV/Radio
- Casinos
- Theater/Arts
- Dining
- Video games
- Metromix.com
- Photos

Autos/Business

- Auto news
- Business news
- Markets
- Auto reviews
- Technology
- Detroit Auto Show

Life

- Travel
- USA Today
- Travel
- Shopping
- Relationships
- Food
- Pets
- Health
- Columnists
- Technology
- Twist

Opinion

- Editorials
- Blogs
- Cartoons
- Letters to the Editor
- Columnists
- Forums

Obituaries

- Death notices

Extras

- Photos
- Videos
- Databases
- Digital Free Press
- Forums
- Lottery
- Comics
- Scores
- Contests



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