

Black July

Written by Springs Toledo
Thursday, 30 July 2009 19:00

The quiet sun is mystifying astronomers all over the world. There has been no activity on its surface for months on end, no sunspots that would be expected to occur in a normal solar cycle. In fact it's at a 100-year low for sunspot activity. Some scientists believe that the sun is dimming.

A quiet sun and a cooler upper atmosphere have made this July one of the coldest on record in many areas of the country. Here in New England some of our stock have devolved from stubborn to stupid. They're packing up the kids and heading to the beach the moment the temperature breaks 68 –not realizing until they arrive that it's ten degrees cooler on the shore. These defiant tribes can be seen scattered on the sand huddled together in sweatshirts. It's fun to laugh while driving by in a heated car as Kool & The Gang's "Summer Madness" haunts the speakers. This is shaping up to be "The Year Without a Summer" and we're all wondering what's going on.

Things are bad everywhere. Even the bums are competing with the rising ranks of nouveau bums and they're asking for dimes again. A dime is better than a dirty look. The discarded newspapers they use as blankets are getting expensive. The Boston Globe is facing bankruptcy after 137 years; and ever since it jumped up to a buck at the stand, no one's buying. A panhandler on Morrissey Boulevard should stop over and tell one of those stuffed suits that a dime is better than a dirty look. Sometimes you'll find those quaint broadsheets wrapped around the leg of a park bench. Be charitable and open it. Read how President Obama's approval rating is sinking back down to earth while the unemployment rate continues to trudge upward towards 10%; that's the highest it's been in more than a quarter century. If you're feeling especially morbid, read about what seems to be an epidemic of suicide.

This is a time of tribulation.

It was a Jewish folktale that gave us the phrase "this too shall pass." But that means more than it seems when you think about it. It is a statement of hope and existential despair. Everything is a matter of time. An active solar cycle will return in time, the temperatures will eventually normalize, the information industry will evolve, Obama's approval rating will climb and fall as has every President's before him, and the economy will expand and contract. Hope and promise will rise again like twin towers. Time will see to that.

For flesh and blood, time begins as a friend and comforter ...a healer of wounds, a giver of things long sought, after things long-suffered: a college degree, a promotion, a baby, a title. Time walks ahead of us, always out of reach while opening doors, removing obstacles, and teaching wisdom. Then we age and stumble and can't keep up and it gets away from us. We'll shake a liver-spotted fist at the clock while clinging to times gone-by like a drunk to a lamp post. The good 'ole days, we'll call them, and the older they are the better they'll be. Up ahead, the friend from our youth will eventually stop on the road -on our road. He'll turn and face us, and we will gasp when we notice that he is dressed in black and carrying a sickle. Time the

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destroyer, called death.

To be fully aware of the human condition means recognizing that all flesh marches fearfully towards oblivion. It is written in nature, in the lines on our faces. The first moment of life begins the countdown to death. It's only a matter of time.

Is it any wonder then that we need heroes, heroes who are at once timeless and transcendent?

Battling Blackjack (nee Lonnie Craft) was a heavyweight who fought Charley Burley and Zora Folley. He killed his wife and was sentenced to be executed at Arizona State Prison in 1959. He walked to the gas chamber dressed as if he were headed to the ring, wearing boxing gloves, shoes, trunks, and robe. That may seem zany, but was it? The ex-fighter needed to feel brave one more time, so he conjured up a heroic archetype and wore talismans. Then there's the story from the 1930s of a condemned man in a North Carolina gas chamber. As potassium cyanide pellets were dropped in, a microphone caught the young African American saying "save me, Joe Louis, save me, Joe Louis, save me, Joe Louis" as he lay dying.

Unlike civilians, the boxer is acquainted with time's warning, with death. He is prepared to explore frightening questions, questions that civilians usually can't bring themselves to fully explore until death is standing on the porch. The boxer's experience is, in a sense, existential. Boxing shows a man who he really is. Stripped down to his trunks and stripped of all trivialities and pretenses, he is a man in dialogue with himself. This dialogue is as intimate as it gets and the forum in which it happens is as public as it gets. The spectator in the stands witnesses the dialogue, and during a great fight, is spellbound by it. Comfort is derived from the experience of a great fight, precisely because the Grim Reaper is present as the fourth man in the ring. There, under the lights and in full view of all of his eventual victims, he is dared, flinched at, and flirted with, even as he points a bony finger. We love it.

We cherish *our* brave ones, victors and vanquished alike, as much as we mythologize them. Without really being conscious of it we are celebrating ancient virtues and taking a sabbatical from a modern culture gone mad with political correctness. We lose ourselves in a celebration of fantastic masculinity. Need evidence? Watch the fight crowd as the bell rings to end a blazing round and you will see graying men jump up and down like pogo sticks and strangers embrace across rows. Sometimes you'll see two strangers jumping up and down while locked in a lover's embrace, self-consciousness in flight, their heads cranked at the ring. Boxing can bring an almost spiritual exultation.

The heroic figure responsible for this has earned attention in the arts, literature, and politics. He has spawned countless references to his ring experiences in slang and idioms that you hear every day from people who don't know the difference between Marciano and Graziano.

The boxer is and must be far more than a simple athlete. Other athletes are familiar with sweat and tears, but not with blood. Many of them are locked in perpetual adolescence. Strip away their size and advanced ability to run and jump or hit a ball, ignore the bloated salary and celebrity, and something surprising may come into focus –their fields and courts are

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playgrounds. They are called what they were called when they were in high school: athletes. And they are still at play. The boxer is not even called an “athlete,” he is called a fighter, a gladiator, a conqueror, a king. He does not “play” boxing. He fist fights in a claustrophobic area with no one to help him. Sometimes he fights as if his life is at stake. Sometimes it is. Boxing is self-reliance writ large. No helmet or shoulder pads for protection and all vitals above the waist are laid bare. Like the laborer, soldier, scientist, craftsman, artist, and mechanic throughout human history, he will rely on his hands.

Boxing’s great practitioners are rightfully frozen in time. Old fighters, be they elderly, retired, or simply past their prime, have in a manner of speaking, conquered time the destroyer. Their images are locked in the cryogenic tanks of our hearts and minds, forever young, forever formidable, forever there to teach us courage in the face of ancient enemies like fear and death.

They are not supposed to die.

Alexis Arguello, Arturo Gatti, and Vernon Forrest laid down for the long count on July first, eleventh, and twenty-fifth, respectively. Alexis’s death was ruled a suicide, only now there is talk that he was killed by a government he had grown disillusioned with. Arturo’s death saw allegations that he was killed by a disillusioned wife, only now it is ruled a suicide. Vernon was shot multiple times in the back after he chased a robber with his three guns –all three of which were registered, two of which were his fists. They were international representatives of the Sweet Science and reflected well its diversity, nobility, and style. Arturo was a banger, Vernon a technician, Alexis –both. And they had heart. They taught us much wisdom in their spit bucket seminars.

Black July, with its quiet sun and deserted shores, was an unnatural month. The death of champions is a phenomenon that feels just as unnatural; but the death of three inside of a month is surreal. They are not supposed to die; they’re supposed to just fade away, leaving us with myths and heroes intact as we march through this world as bravely as we can.

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