



## Rhonda Fazio

This morning I walked out into an urban winter wonderland in the historic downtown city of New Bedford. The snow was coming down hard as I made my way down the covered cobblestones, trying not to lose my footing as I walk. Turning to make my way up Union Street my mind begins to wander as I think of the People here before me, centuries ago and how they prepared for storms they did not know were coming. With a slight detour onto Pleasant Street, I pick up a loaf of seeded whole wheat bread from The Baker. Leaving the welcoming and aromatic confines of the store, I giggle, imagining myself in an idealistic Norman Rockwell painting, clutching my freshly baked loaf of bread as I brave the snow storm on my way back to Union Street, my mind begins to muse. If there is anything you need in a New England snowstorm of the unpredictable kind, it is a loaf of Baker bread sliced to perfection, lightly toasted, slathered with Irish butter, with some really good jam, a cup of coffee and the thought of how lovely life can be in the moment when the snow is falling down, quieting the world.

Surely, if Mr. Rockwell was still painting, this would be a picture perfect scene to transpose one of his famous works of art "The Freedom of Want" the one where everyone is around the table about to eat a feast. I imagine myself sitting at a table having breakfast with a baby on my lap, safe warm and cozy, the baby sneaks a bite of toast and jam as I look out the window towards the blustery storm feeling safe at last...idealistic, but yet, perceptibly real.

This is where my mind is the moment I hear it. I look up in surprise, broken out of my mental reverie as I haven't heard this particular "beep" of the horn in quite some time. It was a "frequent flyer" in the town I currently live in, a rural place made up of country roads gridded by the farm land that once was. Just down the road, a few towns away from here, I would hear the "toot" from time to time but more startling than that, I would see it flying under the American flag in front of a house I drive by every day as I leave town. "The Flag of Dixie" or more to the point "The Confederate Flag" and the song "tooting to the oldies" is none other than "Dixie Land". There was no happier day when I saw the moving trucks at that house and the flag no longer flying under "Old Glory" in its front yard. I thought I would never hear the snippet of that song again. But here it is, the "intro" of a song, a line only meant to be sung once, now becomes the refrain, like a bad memory, as history comes back to haunt us: "oh I wish I was in the land of cotton, old times there are not forgotten" look away, look away, but I cannot.

The truck is moving down the street as I am walking up, how ironic that I should hear this song again and to be on a street called Union, my mind is already there- as in the army? But why is the person in the truck tooting his horn? There is no one ahead of him. There is no traffic. There is snow all over the road, not yet plowed. I am not at a crosswalk contemplating an illegal move because the light is red and no one is coming and who is going to see me anyway? I am safely on a sidewalk trudging through the snow as it is falling making imprints with the first steps uptown. So why is this person beeping? I turn my attention back to the sidewalk as I continue my trek up hill, determined to ignore the sound. Now I see. Through the flakes falling, I see who he is beeping at.

The stones of this town are laid out in such a concrete sort of way they have withstood the test of many comings and goings. In other words, these streets have seen so much of our nation's history. From the pathways of the Wampanoag to the strategic placement of cobblestones to make the thousands and thousands of barrels filled with whale oil easier to roll into the heyday of the textile industry, to the paving and reconstruction of a city that has redefined itself again and again to survive with the changing economic times.

Just ahead, stands a building with a corner stone as solid as any of the ones in the architecture of the historic downtown city buildings. But this one, the one one that stands sentry over the rest, looks over the city as if it is



watching the goings on. The Unitarian Church is a beautiful edifice. As in its name, it is a place of unity on the corner of Union and 8th Streets. Frederick Douglass, an escaped slave, triumphant in his quest for freedom worshiped there when he lived in this city; a city he would register to vote in as a free man.

This is the backdrop as I look in front of me to the men brushing off their car, a young man with the natural pigment of melanin in his skin tone and an older man, shades lighter, looking pretty rough with a cigarette hanging out of his mouth. An odd pairing at first light in the morning but in my mind, everyone has a story and a reason why it is as such at the moment. The young man is looking down and is determined to get in the car as quickly as he can without making eye contact. The older man is not moving quite as fast. He's quiet though as he steps slowly towards the door of the car. He understands. He gets the gist. So, is this some sort of joke? Does the person in the truck think he is funny to lay on a horn that "Whistles Dixie" as he drives by two men getting in a car? I can think of a number of things to say, even at 7:30 in the morning, however, not very nice. Not how I would like to start my day. Man, I think to myself, is he tooting his horn in the wrong place or what? I have too much respect for the ones who came before me. The ones who fought with words and not weapons, civil disobedience instead of violence, teaching tolerance instead of learning how to hate, how to march, take a stand, sit, kneel, however you want to hold the resistance of inhumanity and corruption of the world. I was not about to "buck that" systematic reverence with a retort and a simple change of a consonant. Instead, I smile wide and look right at the older gentleman and wish him a "good snowy morning" as I walk by, with the younger man already in the car, He actually gave me a little smile as he wished me the same. So simple is the gesture on a snow-white morning, though at any time of the day, any time of the evening, no matter the conditions, racism never sleeps, even in New Bedford.

I wrote this essay back in December during the same snowstorm, with a baby on my lap, eating toast and jam, sipping a cup of coffee, in great contemplation about what I just witnessed. Racism - the "problem we all live with" incidentally, is the title to the subject matter that will become the verification to Norman Rockwell's work in the latter part of his career – is the real deal in idealistic America.

It seems so long ago in comparison to what is happening now. A pandemic settled onto the world. Life became slower, like how a snowstorm can often slow things down in a hurry. It keeps you inside, and hopefully with proper planning you can bunker down for a while until the storm passes.

In a different part of the city, six months later, in the throes of Covid-19, in the wake of George Floyd, the county is in protest. I drive down a street in the south end towards the same destination on a different road, from a different angle. I see a man waiting to cross the street, slowing my car down I let him pass. He flashes me a smile and shoots me the peace sign. I smile back. At the same time there is a man to my left that "cat calls" me. "You are beautiful" he says. Should I be angry? This is the age of "Me too" women have had enough. However, not every man deserves to be condemned for saying something that some women may deem inappropriate. And I am choosing my words carefully here, because I have been "cat called" in the most degrading ways. As an independent woman out there on the street, you pick and choose your battles. I choose not to respond, sometimes it goes away. Sometimes it is more complicated. In this instance, I flashed him a smile and shot him the peace sign. He smiled back. I continue on further down the road, still with a smile on my face, because I was feeling a vibe. I encounter a trio of young ladies with protest signs walking along the sidewalk. I catch their eye; give them a nod as we smile at each other as we continue on our way.

I look at human interaction like I do a weft to a warp on a loom. There are multiple threads moving in 4 different directions. The warp moves north and south while the weft moves from east to west. Like People from all over the world that reside in this nation they become interlocking threads with one another. There is a weaving pattern that represents this called summer and winter. It is a durable weave of contrasting colors. A dark pattern on a light background that is reversible.



But can we as a nation reverse the wrongs done unto an entire culture of People. Are we able to fix the deep gouging scars of inequality? Can we as nation endure this upheaval?

The series of events that have come to light in the time of Covid-19 have stoked the long burning embers of a fire that was lit a long time ago. I hold space and faith that the work I do as an Artist will bring People of all nations together and listen to each other's voice so that we can begin to develop a new narrative that does not leave anyone out. The storm is just beginning. The fire is stoked, and at a steady burn. There is room for everyone around the fire; a place to warm your hands as we weather the storm together.