

Barack Obama, Stacey Abrams, John Kerry, Irshad Manji and More on How to Make America Great—Finally

Artists, Activists, Policymakers – and a President – Weigh in on how to live a fearless life in the Trump Era

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POLITICS

BY

Barack Obama

ROBERT F. KENNEDY KNEW a thing or two about hope. Half a century ago, it was hope in the future, hope in people, hope in our capacity to do better, to be better, that spurred him to challenge a sitting president of his own party and challenge the conscience of a nation.

And through steel towns and crowded housing projects and windswept Native American reservations, Bobby reinvigorated an American spirit that was bruised and battered and still reeling from assassinations and riots and protests—and hatred. And he had ambition, and he had moral clarity. He argued for unity over division, for compassion over mutual suspicion, for justice over intolerance and inequality. And standing on some makeshift platform, maybe on the trunk of a convertible or the back of a flatbed, sometimes speaking into a tiny microphone while an aide held up a portable speaker, he felt authentic, and he felt true, not stage-managed or prepackaged like so many people in public life.

Which is why when you look at the photos and you look at the footage of that remarkable period, what sticks out is the sea of hands surrounding him seemingly everywhere he went. Dozens of hands, hundreds of hands, thousands, every shape and every color, the smooth hands of children and the wrinkled, worn hands of the elderly, and they're all reaching upward.

He understood that it wasn't blind optimism that he was peddling. Hope is never a willful ignorance to the hardships and cruelties that so many suffer or the enormous challenges

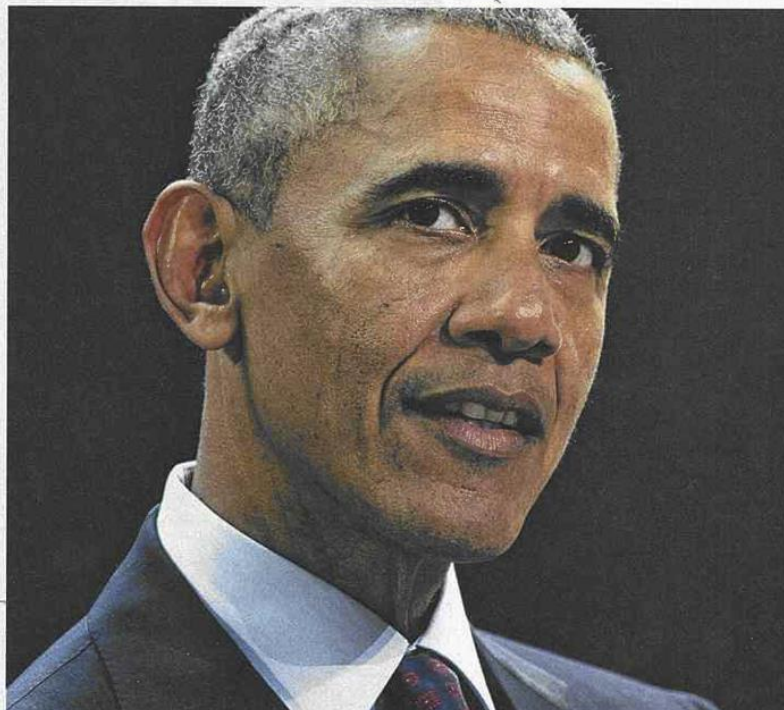
that we face in mounting progress in this imperfect world... [It's] a belief in goodness and human ingenuity and, maybe most of all, our ability to connect with each other and see each other in ourselves, and that if we summon our best selves, then maybe we can inspire others to do the same.

It's been 50 years since we lost Bobby, and because we still seem to be grappling with some of the same issues that he was in 1968, when I was 7 years old, because we are still dealing with poverty and inequality and racism and injustice and environmental degradation and a constant stream of senseless violence, because of all that, it can be tempting sometimes to succumb to the cynicism, the belief that hope is a fool's game for suckers. And worse, at a time when the media

are splintered and our leaders seem content to make up whatever facts they consider expedient, a lot of people have come to doubt even the very notion of common ground, insisting that the best we can do is retreat into our respective corners, circle the wagons and then do battle with anybody who is not like ourselves.

Bobby Kennedy's life reminds us to reject such cynicism. He reminds us that because of the men and women that he helped inspire, because of the ripples that he sent out, because of the often-unrecognized efforts of union organizers and civil rights workers and peace activists and student leaders, things did in fact get better.

In the years since Bobby's death, tens of millions would be lifted out of poverty. Around the world, extreme poverty would be slashed, and more girls would begin to gain access to an education. Millions of Americans would be shielded by health insurance that wasn't available to them before. That progress is fueled—by hope.



FROM LEFT: PASCAL PERICH/CONTOUR/GETTY; ANDREW ECCLES

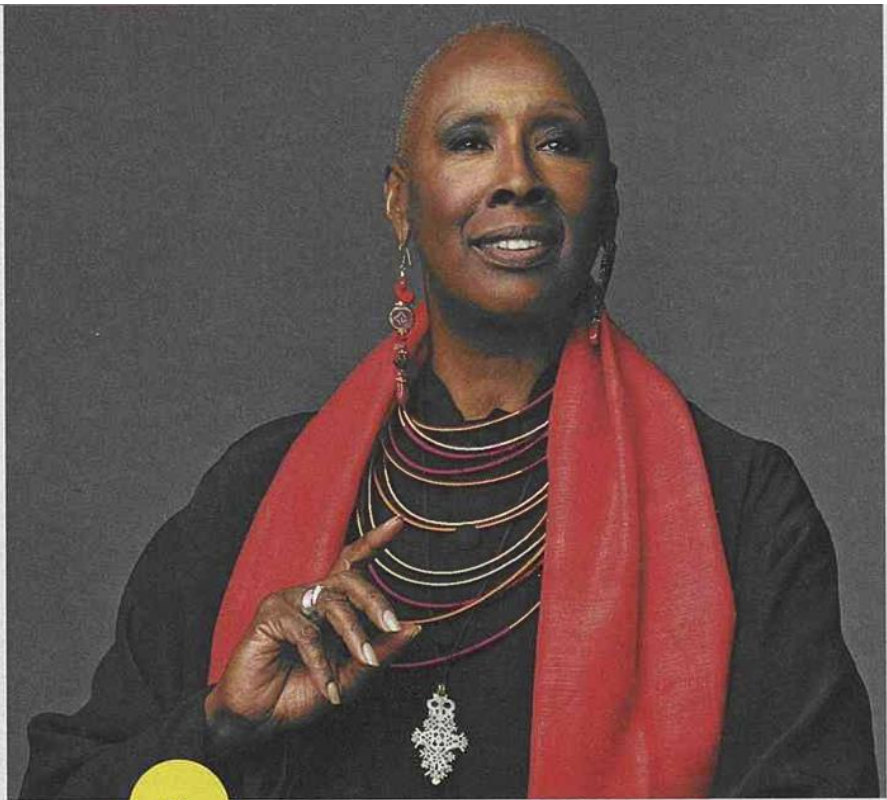
It's not fueled by fear. It's not fueled by cynicism. And this is maybe the most important thing: It's not dependent on one charismatic leader but, instead, depends on the steady efforts of dreamers and doers from every walk of life, who fight the good fight each and every day even when they're not noticed.

Six years ago, Lucy McBath's son was shot and killed in the parking lot of a gas station because the kids in the car were playing music too loud, apparently, and she turned her grief into hope and her hope into a seat in the next Congress, running unabashedly against the gun lobby in the great state of Georgia. She won.

And then there are the Parkland students. It hasn't even been a year since a mass shooting stole 17 lives at their school, but less than a month later those students had helped to raise the age to buy a rifle in Florida. They'd lengthened waiting periods before purchase. A couple of weeks after that, they'd inspired hundreds of thousands to march in the nation's capital and all across the country. And, of course, they haven't won every battle, but online, in the media, in the streets, on college campuses, they have become some of our most eloquent, effective voices against gun violence. And they are just getting started. Who knows what they're going to do once they can actually rent a car?

Ripples of hope. That's the legacy, that's the spirit, that Bobby Kennedy captured, standing on top of a beat-up car 50 years ago. Those are the descendants of the men and women and children who reached up into the sky, trying to get a touch of hope. ●

THE 44th president of the United States, Obama was awarded the Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Ripple of Hope Award on December 12. This is an excerpt from his speech, shared with Newsweek.



BY

JUDITH JAMISON

ONE OF THE MOST BEAUTIFUL things about art—and dance specifically—is that it brings people from all backgrounds, races and religions together. Alvin Ailey said, “Dance came to the people and should be given back to the people.” Ailey gave us works of timelessness and energy that hit you at a core level, in your soul, no matter where you’re coming from in the world, what language you speak or what political party you are with. At a time where there’s so much tension surrounding race, gender and politics, it’s important to have places where people can feel united in an experience that might not be their own. People who did not grow up understanding African-American hymns, rituals and baptisms, or what it meant to grow up in the South, can see a completely different perspective.

And for those who lived that history, it’s a full-circle moment.

In 1960, Ailey created a piece called “Revelations,” which the company has continued to perform ever since. It’s based on his blood memories, of growing up in the segregated South. At that time, the church was the hallmark of civilization for black people. The choreography in “Revelations” shows our humanity, that we are human, that we experience joy and pain. It’s triumphant too—no matter what you throw at African-Americans, we tackle it. We persevere. And that is a story everybody can relate to. ●

JAMISON is a dancer and choreographer who was director (1989 to 2011) and is now artistic director emerita of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, which celebrated its 60th anniversary in 2018.