

Opinion: On Cinco de Mayo, ponder the role of art in changing the world

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"If I take the Mother, must I not take the child?" (Benjamin Butler)

"There is no life without persuasion and peace." (Albert Camus)

"The world is no longer worthy of the word." (Javier Sicilia)

Although not the central actors in the events of their day, with these words, Union Maj. Gen. Benjamin Butler, the French writer and philosopher Albert Camus, and Mexican journalist and poet Javier Sicilia illuminated the problems of the human conscience. Upon hearing their words, world events -- a civil war, a crisis of the rule of law, a crisis of moral identity -- transcended their realities. In two events, the Civil War and World War II, their eloquence helped defeat the forces oppressing humanity.

The third event is ongoing. The primal scream arising from south of the border today is both tragic and audacious. It's essential on this Cinco de Mayo, a holiday invented in Civil War California, that we hear it. Mexico's beauty and strength, and our shared relationship, seems nearly extinct, like the indigenous jaguar of our common desert territory.

Cinco de Mayo presents an opportunity to ask: What is happening to us? When Americans dream of opportunity, what are we asking ourselves? How shall we respond to the new reality of our national population? The character of a nation may hinge on an illusion -- or, as one writer expressed, on the better angels of our nature.

Throughout history, common ground is discovered through the lens of the arts and the art of advocacy. Butler used these tools to achieve the vision of Camus: employ artistry to persuade, and achieve peace. After only one day at his post, he was confronted with a novel legal issue -- three escaped slaves arrived at his command seeking asylum. Under the fugitive slave laws, Butler was obligated to return the fugitives to their captors.

Butler, a lawyer, did not want to return the slaves. But he needed a rationale justifying his position, as he had no support in existing law. He needed to craft the argument in a

way that would win over public opinion. The general used his legal training and his eloquence to persuade his peers.

He argued that the fugitives were contraband – and therefore, not the property of the citizens of former states. But how did he win his argument and reveal the human rights issue? Here is the cadence of his winning advocacy: If I take the Mother, must I not take the child?

Today the cadence of the Mexican poet Javier Sicilia's final poem, dedicated to his son after the Mexican drug cartel's murder of the boy, transcends the brutal mendacity of this crime:

The world is no longer worthy of the word

They suffocated it inside us

Like you (they asphyxiated)

Like you

they slashed your lungs

And pain won't cleave from me

only a world is left "...

When society finds itself in crisis, we must all be artists, like the citizens of California in the 1860s. Their pioneer prose, music and cultural celebrations commemorated both Mexico's astounding victory over the French at Puebla on May 5, 1862, and the freedoms of 1776. These Civil War community revels became the nation's first Cinco de Mayo celebrations, and the sustained oratory accompanying these "freedom dances" served as a rallying cry for the territory's rejection of slavery and its entry into the Union as a free state. The "Southern Strategy" to spread slavery west was halted, in part, by a fiesta.

The arts then, and now, are a trusty catalyst of possibility. And new possibilities abound: Just the other day a rare and beautiful jaguar with piercing green eyes was photographed, not captured, by an American rancher in the border territory of Sonora.

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