

THE BYSTANDER —★—

I am the Light Lady

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Two days after the 2018 Midterm Election, a nationwide call was sent out by a coalition of political organizations to stage protests across the country over the firing of Recused Attorney General Jeff Sessions. There were events hosted in both Martinsburg and Shepherdstown. It was hard to decide which one to attend; I live closer to Martinsburg, but the proximity and charm of Shepherdstown won me over.

Shepherdstown, “one of Americas’ coolest small towns” according to their Visitors’ Center website, is the sort of spot you’d love to stage a protest in. Martinsburg, on the other hand, is just a cold place to stage a protest in, even if it’s the peaceful monthly vigil for a Black man who was shot 23 times by police there in 2013 and barely made the national news at the time.

All I could find to bring to the rally was a couple of strobe-style LED road flares, as if to alert others that an emergency--the country running off the road into a ditch, or a head-on collision with logic—was looming up ahead. I should have brought enough for the five-alarm crisis we are facing, but with just the two flares it was still satisfying to twirl them on my arms like a windmill.

The rally was pleasant and personable. About 100 of us milled around on the sidewalk as if it were a garden party. Then the speeches began. In an effort to rev up crowd participation, one of the organizers asked for people to speak. Evidently my strobe-waving arms made it appear, in the dark, that I was volunteering, although I was not. The organizer called out that “the Light Lady wants to speak.”

I began by introducing myself as a US Army veteran who writes regular Local Op-Ed Columns for the Martinsburg *Journal*. My message was simple; encourage people to submit Letters to the Editor to any local publication, just to balance out the opinion pages. The lack of enthusiasm was palpable. I heard a man shout “we don’t like the Martinsburg *Journal*” and someone

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else added “they won’t print our stuff.” Another voice yelled up to me “I can’t read that paper, I can’t get past the fluff on the front page.”

This is really the tale of two towns---one, a liberal enclave in a historic village, and the other, a working-class remnant of a historic industrial burg. One has a population of left-leaning professionals associated with a state university, the other has a population of left-over factory workers seeing their jobs disappear. One has beautifully maintained charming architecture and an artsy culture, the other has run-down charming architecture, empty storefronts, abandoned rusty mills, drug rehab centers, and a 28% poverty rate--double the national average. Both are in counties that are, as is the rest of West Virginia, deeply red since 2000.

They are 10 miles apart, but that distance is insignificant; they are worlds apart and seem to be satisfied with that. But what Martinsburg does have, along with six radio stations, is the only daily newspaper in the Eastern Panhandle. It’s an old-school paper like the world used to have before blogs, cable talk-shows and the wilds of Facebook. Like every small-town newspaper anywhere in America, the *Journal* is filled with DAR award ceremonies, queen crownings, harvest festivals, high-school sports and pie-throwing competitions—what you might call “puff pieces.” Once you add the editorials, syndicated and local, it’s probably going to look just like a “right-wing rag,” as many have told me the Martinsburg Journal is to them. Its circulation of 16,000 appears to be seldom purchased by residents of Shepherdstown, even though it’s filled with the latest updates on Rockwool, the pipeline, West Virginia politics, and AP articles that relate to environmental policies impacting the area.

And there lies the opportunity, wasted. Anyone can insert their voice into it, but because the politics may not be in line with their own, that ink is bequeathed to the people you’d least like to hear from. If you haven’t written letters to any small-town newspaper in this tristate region, your absence likely helped to give the control of thought to the folks who are dangerously close to being in control of this entire 50-state country.

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There's still a free press out there in places you might least expect it. And it might surprise you to know that many of these small-town papers employ professional journalists who are feeling just as threatened as you are. But if you're not reading a local paper because you don't agree with its apparent point of view, adding yours to it might just make you like it better. Believe me, there are people out there who want to hear from you, badly. And that likely starts with the news staff.

After seven years in the Army, plus four years of travel to US Military bases both overseas and stateside while touring with a USO band during the height of the Iraq War, I'm accustomed to living "in the belly of the beast." In many ways, it's better than "preaching to the choir." You speak not to debate or discuss, but to remind yourself, and others, of who you are. You speak not to convince or persuade, but to practice standing your ground. It's only difficult to do if you expect peace and understanding as the response. And it's only difficult to do if you expect yourself to deliver a flawless manifesto of political policy at the spur of every moment, able to win every argument hands-down, with applause. To participate in a protest in a place like Martinsburg, or to submit letters to its newspaper, reminds the "other side" that you are there, unbowed.

But back to those post-midterm protests. It was fun being the "Light Lady" for an evening, but it would have been better to have gone where voices were really needed. The event in Martinsburg had only three participants.

And the well-attended rally in Shepherdstown? It was the front-page color photo and headline of the Martinsburg *Journal* the next morning.