

## MY VIEW JAIMA CHEVALIER

### Reckoning for Plaza needed before we ‘move on’

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My mother taught at the Santa Fe Indian School, then at Española High. On a teacher’s salary, she couldn’t afford art produced by school friends, so she collected miniatures instead — like a clay skunk from Taos Pueblo or milagros imported by the Hernandez family. Cochiti Pueblo feast days and Spanish matanzas were highlights of the family calendar, and my most precious memories of people in and around the Ancient City seemed to emanate — in the genteel poverty of our home — from these tiny treasures on the mantle. Flashes of reflected light from flakes of micaceous clay in tiny pots or mirrored distortions in milagros formed from pot metal stimulated in me a resonance of my deepest feelings with the artistic expressions of cultures other than the one into which I was born.

My childhood in sleepy Santa Fe centered on the Plaza, at a time when locals would meander downtown after dinner, leaving their homes unlocked and their car keys dangling from the dashboard. In high school, we’d cruise the Plaza, clueless about the deep well of history beneath the asphalt and brick we circled over endlessly. The Soldiers Monument, or the obelisk, towered over us and pierced the sky with echos of Grecian or Egyptian grandeur that added to the murky haze surrounding Santa Fe’s curious amalgam of legend and myth.

Coming shamefully late to an understanding of the Plaza’s past as a place of emergence for the cultures that came before, I learned about O’Ga’P’Ogeh Owingeh, and its cluster of ancient rooms under the the Palace of the Governors; the Pueblo Revolt; public hangings and gun fights that took place on the Plaza; the nearby Potter’s Field for indigent burials; and even a famous decapitation. As I learned more, the sad truths of our checkered past began to crowd out naive imaginings of my birthplace.

Our community’s obsession over the now-missing obelisk reveals a recurring refrain in the public discourse: We should “just move on” because the offensive word “savages” had been chiseled off, and the obelisk should be re-erected. But is this really true? If there’s no act of contrition for the sins of the past, no petition for forgiveness, no remorse expressed for the crimes of long ago, there is no atonement.

Suppressing memories of the past does not remove the stains and horrors of Cambodia’s killing fields, the My Lai Massacre, Auschwitz, Wounded Knee, Kosovo and so on — these places will always be haunted by the facts of their existence, no matter how many monuments are erected to sanitize or obscure their true histories.

I fear for our common ground; it can never be found in a monument or a survey marker. It is fixed only to that secret map in our hearts where we record memory and purpose.

If a simple geometrical object is to define the core of our communal spirituality, if we ever hope to regain togetherness, we must find a way to honor this treaty between all hearts — that we apologize for the sins of the past, that we are one people, and that we make a community based on common purpose. If we fail to make ritual of righting a wrong, if we continue to ignore the sad aspects of a monument that once graced the Plaza — old truths from the graves of the forgotten will haunt these grounds forever.

If we continue to let discord flourish, discord will stand for our past, and, the Santa Fe of myth and memory was never meant to be, consigned to the dustbin of history along with the trinkets of childhood.