

On Life and Meaning

MARK PERES

Episode 38 – Toussaint Romain – Between the Lines

The Man in the White Shirt

And now a personal word,

When I sat down to talk with Toussaint, he surprised me. I had prepared to ask him questions about his work as a public defender: the clients he represented, the cases he managed, what his day looked like, what he loved about the work. Just before I turned the microphones on, Toussaint said, ‘I’m not a public defender anymore. I just resigned. I’m running for office to become District Attorney. I’m announcing this afternoon.’

I did not see that coming. Toussaint had consistently been on the record of not being interested in public office. I had a scoop on my hands. I was the first person outside his inner circle to know officially that he was running for office. He had not yet sent out his first tweet about his candidacy or had his first public gathering. I wouldn’t be the one to break the news as this podcast would broadcast a week after our conversation, and it wasn’t my news to share, it was his news to declare on his own terms. But it felt good to record his first public response to why he wanted to become District Attorney and what qualified him for the role.

The second thought I had was I felt I was crossing suddenly into news journalism. I don’t think of myself as a reporter. I just record conversations with people who interest me. Toussaint was now a guest of this podcast in the midst of a race for public office. What was my responsibility? What responsibility did I have to share this platform with his opponent? The answer is I extended an invitation to the current District Attorney because I am interested in him too. As a person. Less as a candidate. He said yes and I look forward to my conversation with him.

When I think of Toussaint so many other thoughts come to mind: the many instances when he stepped into the breach of public protest, his instinct to keep the peace, his having his feet on both sides of the line. What compels someone toward danger? What compels someone to risk harm to themselves for the public good? Toussaint answered these questions: he sees himself as uniquely qualified to bridge differences. He feels an obligation to lead.

One event can change lives. CNN recorded him trying to stop violence between police in riot gear and protestors in a fast-moving street protest in response to the shooting of Keith Lamont Scott, an African American citizen killed by a Charlotte-Mecklenburg

police officer. Toussaint became famous that night: 'the man in the white shirt.' Who is he? What is he doing? What is his story? News reporters and magazine writers closed in. Toussaint became a hero. A good guy in the midst of chaos. The humanitarian awards soon followed.

Toussaint deserves the recognition. He responded to a moment of crisis with courage, but his heroism goes far beyond one night. His life is devoted to justice. He has worked for 20 years to create community change. The sense of calling is strong in him. The question now is what happens next.

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