



WINDY CITY TIMES

'Culture worrier' Clarence Page reflects on 50 years of change
Special to the online edition of Windy City Times
 by Gretchen Rachel Blickensderfer
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Clarence Page



On Oct. 26, 1960, then-presidential candidate Richard M Nixon made a campaign stop at a Middletown, Ohio, railway station. "When you elect a congressman or a senator, let's not think only of just our own little problems, but remember what happens to America is going to affect you," he said before suddenly switching gears. "Now, let me put it very bluntly, let's think for a moment, if I may, of those boys over there on that platform."

But among them, one 13-year-old boy wasn't paying the slightest bit of notice to him. Clarence Page was instead fixated on the circus full of reporters who had poured out of Nixon's train with press passes around their necks.

Three years later, Page set out to get one of his own. In the introduction to his latest book, *Culture Worrier: Reflections on Race, Politics and Social Change*, that was released last month, the two-time Pulitzer Prize winner wrote, "Looking back as a journalist, I feel blessed to be tasked with deciphering interesting times."

Since his career began, more than half a century of the world's interesting times have unfolded before him. As one of this country's most accomplished and celebrated observers of moments both turbulent and temperate on a local, national and international stage, Page's nationally syndicated columns range from whimsical to outright damning opinions of current events, popular culture, political and social issues. His book is the first collection of 30 years of that commentary—from 1984 to 2014. While not chronologically ordered, Page's columns form a tapestry of U.S. culture woven through perceptions steeped in the keen sense of irony naturally bequeathed to Page as one of history's most eloquent witnesses.

"I have seen same-sex marriage denounced by some as a threat to the institution of marriage," he continued in the introduction, "even as same-sex couples are the only group whose marriage rates in America have been going up."

Page told *Windy City Times* that he was unexpectedly surprised and encouraged at the rate at which acceptance of LGBTQ issues such as marriage equality evolved in the United States despite the furiously archaic and often illogical anti-gay propaganda of its opponents. "It has been gratifying to me," he said. "One of my good friends, Bill Sievert, and I were college roommates and he was editor of our campus paper at Ohio University in our senior year. The Stonewall Riots happened that summer after we graduated and Bill came out of the closet within a year or less. He moved to San Francisco and hooked up with a partner that he is still with after some 44 years. Of course, only recently they were finally allowed to legally marry."

Sievert himself has become an iconic journalist covering LGBTQ news and culture. In 2010, he published *Sawdust Confessions*—a book *Lambda Literary* reviewer Amos Lassen ranked among the "queerest [and] craziest I have ever read."

In countering those who would proclaim that his friend's same sex wedding is destroying an institution, Page points out that Sievert and his partner have been together longer than any other marriage from the 1969 graduating class of college newspaper staff. "The whole argument that it is going to 'ruin marriage' or that 'we've got to save marriage' is irrational," he said. "There's no evidence to support it and there's no mechanism by which you can describe how expanding marriage rights is going to destroy it. The argument itself has died of its own weaknesses and nothing has replaced it."

Page added that he has found the fight for marriage equality to be educational. "It gives me hope for other reforms when we see that the public can learn valuable lessons," he said. In quoting civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., he added that "the arc of the universe is long, but it bends towards justice."

In 1963—while Page had begun writing for his high school news paper with the encouragement of a teacher named Mary Kindell (now 100 years old)—King was fighting against segregation 500 miles south in Alabama. Birmingham police chief Bull Connor arrested King, filled his jails to capacity with protestors and turned the full

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force of fire hoses, police dogs and batons on their children. Less than three weeks after King led the March on Washington and declared "we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream", a bomb planted by the Ku Klux Klan at the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham killed four young girls. In the aftermath of the attack, President John F. Kennedy said that he hoped "these cruel and tragic events can only awaken this entire nation to a realization of the folly of racial injustice and hatred and violence." His own life was taken a little over two months later.

While Page's work was born out of one of the most tumultuous years in the struggle for civil rights, he shakes his head at declarations such as those made at the annual meeting of the Southern Baptists Convention in 2012 which railed against same sex marriage as a civil rights issue. "For years—gently among my fellow African Americans—I have pointed out that if you're an oppressed group, to get into questions about who is more oppressed is not useful," he said.

Page himself persevered through his own adaptation of King's hope for the future. "I came into journalism thinking this was a route where I would be judged not by the color of my skin, but the content of my copy," he asserted. "But I didn't know if I was going to get hired by any major newspapers or TV stations."

Just before Los Angeles' Watts riots of 1965, his grandmother told Page to prepare himself in case the "doors of opportunity should open up." By the time he had completed college and an internship at the Dayton Journal Herald, he had five job offers.

One of those offers took him to the Chicago Tribune. "I was surrounded by people who had come to Chicago for the same reasons I had," he remembered. "They wanted to be the best journalists in the world and Chicago was the best journalism town."

Page was also on a mission "to rescue Chicagoans from a dictatorial Mayor [Richard J.] Daley. But I got into the neighborhoods and mingled with the folks there and I was astonished at just how much people loved him," he said.

Page was selected to go undercover at a polling station during the 1972 primaries. The multifaceted and exhaustive series of reports compiled by a task force of both fledgling and seasoned investigative journalists like George Bliss and Pam Zekman helped garner Page both his first Pulitzer Prize and an education in grassroots Chicago politics. "The most benevolent administrations can be the most corrupt," he said, "and corner-cutting is part of that culture."

Page began work as a columnist in 1984—the same year scientists in the United States and France identified the retrovirus HIV. An editorial piece Page wrote four years later slammed a legislative effort in the Illinois General Assembly that would have given dentists free rein to discriminate against patients with the AIDS virus. "In a sense, the sponsors of this deplorable legislation, which whisked through the committee by a 13-4 vote after only a few minutes of testimony were allowed is the moral equivalent of the vandals who burned an Arcadia, Fla., family out of their home because their three hemophiliac children have the AIDS virus," he wrote. It was one of 10 columns that earned Page his second Pulitzer.

"I realized that this was how a lot of white people reacted to the black civil rights movement when it came along or the women's movement," he recalled. "I will always be grateful to journalism for helping to open my eyes in a lot of ways."

Thus, with his eyes open while others were squeezed shut in contented ignorance, Page joined those predicting that the African American community would eventually become disproportionately affected by HIV—today accounting for 44 percent of new infections among people over the age of 13 according to the latest figures from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"It was obvious that those services that helped people to avoid AIDS or to be able to treat it were more available to folks who had money and access than to those who didn't," he said. "It's like with the Ebola discussions [today]—you might want to ignore it as an 'Africa problem' but the next thing you know, it's going to be right here. Nothing in today's world can be isolated to any one community. It benefits everybody to help those communities that are most in need."

Page has watched the world of his profession expand and dramatically change from those days when he took his first steps into the old school of journalism taught by Kindell that "put the story first, not your egos." The rise of sensationalistic "click-bait" reporting on the internet and cable and network news outlets driven by a kindred need to terrify the public into watching raises questions about the integrity of the business.

"These are not new questions," Page said, referring to the days 120 years ago of "yellow journalism" when a battle for readers between William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer resulted in deliberately panicked headlines and disconcerting hyperbole. "When I was in school, we happily vowed to care more about the substance than the headline. Yet [today] I know my column is going reach a lot fewer people if I don't have a click-bait headline of some kind, so my challenge is to try to be exciting without distorting what the news is. The public has many more choices now and the competition is fierce for their eyeballs but, to me, it's really energizing because I know I am competing for the public's time so I want to be the best journalist possible."

In that regard, despite the half-century of cultural upheaval, revolution, wars, fortunes and absurdities that Page has documented, for the man who calls himself a "culture worrier," nothing has changed.

On Oct. 22, Page will be discussing his newest book, "Culture Worrier, Selected Columns 1984 — 2014, Reflections on Race, Politics and Social Change" at the Union League Club, joined by Bruce Dold, editorial page editor of the Chicago Tribune, during a luncheon presented by Printers Row and the Union League Club. Copies of Page's book will be available for sale, and he will sign books following the discussion.



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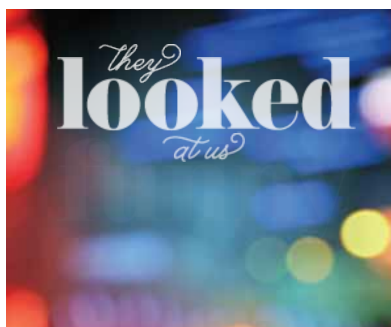
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