

LET IT BEGIN WITH ME

Beth Eichel

In October, my husband Berk and I went to South Carolina. Our first week was spent in Charleston where Berk presented some of his ideas on sinus surgery to the residents at the University of South Carolina Medical Center.

While we were there we stayed as some of the very first visitors in the Embassy Suites, formerly the Citadel.

We have read every book that Pat Conroy has written and both of us looked forward to this trip. Also, some of my ancestors are from North Carolina and according to my mother, a member of DAR, some of them fought for the North and some of them for the South – brother against brother in a couple of the families.

As a young girl, growing up with somewhat Southern roots, I saw *Gone With The Wind* several times and loved the idea of living on a plantation and being pampered.

However, while writing *Porches*, a musical-drama, with Dr. Louise Midget, an educator and a woman of color, my vision of the South changed. I was able to see the price that people of color paid to keep up those beautiful plantations and take care of those beautiful people.

For those of you who didn't see *Porches* when it was presented at St. Luke's as a benefit for the South Coast Ecumenical Council's Good Samaritan Counseling Center, here is a simple synopsis of the musical drama.

Two middle-aged women, one white and one black, meet on a porch at a women's retreat on forgiveness. One of them has heard about the other woman. Both of them are seeking healing. As they begin to know more about each other, they see all that they have in common and all of the things that keep them apart. Two of the many songs we wrote, "Different on the Outside" and "When Will We Laugh?", resound in my head.

Actually, the stereotype of the white woman Elizabeth in *Porches* came from my own upbringing. I grew up in an all white, Protestant farming community in Oklahoma and when I go home to visit my folks, I see that nothing has changed. It is still an all white, Protestant farming community, but smaller. Many of my generation left. We knew something was missing and we felt stifled.

My cousin Donna told me a story about something that happened to her as a child when she was at our Grandmother Watson's house one day. Maybe it will show you how it was. A neighbor came over and said to Donna, "Donna Mae, if you

would like to see a Catholic, there's one sitting on Mrs. Jones' front steps." Donna went running out to see this strange sight. As she got to the house, she slowed down. Sitting on the front steps was another little girl, about Donna's age. Donna looked around and didn't see anyone else. She stopped and slowly walked back. "That day I felt this feeling in the pit of my stomach that something wasn't right," she said.

I felt that feeling in the pit of my stomach when I looked at the slave auction house, the slave quarters and the evidence of the grandeur of the South in Charleston.

Back in our room at the Citadel/Embassy Suites, I journaled about these feelings and one of the results is the poem "Charleston" below. I gave a copy to Louise and she said, "You've got to put this in *The Sign of Jonah*."

That was before Christmas. A couple of nights ago Berk and I went to see *The Ghosts of Mississippi* and the horrors of the past came back. We were disappointed that after seeing this movie about a true story that we knew nothing more about Medgar Evers. He was an incredible courageous man fighting for what he already deserved -- equality, dignity, peace -- and much of what he fought for seems to still be lacking for a large segment of the black community.

One of the songs that tugs at my heart is "Let There Be Peace On Earth." I often sit at my piano and play it and sing it. It frequently makes me cry. How can peace begin with me? L.A. feels like a city of Babel.

This is a new year. I don't really make New Year's resolutions anymore. However, by looking at the past I can see how much my attitudes have changed. We have lived in this community for almost thirty years and L.A. has changed, too.

The beautiful city I still love is not the safe refuge it used to be. Children are addicted to drugs. Some carry guns. Some of them live in poverty and despair and anger. Maybe we are different on the outside, but we are so much alike inside. Will we ever be able to sit on *Porches* again and feel truly safe?

Helen Keller said something to the effect, "I can't do everything, but I can do one thing. I will do that one thing" -- and I wonder is *Porches* my one and only thing? I hope not. After all, as Scarlet O'Hara said, "Tomorrow is another day!" And, this is a new year. Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me and you and each of us at St. Luke's.

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CHARLESTON

*The shackles of the past seem gone,
The quarters of the slaves torn down.
Plantation homes still linger on
And some of them museums, now...*

*With hostesses who still spin yarns
About the grandeur of the rooms,
And of the people who lived there
With gardens of magnolia blooms.*

*The bus loads and the carriages
Slow down the traffic on the street
And all the people passing by
Are mesmerized by life so sweet.*

*I listen as I walk and watch
And hear the voices of this place,
That sometime seem to call to me...
"Injustice in this human race!"*

*Moss covered oaks and mansions rare
Invite us in, "please take a chair."
And I'd be tempted to sit down
And leave another life and town.
And I would rock upon a porch
And drink iced tea or lemonade
And maybe then I would forget
Who paid for this? Who was afraid?
Oh, I am torn by Southern roots
And skin as white as it can be
While praying, "Can I make amends
For deeds done by someone like me?"*

*Oh, precious dark skinned friend of mine,
When will you be free at last?
What can I do? What can I say?
I know I cannot change the past.*

Ruth Eichel