



MY WEEK

Alvin Hall



‘Great words, like great art, never lose their power’

I have been reading some highly recommended books about social justice (*Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson, *Stamped From the Beginning* by Ibram X Kendi, *White Rage* by Carol Anderson) and re-reading others (*The Fire Next Time* by James Baldwin). Many passages have made me stop and reflect on the America in which I was born and raised and on the America in which I live today. It's not just the difference between being born in a fairly isolated, small rural Southern community and now living in the centre of the Big Apple. It's what I've seen and experienced during my lifetime. The books are making me realise how much I, along with many African Americans of my generation, lived this history. It's more than ink on a page.

Reading about it is upsetting but also reassuring. To see my experiences, my truths on the printed

pages of a book makes them feel more permanent, more substantial than stories, however eloquent, passed down by word of mouth.

What continues to surprise is how this accumulation of knowledge affects me – changing my perceptions and my perspectives. At the most unexpected times, the depth of the changes emerges and nearly overwhelms me.

During a panel discussion on Zoom recently, I began talking about *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried*, a powerful artwork by Carrie Mae Weems. I first saw the work around 1995. I can still recall the visceral, knowing feeling of encountering historical and emotional truths brilliantly captured by Carrie in the images and text sandblasted onto the glass of each photograph.

At the beginning and end of the series of 33 photographs, two large, blue-tone, rectangular photographs of the same African woman in profile face each other. On the glass of the first photograph, facing right, are sandblasted the words: “From Here I Saw What Happened” and on the last photograph, facing left are the words: “And I Cried”. Between these bookends, close to 30 round, deep-red-toned, often not easy to look at, historical photographs have sandblasted text that forms a

powerful narrative about the black experience in America. When I saw this work, I knew I wanted a more intimate connection; I bought four of the photographs, including the first and last images.

Great words, like great artworks, never lose their power. They transcend time and place. The words' import, message and relevance will shift or expand as the viewer's knowledge and experience change. The words of John Lewis, the recently deceased Civil Rights hero and US Representative from Georgia, sparked such a moment for me. “It was so painful. It made me cry,” he said during a television interview about the video of the police officer kneeling on George Floyd's neck.

I'd heard these words before. I had read them. But when I said the title of Carrie's artwork on Zoom, her words suddenly changed for me. They became biographical, an encapsulation of John Lewis' experience, everyone's experience who saw the video, and the experiences contained in many of the books I'd been reading. And then unexpectedly, the words became autobiographical. They spoke of my experience. From my apartment on Madison Avenue, I saw what happened in Minneapolis, and I cried. I heard my voice begin to break.

When the interview ended, I went into my living room, pulled up a chair and sat in front of Carrie's work – to look at the images, to read her text, to recall Lewis' words, to think about what I had been reading. Carrie's words, although written about the past, were relevant now – their meanings expanded and even more profound.

The shock made me sit still, holding my stomach for a while. I could feel all the realisations and connections swirling inside me, making me well up. Now, every time I pick up one of the books I'm reading or walk into the living room where Carrie's work is installed, I am reminded of the transformative power of art and words together.

MY GREEN HEAVEN

“You're so lucky to have outdoor space!” My friends say this often about my 14th-floor, modest terrace, just two steps up from my study where I work most days. True, the terrace has allowed me moments of relaxation, reflection, even contentment, especially in lockdown. A few times I even put down my yoga mat and did my daily stretching exercises out there.

To be honest, I often chuckle quietly at my friends' comment. Luck had little or nothing to do with it. Determination and knowing myself did.

I was born and raised in Florida Panhandle, surrounded by acres of wild forest in which I freely wandered. While I love living in the city now, I know how reaffirming and reassuring it is for me to be able to see, smell, hear and feel nature. So, when I was looking for my ideal apartment I stubbornly held out until I found one with a terrace on which I could create my own bijou forest.

Nearly every morning from spring to autumn I am on my terrace, having coffee, reading, taking in the verdant lushness. During the early part of lockdown, the perennials seemed to push through the soil in their planters with unexpected vigour. Was this an unusual year? Were the plants always so many different shades of green? And were there always so many small insects? One day it dawned on me: I haven't been in my apartment or on my terrace for this many consecutive days since I bought the place more than two decades ago.