



Fall 2020

Ignoring the Cries of The People

Albert Sterner '24

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/firstyear_summer

Recommended Citation

Sterner '24, Albert, "Ignoring the Cries of The People" (2020). *First-Year Summer Reading Program Essay Contest*. 19.

https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/firstyear_summer/19

This Article is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by Digital Commons @ IWU with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this material in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/ or on the work itself. This material has been accepted for inclusion by faculty at Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@iwu.edu.

©Copyright is owned by the author of this document.

Albert Sterner

Ignoring the Cries of The People

Denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance. The five stages of grief have become almost colloquial in modern day society. Everyone deals with grief in their own way, some skip right to depression, while others dwell in a state of rage for years, and others may never reach acceptance. When dealing with grief, or crisis, humans process their situations in a myriad of ways, so they form factions. This same factionalization occurs when you expand that scale of crisis to a national level; factions emerge, and these factions all deal with grief differently.

In “What the Eyes Don’t See” the factions that emerge are twofold: Those like Mona Hanna-Attisha, Senator Ananich, and Elin Betanzo who actively fight against systemic environmental violence, have reached acceptance, and are ready to change the system; and those who remain in a state of denial and stay silent in the face of oppression, like members of the EPA, who knowingly allowed Flint’s infrastructure to fall into disrepair, or those, like Mayor Dayne Walling, who unknowingly put hundreds of thousands of lives in danger by changing the water supply. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we see these same two factions: those who have accepted; and those who are in denial and perpetuate systemic violence. In other words, the activists, and the perpetrators. Those who grieve, and those who cause grief. COVID-19 and the Flint water crisis stem from the same problems at their core; austerity measures in an urban environment that led to a breakdown in infrastructure, and Government denial.

Starting with austerity measures, these are put in place to undercut government spending in order to decrease the deficit spending of a municipality, thus decreasing their debt. In 2012,

the Michigan Legislature passed the “Local Financial Stability and Choice Act,” which pointed out that “the health, safety, and welfare of the citizens of this state would be materially and adversely affected by the insolvency of local governments. And the fiscal accountability of local governments is vitally necessary to the interests of this state.” Essentially saying that the government believed extravagant spending of Michigan negatively impacted the health and welfare of its citizens. The bill also stated that above all it is “vitally necessary to protect the credit of this state and its political subdivisions” and incredibly important to assist the government “in a financial emergency so as to remedy the financial emergency by requiring prudent fiscal management.” What this led to was a complete breakdown of spending on infrastructure that still persists today. For perspective, according to Bridge Michigan, a non-profit and non-partisan organization, Michigan is \$4 Billion dollars short on infrastructure spending. And over the course of the next 20 years they will have an unmet need of \$16 billion for sewage and water treatment, \$500 million for water and sewage emergency responses and \$200 million dollar unmet need for rural drinking water/wastewater infrastructure. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the Trump administration gutted multi-million dollar pandemic prevention teams, and cut staff from the department of Health and Human services. The cutting of funds, austerity measures, are directly responsible for how America is crying out in pain. Throughout “What the Eyes Don’t See,” Hanna-Attisha is well aware of what the government can do to its citizens. She describes her immigrant family and having witnessed the gas attacks by Saddam Hussein on his own people. These austerity measures actively hurt Michigan’s own citizens just as Hussein’s gas attacks. In terms of systemic violence, infrastructure is used to negatively

impact United States citizens in the worst ways imaginable. The Government that is sworn to protect their people, is poisoning them.

In “What the Eyes Don’t See,” Hanna addresses the lack of Government action, and even a cover up in the wake of the Washington D.C water crisis and the Safe Drinking Water Act. When a colleague brought up their findings of lead in the water at a point of 1250 ppb, a level of hazardous waste, to WASA, he was stripped of his fundings and told to stop research. Similar events happened to Hann-Attisha when contacting the Mayor of Flint, in which a deadline for action passed without cooperation from the Mayor for action. With the COVID-19 pandemic, similar efforts are currently being made by the government to suppress information. This can be seen with the Trump administration ordering information about the virus to stop being sent to the CDC, or with the Trump administration ordering the CDC to underrepresent the deaths of COVID patients. The effect is the same as in Flint. When governments fail to act, and when funding is absent, the people suffer.

In “What the Eyes Don’t See,” Mona Hanna-Attisha stresses the importance of holding one's government accountable. A lack of infrastructure, and funding on the government’s part has led to both local crises like that in flint Michigan, and international pandemics, like COVID-19. It is no longer an option for governments to take a passive stance in fighting oppression of their citizens. The United States Government can not remain in a state of denial. It must grieve with its people, so it can finally reach acceptance; to begin fighting with its people and not against them.