

As 2007 slips into oblivion....

As we are about to bid adieu to another year in our lives, I'm trying to get a perspective of some sort on the months gone by. The year 2007 was not a whole lot different from 2006 or the years before that. And yet much happened in 2007; most of the times, though, many a things didn't stir us at all. The news of war in Afghanistan and Iraq has already turned stale and hardly anybody pays attention anymore. The much-awaited and cavernously-anticipated Tony-nominated choreography based on the Attorney General fiasco turned out to be no brainer after all the hoopla. As usual, the lilting tapes of Bin Laden and Zawahiri that were released at a frequency higher than expected, didn't quite make to the billboard charts, except that they were viewed by the Homeland Security folks in the shade of 'orange' rather than 'yellow' or 'green'. The bizarre burglary orchestrated by OJ to retrieve his personal memorabilia that he thought he had donated or sold (or whatever) after the violent death of his wife Nicole, did spice up the otherwise dull life of the ET and Extra viewers, just a little bit; nobody else in the nation paid any attention.

Yet, some news items jolted us out of our comfortable slumber zone. Jena 6 was one of the rarities; an otherwise below-the-radar episode that became an international phenomenon. Six black teenagers, a white tree and a noose. Like the apices of a triangle, this was a formidable combination of powerful

symbolism. The boys symbolized a vibrant African heritage, unfortunately marred for times unknown with the 'N' word adage by the ignorant amidst us. The tree - a beautiful old Southern oak with outspread boughs offering a haven of cool shade in the center of the High School courtyard - symbolized the beauty and kindness of nature that knows only to give. And then there was the notorious noose.

Everyone (even an immigrant like me) knows what a noose means, especially when it is hanging predominantly in front of black folks. For them, noose is a powerful symbol that invokes the history of lynching in a supposedly bygone era. The supremacy of the modern-day America - the most powerful country on the face of this planet and a beacon of freedom - is intertwined with its ugly past of slavery and savage lynching that occurred for about two-and-a-half centuries (246 years to be exact).

Little we know about symbols or their power. While some symbols are of strong historic connotation, some are ingrained in our psyche and soul. Some become part of our lives. Take the symbols of stripes and stars on our flag. In decades gone by, people have made ultimate sacrifices for them and what they symbolize; thousands are still doing it everyday, several continents and countries away. Most of the times, when symbols are slighted, raw nerves are touched. Something deep within us bordering on our humanity

or religiosity or both, is molested. It is common knowledge that for weeks and months following the 9/11 attacks, small school children shied away from drawing pictures of airplanes, because they symbolized death and destruction.

If you think about it, a cross, a swastika or a noose are mere simple geometric shapes and symbols. But are they really, when we see them burned or painted on the walls of a Jewish synagogue or dangled in front of an African-American?

In the wake of the resurgence of neo-Nazism on one hand and the militant extremism in the name of Islam on the other, the last thing we need is a new threat code. Intolerance is no substitute to coexistence. This great country of ours is called the finest melting pot on this planet for nothing. But it seems that lately the pot is simmering, beginning to froth at its rim and is showing the signs of a boiling spill. This should worry us lest it forms a noose and hangs everyone. Too bad, it wouldn't matter how many trees we fell then.

I don't intend to end this essay on a depressing note, though. I think the best story of the year was the one not about the husband of the retired Supreme Court Chief Justice, Sandra Day O'Connor, who is suffering from Alzheimer's. But what touched us all to the core and lifted our spirit was Mrs. O'Connor's exemplary magnanimity and graciousness in accepting that Mr.

John O'Connor is romantically involved with another woman patient at the same facility. Just imagine, she took an early retirement last year from the bench to care for her ailing husband! This sounds like a page of devotion, understanding, selflessness and acceptance, straight out of the Scripture, ordinarily ascribed to the saints and prophets only.

Truly, it would take a woman of Mother Teresa's stature and strength of Titan who after 55 odd years of married life could take comfort in knowing that her husband is happy in some other woman's company. This is simply not a story of moral strength and strong character; this is a legend of faith that transcends all obstacles. I for one intend to begin the New Year on that note of faith.

Who says there is no God? Or, that He is only the God of wrath and destruction and not the God of compassion? To believe that He did create us in His reflection, all one needs to do is to look at Lady O'Connor. A bit ironic though; she has been handed down the harshest verdict of her life and is totally content with it! But then again, only a woman could have had the courage to meet such a daunting challenge, look it in the eye and subdue it.

On the bench, she championed the law. Out of it, she is telling the real story of life. We all - men included - ought to listen.