The Definition of the American Spirit

The Story of Maya Lin

An excerpt from YOU’RE A GRAND OLD FLAG: STORIES OF THE AMERICAN SPIRIT
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From: YOU’RE A GRAND OLD FLAG:
STORIES OF THE AMERICAN SPIRIT

By: Bette Lou Higgins

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What defines the “American Spirit?” Is it Yankee Ingenuity? Is it Patriotism? Is it the concern for Civil Rights and Freedom? Is it all of this?

Whatever it is, Maya Lin is an artist who has put that spirit into form with public monuments that are tributes to the American Spirit. Lin, of Athens, Ohio, is the sculptor of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and The Civil Rights Memorial. Both of these pieces are as controversial as the events for which they stand.

When Maya was a student at Yale, she heard about a design competition sponsored by the Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial Fund which wanted to create a memorial to honor those who had served in the Vietnam War when a professor assigned the design as a class project. So in November, 1980 she traveled to the proposed site in Washington DC in the Constitution Gardens on the National Mall. Maya took pictures of the area and the design began to take shape. She “thought about what death is and what a loss is -- a sharp pain that lessens with time but can never quite heal over. A scar. The idea occurred to me there on the site.” Envisioning a rift in the earth with “... the memorial going into the ground, then emerging from it, symbolizing death and calling for remembrance.” Lin said, “I had an impulse to cut open the earth...an initial violence that in time would heal. The grass would grow back, but the cut would remain, a pure, flat surface, like a geode when you cut into it and polish the edge...[It] was as if the black-brown earth were polished and made into an interface between the sunny world and the quiet, dark world beyond, that we can’t enter.”

Maya’s gash in the earth became two walls, each over 245 feet long. They were made of highly polished black granite and formed a wide angled V. One end pointed to the Washington Monument and the other pointed to the Lincoln Memorial. The ground rises up to meet the top of the walls in the back and dips down in front before rising back up and creating an amphitheater. In the center, the walls are 10 feet high and gradually taper off to eight inches at each end. The names of over 58,000 Vietnam veterans and those who were Missing In Action are carved in gold on the walls in chronological order.

In May, 1981 Lin’s student entry had beaten out 1,420 entries by nationally famous professionals and had taken the top prize of $20,000.

Soon Maya’s Memorial became as controversial as the Vietnam War itself. Critics called it “a degrading ditch”, a “black gash of shame and sorrow”, and “a black scar – black the universal color of sorrow and shame and degradation in all races and societies worldwide.”

After many public hearings over the design, a compromise was reached. A more traditional sculpture showing three servicemen would be placed near the memorial. Though Lin was not happy with the addition of the sculpture, she did not abandon the Memorial and her efforts were not in vain. When the Memorial was dedicated on Veterans’ Day in November, 1982, thousands of veterans
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came into Washington and the Wall was greeted with immediate acclaim. The atmosphere around the Wall was quiet, poignant and contemplative, evoking deep emotions in all who saw it. Veterans and their families cried along with the journalists standing nearby. Eventually it became clear that the Wall had the power to heal with reconciliation and remembrance and Lin’s critics were silenced like those who stood in front of the massive wall of names.

One would not be surprised if, after all the turmoil that Maya went through to bring the Vietnam Memorial to fruition, she felt her own spirit drowned out. But she went on to memorialize another part of the true American Spirit with her Civil Rights Memorial.

The Southern Poverty Law Center of Montgomery, Alabama was founded to protect the rights of poor people and minorities and to fight racist and discriminatory activities. They decided to build a memorial to the civil rights movement at their headquarters and they thought of Maya Lin. In 1988, Maya flew down to Montgomery to view the site. On the plane ride down, she was reading the words of Dr. Martin Luther King. One passage was taken from the book of Amos, “We will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream.” She knew at that moment that the Memorial would have to be about water and suddenly the whole form took shape. She wanted to create a time line of the movement’s major events and its individual deaths. These events would show how peoples’ lives influence history and how the deaths made things better. She envisioned the memorial in two parts of black granite, surrounded by a plaza of white granite. At the back would be a highly polished black wall with gold lettering: ... until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream. – Martin Luther King. A steady stream of water spills down over the words. In the foreground, a disk or table of black granite would sit on a base that narrows down to only 20 inches across, which would make the table top look like it was floating in space. Water seeps out from the center of the table and flows over the words to encourage people to touch the names.

Lin describes it, “The water is as slow as I could get it. It remains very still until you touch it. Your hand causes ripples, which transform and alter the piece, just as reading the worlds completes the piece.”

The names of those who were killed and the names of the important events of the movement are inscribed on the table top, forming a time line of the struggle. The Civil Rights Memorial was dedicated in November, 1989. On opening day, 600 family members of the people named on the memorial joined a crowd of 5,000 visitors in the emotional and inspirational ceremony. Today, the tears of the people who have come to the memorial have mingled with the water creating a living bond with those who come to remember those who have gone before.

Maya Lin has certainly proven that her real talent is to portray the true American Spirit and to make it visible to all who come to be touched by the bond we share with our past.
The Vietnam War Memorial was commemorated on November 13, 1982. The Civil Rights Memorial was dedicated on November 5, 1989

Bibliography


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