

The Painless Knee: Some Questions

by James Como



These days if I were to “take a knee” the crackling would wake the neighbors and there’s a good chance I wouldn’t make it back up, at least not for a while. I would be paying a price, as is the case, for example, when I (try to) genuflect at Mass, first leaning, then hoisting, on the arm of a nearby pew. So, to those exceptionally privileged – but this is not about the current distension of that trendy word: I trust no one is silly enough to contest my use here of ‘privilege’ – to those privileged athletes who take a knee, four questions: 1/ What price are you paying? 2/ Have you thought out – *really* thought out – your gesture, to the extent that you can make a *reasoned argument*? 3/ What, if any, allegiance do you owe to the United States (or, for that matter, to your game and its fans) above your Cause? 4/ What, finally, is your point?

We are living in the age of gestures, bumper stickers, initials, abbreviated tweets, chants, placards, emojis,

protests, riots, and other shortcuts to meaning that I'm sure I've overlooked. I'm not asking for any of those, e.g. "we disrespect a flag that disrespects us," "black people cannot be racist," "we live in two nations," "no matter our salaries, we are merely high-priced slaves." That sort of thing. Unacceptable. Singly or in combination those thought-substitutes, all clichés, do not add up to an *argument*, let alone a *case*, in support of taking a knee at the playing of the National Anthem, *with all the specific symbolism, context, history, and purpose thereunto appertaining*. I dismiss them precisely because they militate against the honest conversation that so many people ask for.

Here I must become the communication professor I was for fifty years: in human communication *intent never equals impact*. In other words, you seem to have lost control of your message, which happens especially in cases where the message is inchoate to begin with. That is why I hope you will see that I'm not really asking questions; I'm asking a favor. I'm confused. I'd like you to use words, not feelings or symbolic action. I'm asking that you explain, convince, argue, *converse*. You have my attention. In that light I offer some thoughts that together may add up to a portrait of my dilemma.

If you wanted to make a statement respecting the unwarranted loss of black lives at the hands of police, then why a second, or a fifth, time? Or is it racial injustice generally that you protest against? But since (you tell me) that's not going away any time soon, why stop at the field (or include it in the first place, where there doesn't seem to be any)? Or did you protest the National Anthem precisely to shame the country – in perpetuity? If so, have you said so? Was your purpose to divide (intent)? Surely you must have known that veterans, police, and millions of ordinarily patriotic citizens would take umbrage (impact) – or did you? Do you recall when President Obama thoughtlessly called the police "stupid" when they arrested Henry Louis Gate, Jr.? (He would learn better.)

Did he *mean* to divide, as surely he did (and not for the last time)? Or is your gesture, as one commentator has suggested, an expression of love for your country – a distinctive expression unaccompanied by any other?

We all have a Cause, or even Causes. I recall hearing the great radical trial lawyer William Kunstler saying that no one on the Left should ever criticize *anyone* on the Left, for *any* reason (and that included the demonic Pol Pot). The Cause comes first, and last. Is that the case here? If not, I'd like to hear how not – how the Cause does *not* rule. That is, I'd like to know what boundaries, if any, exist. Be specific. What exactly are the targets of your protest? Its goals? Is your gesture intended to be corrective, destructively revolutionary (there can be no fixing *this* house), or merely accusatory? ("Shame! Shame!" Well, I've been ashamed of myself, and in this case I find nothing to be ashamed *of*, unless being white is shameful enough, in which case – say so. I'd like to hear that. Everyone should hear that. Out loud.)

As for the first question, the one about the price you pay. What, other than taking a knee, are you ready to do? Will you, for example, visit a VFW hall, or West Point, to tell soldiers directly that they fought for a worthless, even criminal, nation? Or a local precinct (or turn to the cops behind you on the sidelines), to say something equivalent directly to police? I've heard that the money you make should play no role in the criticism you've received, but I disagree. For example, have you thought to pony up, say, \$10,000 to a group that supports your protest every time you kneel? Or do you want the game without any *real* blame, blame that might hurt beyond the (oh-so-helpful) criticism from a largely unpopular president?

Because that's how it looks. As it is, kneeling on the field during the anthem seems little more than exhibitionistic. (Or do you really think you are "speaking truth to power," another cliché?) Simply put, right now you seem more like hijackers, children acting out at a party to spoil the fun; unfocused,

shallow, facile mischief-makers. (Jim Brown said he wouldn't take a knee, he'd take action, as Ali did: *there* was a price. A fifth question: are there any real Stand Up Guys among you?)

Of course I realize that you may think all the hash has been settled, that reason intrudes upon sincere passion (well, it does) and that nothing counts more than passion (or feels better: so *righteous*), that arguing (not quarreling, *very* different) is a waste of time, and that anyone who needs an explanation is beyond understanding in the first place, is really one of *them* – with their flags, and patriotism, and national pieties – not one of *us*, deplorable. So why bother? Well, then, say *that*. It would answer a lot of questions.

And if you “keep on keeping on”? That, too, will answer a lot of questions. Maybe haters really do have to hate.