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Bruce Gordon

Indiana II: A Few Good Signs

I HAD SWORN OFF POLITICS. I had made a solemn vow to stay away from anything and everything political after my involvement with the Student Nonviolent Co-ordinating Committee several years ago. I thought that my days in Southern jails had taught me enough about the legal and political system in the United States to stay out of politics. Then McCarthy came along.

I was a chemistry major at the University of California at Berkeley, quite happy amid all my strange colors and smells. My wife, Claire, is a social worker and we live in a small house near a hippy colony on the edge of Berkeley. My political troubles started again when my wife met Katie Odine. From the start it was two against one.

Politics is a favorite topic in Berkeley, and long hours are spent trying to find something good to say about them. But 1968 looked as if it would be another dull political year—a good year to stay out of politics. Then Eugene McCarthy came out of nowhere and into New Hampshire. 1968 might not be such a dull political year after all. No one really expected McCarthy to last through New Hampshire, but it would be interesting to see how the system destroyed him. To speak out against the administration's foreign and domestic policies was one thing, but to enter a primary against the incumbent President of your own party is another thing entirely. To top everything, McCarthy was banking on the American voter. This was indeed news to us in Berkeley. Most of us under thirty had never heard of a national campaign that took the voter into consideration. What with delegates and the electoral college to worry about, who had time to worry about a guy with just one vote going for him? Democracy is democracy, but this McCarthy fellow was too much: Either a United States Senator had gone completely out of his mind, or here was an example of courage so rare in modern politics that insanity seemed the only explanation.

On a dull mid-January day Katie and Claire came dashing into the house with exciting news. A friend of Katie's had just asked her to work

for McCarthy in New Hampshire. Katie immediately agreed, and managed to persuade us to buy her car so she could afford the trip. With some reluctance we purchased her VW, and off to the snowy wilds went Katie.

Since one of our friends was now working for McCarthy, we followed the action in New Hampshire closely. I admired the Senator from Minnesota for his courage, but it did seem at the time that he was fighting a losing battle. McCarthy had little if any party support, little money, a campaign staff full of amateurs, and to top it all he was taking his campaign to the people. How would the people of New Hampshire respond?

The New Hampshire response was a hell of a surprise. All of a sudden a lot of us had to take another look at ourselves and the system. There are actually people out there who vote and think, millions of them. For the first time in a long while our political discussions held a note of hope, and politics again became a clean word. As we followed the campaign into Wisconsin through the mass media and Katie's letters, I began to feel the old familiar stirrings in my mind and soul. This meant one thing: politics. Whether I liked it or not, I would once again be involved.

Then Robert Kennedy entered the race, and I thought that now was the time really to get involved. As much as I admired McCarthy, I thought Kennedy had the best chance of winning the nomination and the Presidency. So I made a nice practical choice and signed up on campus to be a volunteer worker for Kennedy.

Martin Luther King is dead. I was out with some friends when I heard the news. We went to their apartment and turned on the radio. It is true. He is dead. A sniper with a high-powered rifle fired one bullet and killed one man. A few ounces of lead at high velocity ended a life. Why? What about another man who wasn't practical, who believed in impossible things, who had dreams? Maybe, just maybe, it was time I stopped making such damned practical decisions. Yes, Kennedy looked like a winner; yes, he had the organization and the money. Yes, a good practical choice. But there was also this impractical man who stood up with nothing but ideas and dreams, and the people of New Hampshire had responded. Maybe I was reading a little too much romance into the whole thing, but a sniper isn't a romantic figure nor does he come bearing gifts of love.

I remembered the years I had spent in the South chasing dreams. Dreams of a time when I could be me and not a color. Dreams of being

the first human to accomplish something, not just the first of my race. At that time my work in the South had seemed impractical, but now I know that it was a necessary step toward racial justice. If I felt the need to become involved in politics again, then my decision should not be based on practicality. I realized I would be working for Kennedy simply because he was the most likely candidate to win, not because I thought he was the best candidate. But I knew little about McCarthy and I felt I should know more about both candidates before I worked for either.

Fate stepped in with a phone call from Katie. The McCarthy campaign had reached Indiana and Katie called me from Indianapolis to ask me to come there. If I wanted to find out more about McCarthy, here was a golden opportunity. After talking to Claire—Thank you Claire for being so understanding—I decided to go to Indiana, on the understanding that if I didn't find McCarthy a good candidate I'd come back home. I withdrew from school, quit my part-time job, and waited for Katie to send a ticket. Within a week I was on a plane for Indianapolis. If I had known what was in store for me I might have changed my mind and stayed in Berkeley. But I was trapped: the ticket Katie sent was one-way.

Indianapolis is the capital and largest city of Indiana. It is also probably America's leading city in war memorials. The general architecture is gothic, massive, ugly. Being raised in Harlem, then living in Berkeley, I disliked the pace of Indianapolis. It's not that the town closes down at an early hour, it's that most of the time Indianapolis seems never to have opened up.

The McCarthy for President headquarters was in the Claypool Hotel. The Claypool was once one of the finest hotels in Indianapolis until a fire, a number of years ago, nearly destroyed the building. McCarthy headquarters was on the ground and first floors, the only floors not damaged in the fire. Mass confusion is the only way I can describe the scene that greeted me. People of every age and description were running and shouting back and forth. I soon found out that this is the normal way a McCarthy headquarters looks and sounds, and that there's always enough confusion to last far into the night.

My first task was to locate Katie, then find a place to eat and sleep. After a ten-minute search through the Claypool—affectionately called the Cesspool by the staff—I found her. With a phone at either ear and carrying on two conversations, Katie was having a ball. When she saw me she shouted a general hold on both phones, dropped them onto the nearest desk, and dashed to me for a hug and kiss.

After I explained how tired and hungry I was, she promised to send me down to the housing staff, but not until she had introduced me to one or two people. Just one or two, she promised. Ten people later I pointed out that I had met more than one or two people. To Katie those didn't count, I still had to meet one or two important people. Faces swam toward me out of a haze. A name was smiled to me, my hand shaken, then off we would go to meet just one more person. Finally Katie shoved me in front of a thin, nervous man of about thirty. "Bruce meet Curt Gans, the national campaign director." "Hi Curt. Katie, I want to go to sleep." "But Bruce this is one of the important people." "Hello important person. Where can I find a place to sleep?"

Katie and Curt seemed to think I had quite a sense of humor. I was only getting desperate. It was a job just to stand up. Then Curt's voice came from somewhere out of the haze. "Bruce I haven't got time to talk to you, but we're having a meeting later tonight in my room. Why don't you come up? Katie will tell you where." Did he say a meeting tonight? I guess meetings have to be held at night in order to plan the next day's confusion. What in the hell had I gotten myself into.

Katie finally navigated me to a desk. I was assigned a room in a local hotel where most of the staff was staying. Then she dashed off back to her phones. I caught a cab to the Antlers—affectionately known to the staff as the Anthill—and at last found myself in a room, a room with a bed in it.

It was midnight and the phone was ringing. Katie was reminding me that I had to be at a meeting in thirty minutes. "But Katie it's midnight. What kind of madhouse is this? Do you usually have meetings at midnight?" "Sure Bruce. Midnight is when everyone's free." "But when do you sleep? I've a habit of sleeping at night and working during the day." "Don't worry Bruce, you'll get used to it." Oh how right she was.

I managed to drag myself out of bed and into some clothes. Ten minutes later I was in the Essex House Motel—never mind what the staff affectionately called it. Of course the meeting started an hour late, and of course everyone was red-eyed and sleepy. But we did have a meeting. Curt assigned me to the state's northern Congressional districts. I was to trouble-shoot those areas and try to keep the troops quiet, happy, and productive. Also I was to see to it that something was done in the Black areas to get the message across that Kennedy wasn't the only one in the race. Our main problem was that McCarthy just

wasn't as well known as Kennedy, and too often the first question our canvassers had to answer was "Senator who?"

But we were making progress, and everyone at the meeting seemed hopeful we could make a good showing in Indiana. After progress reports and more progress reports, Curt turned the meeting over to financial reports. They were all too brief. If you don't have much money, I guess you don't have much to say. But we were managing to run a campaign on almost nothing, and we seemed to be getting away with it. Our little meeting finally broke up, with the sun coming over one of the war memorials.

That day I decided to rent a car and travel around the northern end of the state to get to know the project areas and the people who ran them. Fortunately I ran into Katie and found that we did have a transportation section of sorts, run by a guy named Richard Vanecheck. Somehow we had found money to rent a fleet of cars, and there just might be one left over. The transportation section was located in an old auto warehouse shared with literature distribution. By this time I was getting used to the confusion, but the warehouse was something else. There was so much room to spread things out that everything looked especially confused. I finally found Richard in a small office, lying on a cot with a copy of Playboy and a glass of Scotch. He looked at me over the top of his magazine and said, "You probably want something I don't have, but tell me what it is anyway. Then I'll tell you I don't have it, and I can go back to my center-fold." "Are you Dick Vanecheck?" "Yes. Who are you?" After the introductions were over, I learned that Dick, out of the goodness of his heart, was willing to let me have a car. "And save the gas slips so you can get your money back."

I decided to go northeast from Indianapolis to Fort Wayne, then north to South Bend and west to Michigan City and Gary, from Gary south to Lafayette, and back to Indianapolis. I figured the trip would take a week and that I could find places to stay and meals at each town I stopped in. I had learned to live off the land during work in the South, and this time it would be easier with no one shooting at me. So armed with a road map, addresses, and phone numbers, off I went to Fort Wayne.

Doug Walcholz ran the project there and everything was under control. So on to South Bend. Tom Dubbs was its project director and he was happy to see me. Tom had a small problem. He had

wanted to open an office in the Black community and had just rented a store front. He then found out that the back of the place was a local numbers drop. "I was wondering, Bruce, if it's all right to go ahead and use the place?" "No Tom I don't think that would go over well." "But who's to know that the place is a numbers drop?" "Besides the whole community and the local police, I don't think anyone else would. The best thing you can do is get your money back and find someplace else." "Would you come with me and see that I get the money back?" After a quiet talk with the guy who had rented Tom the store front, we got the money. So far so good. All the problems only had to be as simple as this and I might get through the campaign with part of my mind left.

Gary is a world unto itself. Next to Indianapolis it has the heaviest concentration of Negroes in the state, and one of the country's first Negro mayors. Tony Podesta was the head of the project there and he and his crew were known as the "suicide squad." In the previous Presidential primary and election, the first Congressional district, of which Gary is the seat, gave a very heavy vote to George Wallace. Now it seemed as if Kennedy was going to take it. Problems Tony had plenty of. Unfortunately I didn't get much of a chance to help. I got a call from Indianapolis that the Senator was due there for a speech and a walk through the Black community. Someone in Indianapolis thought it would be nice if there were a few black faces walking along with him. So all I did for Tony was listen to his problems, then wish him the best of luck.

The normal chaos in the office had increased tenfold by the time I arrived at the Claypool. I soon found this too was normal every time the Senator was expected within ten miles of a headquarters. Mike Rosenthal was in charge of the project in Indianapolis' ghetto, and he was determined that the Senator's visit would be a good one. McCarthy was scheduled to meet with some of the leaders of the community when he came in from the airport. Next he was to go to a small rally at the YMCA in the ghetto, then walk through the area, and on to his next stop. Mike had done all the ground work: everything was set for the Senator's visit and nothing could go wrong.

Everyone was gathered at the Essex for the first meeting. Coffee and cakes were being served, the chairs were arranged in a circle to provide an informal atmosphere, all was ready, and the Senator was only thirty minutes late. This was the first time I met the man. Tall and easy, he came striding down the hall toward the room where everyone

was waiting. His eyes seemed indifferently to drift over faces, but then you were brought up short when you realized that you had been seen and acknowledged. No harsh outgoing bit, no bone-crushing handshake, no pats on the back, just a sure quiet look and an easy voice. Man, this cat was too much. He smiled when he wanted to, or when he felt like it. No rush, no fuss, no bother. Just striding down the hall toward me with everyone around him hustling to keep up, and him like a rock in a stream. Love at first sight.

"Good afternoon Senator McCarthy. My name is Bruce Gordon and I'll be accompanying you on part of your tour this afternoon. We're running a bit behind schedule now, but I think that we'll make everything else on time. I'll be back for you in about thirty minutes. Everyone's waiting for you inside. There's a seat for you to your left as you enter." "Thanks Bruce. Sorry I'm late but we took more time at the airport press conference than I thought." I open the door and in he goes. Off I go to check the car and the next stop. Mike has gone on to the YMCA to make sure everything is set there. To be doubly safe we have two cars and two drivers outside the hotel. I give both sets of keys to one driver and tell him to have the doors open when the Senator comes out. Simple, can't miss. Since we are going to the Black community, we have one of the local ministers riding with the Senator, plus two Black staff members, not to mention the driver and myself. There have been charges that there were no Negroes on the McCarthy campaign staff: today we are going to show off some of us.

Everyone is set and ready to go. I go back to the meeting to wait for the Senator. The meeting runs right on time, and the Senator comes out. "This way Senator. The car is waiting to take us to the YMCA rally." Out through the hotel doors we go, to find nothing but a locked car. The Senator stops in the door with a puzzled look. The press and people who have been following us begin to pile up in the door behind him. The driver with the keys is trapped behind them and can't get through the door. The local minister is still in the conference room waiting for someone to tell him where to go. The staff guy who is supposed to be riding with us is off looking for the other driver. There we stand in the door of the hotel. People passing on the street give us the strangest looks. Finally the driver with the keys manages to get through. He's kind of shaken and gets the wrong set of keys out and jams the lock trying to open the door. Around to the other side of the car he goes, and this time he gets the right key in the lock and the door open. Someone has found the local minister and has gotten him to the car.

The staff man has returned with the other driver. Now there is a mass of people closing in on the car. As soon as the driver opens the doors, in goes the local minister, the staff man, and myself. It suddenly occurs to us that the Senator is still standing in the doorway. Out we all pile, then in again with the Senator. We are about to drive off when the second driver comes up and asks for the other set of keys. All the first driver has is the end of the key he broke off trying to unlock the door. The Senator seems to be having a ball, while I am losing my mind in the confusion.

"Look, get another car. I'm sure that someone back there has one, and bring along everyone who should come. Let's get moving. The police escort should be waiting for us as soon as we get out of the parking lot." I hope that I have proper control of my voice because at the moment I really don't feel too well. Finally we are out of the parking lot and behind the police escort. "Senator, I'm really sorry for this mixup. I think that everything should run okay from here on . . . Senator, do you mind if I tell you something?" "No Bruce. Go ahead." "Well Senator when you're talking to my folks you might raise your voice a bit. You see, we're used to making a joyful noise and not an orderly one like our lighter brothers. So let a little of your Minnesota soul come through when you give your speech at the YMCA." "You think I should let a little soul into my speech?" "Not too much. Just a little." "Well I'll give it a try." He seems calm and relaxed. If he can smile through that mess back at the hotel, I guess he can get through anything.

At the YMCA a parking space in front of the entrance has been miraculously reserved. We all manage to get out of the car without trouble and into the YMCA. A lot of people are in the hall to greet the Senator, including a few of the local Black militants Mike Rosenthal had befriended. They are standing off to one side just looking. Suddenly the Senator sees them and walks over. "Hello. I'm Senator McCarthy. I'm happy to see you here." This catches them by surprise and there is a moment of silence before one of them introduces himself and then the others. "I hope you fellows will stay and hear what I have to say. I think there will be time for questions and answers after I talk."

Off we go into the hall. Food is being served, though I had thought this was to be a rally-type rally, not an eating one. The Senator doesn't seem to mind, and he pauses to acknowledge the applause. I'm looking for Mike to tell me where to seat the Senator, all the time hoping that the applause won't die down too soon. Mike is nowhere in sight.

I assume there will be a table somewhere down front so the Senator won't have to walk a mile to the stage. When he looks at me about what to do next, I just begin walking toward the front of the hall, hoping to see an empty table before we reach the stage. Finally I spy Mike off to one side, pointing to a table set up for the Senator, and I manage to lead him to it.

The Senator and I have the table to ourselves. No one else supposed to be there has gotten the word. Mike is running around finding them. Finally, by ones and twos, the table fills with all the proper notables. But, before we can get started with the meal the press descends on us. Bright lights and cameras focus on the Senator, waiting for him to take a mouthful of food. McCarthy just sits there. Everyone is looking at the Senator, the Senator is looking at the cameras, and the cameras are looking at him. "Come on Senator, take a bite." "Yea just one bite Senator." "A little of the roast beef is all we want." "Please fellows, I just want to eat. I'll give you all the pictures you want later, but I hope you don't mind if I'm not photographed eating." Finally the cameras go away. After the meal the Senator does not raise his voice: just a normal quiet speech, full of facts and hard sense.

After the question and answer period we take off into the street with the press hard behind us. Senator McCarthy is a tall man, and a man used to walking. It's all I can do to keep up with him. The press, with their cameras and recording equipment, are having a much worse time. Soon all I can hear behind us is the puffing and panting of cameramen. The Senator spots two women standing on a lawn watching this strange procession charge toward them. He stops suddenly to say hello, and behind us we hear the clanking and banging of the press as they run into each other. A quick hello and handshake, and again off we go.

There is a housing project nearby that the Senator wants to see. So between parked cars and across the street we go, with the press in puffing pursuit. A caretaker is gathering leaves and trash on the lawn. As we draw near, he starts to run. Here is this tall guy with a Negro next to him and dozen pressmen behind them, all bearing down on him. Before he can get started the Senator has him by the hand and is trying to introduce himself. The poor guy is trying to pull away. "Can you both smile?" "Senator how about moving closer to him?" I'm glad the Senator doesn't move. At the angle this guy is leaning, still trying to pull away, one step by the Senator and he would have been sent sprawling. Off we go again, scattering his neat piles of leaves and trash. That was the end of the walking tour.

Fortunately the next car and driver were ready to pick up the Senator and get him to his next stop. I was happy to see him leave. I don't think I could have lasted through the rest of the day. I went to the nearest bar and had a tall cool one.

I managed to recover by the next day and get back into the field with literature, mail, and money for our field staff. I didn't get far. They caught up with me by phone in Michigan City. Paul Newman was re-joining the campaign and was going to open a number of storefronts in Indianapolis and Lafayette. Would I come back to Indianapolis and accompany him? Sure, why not? After my experience with the Senator you'd think I'd have enough sense not to take another job like that. But a movie star, what the hell! So back to Indianapolis I went.

Paul Newman was a natural part of the McCarthy campaign. He got lost coming from the airport, but eventually he did arrive at the right hotel. Paul's son, who had been working as a canvasser, and a few others were waiting for him. Paul first greeted his son with a warm embrace, then was introduced around the room. He is a short guy, but what he doesn't have in height he more than makes up for in muscle. He's easy and relaxed, and after we had passed around the beers we got down to the business of planning his tour. We decided that since Paul was just going to be with us for a day, we would cram in as much as we could. What we finally settled on was that Paul would officially open eight storefronts in Indianapolis, two in Lafayette, give pep talks to the staff in Indianapolis and Lafayette, and take walking tours through the ghettos of both cities. Any time that Paul had left over was his own. Then we relaxed and talked and joked. Somehow I got into a thumb wrestling match while I was trying to teach him a soul brother handshake. I won three out of five.

I really didn't know what to expect the next morning. The chaos in the Claypool, where we were to start the day with a pep talk to the staff, was pure female hell. I never saw so many excited women in one place at one time. Paul was in a side room, pacing back and forth and enjoying his last moment of solitude. Then he stepped out into the main room and all hell broke loose. One mighty gasp from a hundred throats filled the room. Screams and giggles and even one or two howls. Man, women are something else! I went downstairs to make sure the car and the police escort were ready. We were using a station wagon so that Paul could give brief speeches from the tailgate. Lo and behold, everything went like clockwork at the first few storefronts. But this was early in the day when most people were at work.

Our troubles started when we approached a storefront near a supermarket. The crowd filled the parking lot and most of the street. It was all the two motorcycle policemen could do to get us through. We even managed to let the tailgate down. Maybe this was a mistake. The women almost dragged him off. I guess that much concentrated femininity is hard to control. Paul succeeded in giving a short speech and climbing back into the station wagon. As I was trying to close the tailgate, a couple of teenagers attempted to get into the car with him. They slammed the tailgate out of my hands, in the process gashing my left hand. At the next stop I got to a drug store and patched myself up.

From then on the day slowly began to come apart for me. We began to run farther and farther behind schedule. But finally we were through with Indianapolis and ready to go to Lafayette. We stopped at a diner to get some food. Luckily there was a liquor store nearby and we also got a couple of sixpacks of beer. If the day was going to get any worse, I didn't want to be aware of it.

Paul took a liking to the big motorcycles the police were riding, and he persuaded one of the officers to let him drive one around the block while we were waiting for our food. Several anxious minutes later the officer began to look a little green, a color that didn't fade until Paul finally got back. Then we piled into the station wagon and promptly got lost. By the time we reached Lafayette my hand had stopped hurting, and I had enough beer in me to make everything a blur. We cut a few corners and managed to make it back to Indianapolis by nightfall. I ducked out to the Antlers and into bed, vowing never to accompany anyone, anywhere, anymore.

After all this, the results of the Indiana primary were quite a blow. But we were learning fast and we were more determined than ever to carry the campaign to Nebraska and Oregon. The majority of the staff went to Oregon; the rest of us split up between California and Nebraska. My first stop after Indiana was Omaha.

It was a rainy morning and I was about to accompany the Senator into Omaha's ghetto. Here I was again, doing the accompanying bit after I had promised myself never again. This time I had a lot of help. Bob Paris and Dale Anders are tough Black militants, born and bred in Omaha's ghetto. They had tried working for Kennedy and found it not to their liking. Now they were trying McCarthy. They had set up a storefront in the ghetto and were getting the word out to the community about "Senator Who?"

Bob and Dale set up a rally for the Senator at this headquarters on

the same day that Kennedy was to visit Omaha's ghetto. It was going to be an interesting hour. We planned for a brief stop at the headquarters to shake a few hands. We were hoping that the Senator and Kennedy would meet, but Kennedy left before we arrived.

Things began to come apart before we even got started. At the last minute our driver got lost, so Bob got another car for us. However, he couldn't locate another driver. "Look Bob, the Senator will be down in a minute. Why don't you drive us? You know Omaha and where we're supposed to go." "Bruce I don't think I should drive the Senator, and there's something else I think you ought to know." I was getting frantic and not in the mood for any more problems. "Bob, drive the car. I have to get back upstairs and make sure the Senator's ready. Charlie Calanan will be coming with us and Bill Briggs. Please get ready to move." "But Bruce—" "See you in a minute."

I met the Senator and Charlie coming out of the elevator. Charlie is the Senator's personal secretary and traveling companion; and he was taking a dim view of the hasty tour we had planned. But everyone was present and accounted for, so we got in the car and headed toward the ghetto. Bob ran the first stop sign we came to, and it was then that we discovered the car had bad brakes. The rain wasn't helping much either. We crept through the streets. We didn't have a police escort since we had planned this tour on the spur of the moment. So much for my advance work.

When we finally arrived at the headquarters, quite a crowd was waiting. Dale had been out in the community most of the day getting people. He even managed to convince the band that had been playing for Kennedy to come and greet the Senator and play for free. The Senator seemed pleased and a bit more relaxed. The car ride hadn't been easy on anyone's nerves.

While the Senator was shaking hands, a woman came up to him with a note from her husband, who had injured his foot in a lawnmower. He was a supporter of McCarthy and if the Senator had a little time to spare he would feel most honored to have the Senator come and shake his hand. Since the house was only about a block away, the Senator decided to walk. I told Bob to follow us in the car. "But Bruce, there's something I want to tell you." "Look Bob we have it made now. We'll just take a short walk to this guy's house and have the Senator meet him, then we're home free. You and Dale did a great job on such short notice. Just follow slowly in the car, and wait across the street." "But Bruce—" I had to leave Bob and get back to the Senator.

It was starting to rain again and harder. Off we went, with the Senator and the woman in the lead. We had to cross a street to get to the house. As the Senator and the woman stepped out between two parked cars, Bob almost ran them down. The woman almost fainted, the Senator smiled and took her arm, and I almost had a heart attack. Bob didn't look too good himself, though he did manage a sick smile. Another handshake and we were in the car. The ride back to the hotel was something else. The brakes were almost totally gone now. But we did get the Senator back in one piece. "All right Bob, what is it that's so important?" "Bruce, I don't have a driver's license. Mine was revoked a couple of months ago." I went to the nearest bar for a tall cool one.

Nebraska turned out to be another defeat and another series of lessons. We had our noses bloodied again, but we were learning. And we were regaining a faith in our system of government that many of us had lost. The system can change, and it will change if we do our part. And it can be done without violence. I guess this is the greatest feature of the whole mess we call the American Way: change, maybe slow change, but change nonetheless.