

## **BACKWATER BAY**

### **Episode 1: "Civic Imagination & the Backwater Bay Holy Wars" (posted June 20, 2018)**

Producer's Note: This transcript is taken from the podcast script. There may be some minor differences in the transcript and the final podcast due to cast improvisation and sound design editing.

#### **CAST**

Buster Lawrence, the announcer

Bette "Cupcake" Crawford, the host

Tempus and Fugit, Backwater Bay's time-telling geese

#### **THE SOUND OF THUNDER AND RAIN**

##### **BUSTER LAWRENCE SPEAKS:**

We've all been in a great storm. It usually means that the weather is about to change. How? Well, in part, the answer to that is up to us.

##### **BACKWATER BAY MUSIC JINGLE:**

Upbeat radio jingle music. The lyrics are:  
Backwater Bay! Where speech is free and so  
are we, and we never shut up! Good morning!

##### **BUSTER SPEAKS:**

I'm Buster Lawrence, and this is Backwater Bay, always broadcasting from an undisclosed site in the public mind on the radio waves of your own considerable imaginations.

##### **BRIEF MUSICAL INTERLUDE, BACKWATER BAY JINGLE**

**BUSTER SPEAKS:**

So, grab a cup of coffee and join us for today's adventure, "Civic Imagination and the Backwater Bay Holy Wars." Here to tell us the story is Backwater Bay's unofficial town crier, that kindly but crusty old broad, Bette "Cupcake" Crawford.

**BETTE "CUPCAKE" CRAWFORD SPEAKS:**

Good morning Buster, and all our friends and visitors. Thanks for joining us. It's a beautiful day here in Backwater Bay, but we've certainly endured our fair share of bad weather. For a long time, it centered around issues of the role of religion in public life. Theologians call that Faith in the Public Square. Let's get real. In practice, what it really means is: whose religious voices get the controlling say in determining society's ethics, laws, policies, practices, institutions, and structures?

**OMINOUS MUSICAL ACCENT PORTENDING DANGER**

**BETTE SPEAKS:** We had a long, bad streak of ill will and conflict that played out over recent years. Various faith and spiritual communities had already been at each other's throats over so many issues. Reproductive justice. Environmental protection. Wedding cakes for same-sex couples and health care for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans people. Protection of Indigenous sacred sites. Religious displays, and prayer requirements in public places.

For a while, the conflicts pretty much played out over policy issues. That was bad enough. We managed to create our own little civil wars. Especially because so many politicians tried to shore up their own support by stoking the fights. Then just when you think it can't possibly get

any worse, it does.

**MUSICAL ACCENT THAT SIGNIFIES A CHANGE IN THE WEATHER**

**BETTE speaks:**

During the Lost Years, as we refer to them now, a predominantly Black church got firebombed. A synagogue was spray painted twice with Nazi symbols. Armed with a semi-automatic rifle, a board member of the National Association for the Freedom Loving Use of Assault Weapons, tried to hold a group of Muslim men hostage in the local mosque. Fortunately, he was tackled and disarmed by two women who sneaked up on him from behind.

Federal agents from ICE - that's Immigrations and Customs Enforcement stormed a Catholic Church, searching for immigrants to detain and deport. Without proper warrants, or any success, I might add. Then, accused of multiple instances of sexual harassment, the pastor of a prosperity gospel congregation denounced not only his accusers, but all women, as "harridans, harpies, and hags." He said that rape was "an impatient warning from God." You can imagine how that went over.

Anonymous posters appeared calling for the tarring and feathering of members of a local I-Ching study group who were said to be engaged in occult practices. And somebody called in repeated bomb threats to the very popular local queer dance club, labeling LGBTQ people as "the godless spawn of Satan."

**BRIEF BUT ALARMING MUSICAL ACCENT**

**BETTE speaks:**

It was a miracle that we ended up with only

a few injuries, property damage, and no deaths. Other communities - Charleston and Knoxville come immediately to mind - didn't fare so well. But the atmosphere was so angry. Distrust, threats, and attacks mounted. Of course, some people just wanted to ignore it because they weren't personally affected. Others wanted to blame it on a few "bad apples" and "outsiders."

**SWELLING MUSICAL THAT IS SORROWFUL AND WISTFUL**

**BETTE speaks:**

But things had gone way beyond "a few bad apples." It was all too obvious that this wasn't "us and them." It was "us."

**THE SORROWFUL, WISTFUL MUSIC CONTINUES**

**BETTE continues:**

That's hard to admit. What on earth could we do?

**MUSIC ENDS**

**BETTE speaks:**

It wasn't possible to turn to frenzies of policing and arrests. We'd already abolished our police force and turned our local jail into a public botanical center devoted to phytomedicinal plants and classes in ethical wildcrafting.

Some groups periodically organized "Stop Hate" rallies, but everybody attending thought of themselves as being hated and victimized, but not as actually hating anyone else. Among those who didn't attend, not one person or group voluntarily identified as a hater who should stop.

We were at our wit's end. We agreed to be more vigilant about the separation of church and state, and that helped some. But not everyone was happy about it. And it didn't address the deeper conflicts.

**SUDDEN MUSICAL ACCENT: SOMETHING IS HIDDEN IN THE SHADOWS**

**BETTE speaks:**

The more we looked at those divisions, the more we realized we were fighting over things that reflected deep-seated beliefs that some groups of people are better than and should have more power and rights than others. You know. White supremacy. Male supremacy. Heterosexism. Religious supremacy. These ideas of superiority and inferiority influenced the operation of whole institutions, not just individual beliefs. The violence and harassment were symptoms of shattered community relationships in so many areas.

**SOMBER MUSIC IN BACKGROUND**

**BETTE continues speaking:**

We called ourselves a community. In reality, we had become a collection of suspicious enemies living in close proximity. People started praying that their opponents would leave or be driven away. Or better yet, just drop dead.

In short: we were useless. The so-called leaders of Backwater Bay hit smack against the walls of our own jaded, narrow, cramped, little imaginations.

**SOUND OF HEAVY THINGS THUDDING AGAINST WALLS**

**BETTE speaks:**

And I, for one, just hate to feel  
Useless!

**SOUND OF GLASS SMASHING**

**BUSTER speaks:**

Uh...well...ah, while Bette composes herself,  
I'll just mention that in times of doubt and  
confusion, we often turn for insight to one  
or more of Backwater Bay's Designated  
Kindred Spirits

**BETTE speaks:**

It's OK, Buster. I'm OK. I'm good.  
Sometimes, I just need to break something,  
which is why I keep that box of old  
glassware handy.

Anyway, like Buster said, we turned to a  
dear Kindred Spirit, Ursula K. Le Guin. She  
died earlier in 2018, and we miss her  
terribly. She always joined us for Backwater  
Bay's Founders Day celebrations, in person  
or by video. But even though she's dead,  
because she's Ursula, we won't be surprised  
if she shows up again this year, one way or  
other. The thing is, Ursula Le Guin's  
novels, stories, poems, essays, and  
translations are intriguing maps into  
uncharted worlds, different possibilities,  
and new ways of thinking about things.

So when we asked for help, she told us - and  
I quote - "No one can do very much, really,  
alone." She called her advice "Operating  
Instructions," and wrote them down. You can  
find them in her collection called *The Wave  
in the Mind: Talks on the Reader, the  
Writer, and the Imagination*.

She said we should remember that really meaningful change always begins in community, where people gather, in her words, "to imagine how best to live and help one another carry out the plan."

It's obvious that we talk a lot in Backwater Bay. Especially me. But we've learned to listen, too. Like Ursula says, listening is actually an act of community. We began to change through listening, really listening to one another's histories, experiences, hopes, and fears. Listening, especially, to listening to our neighbors who have borne the brunt of the violence of vigilantes, domestic abuse, and violence inflicted by public and private institutions. We changed enough to start working toward the kinds of societal change none of us initially thought were possible.

Ursula didn't tell us what to do beyond emphasizing the importance of imagination. She said imagination "is the single most useful tool humankind possesses." She also said that as we worked on ourselves, it was just as important to help our children develop and hone their own imaginations as a basic life skill.

**SLOW MUSICAL ACCENT EMPHASIZING BEING SADDER, BUT WISER**

**BETTE continues:**

In the heat of our civil wars, we'd forgotten that.

So we turned to students in our public K - 12 schools for help. We asked them to come up with ideas for how we might start addressing our shattered spiritual and faith relationships - and the attacks, harassment, and intimidation that symbolize lousy relationships.

And you know what? That was the breakthrough!

**BRIEF MUSICAL FANFARE OF BRASS INSTRUMENTS**

**BETTE continues:**

The kids turned in so many wonderful ideas. They wrote songs and poems, they performed plays, they made signs and painted pictures, and they wrote papers. We created an archive for all of it!

In the end it was Aurelia Gold's 7<sup>th</sup> grade class who came up with the sketch and idea that form the heart of Backwater Bay's most recent approach to Spirit and Faith in the Public Square.

You can find their drawing at **backwaterbay.com**; there's a link to it on our "On the Air" page featuring this program and you can also get to it through the Crossroads hub on the website and in my blog post on the subject.

The kids basically said this:

Just stop! Cut the crap! You're killing us. Stop it! If we're going to live together, we have to take care of each other together. We have to actually stop the crap together and create the good stuff together. And we know this, because kids always end up smack in the middle of adult fights.

The students reminded us that nobody has to like each other; we just have to treat each other OK. And we have to do it without cops.

So. In Backwater Bay, we have several public squares, you know, one for The Arts, one for Community Services, one for the Wonder of Science. Now we also have a Spirit and Faith Public Square. The design is one, big interconnected building providing

architecturally distinct congregational and gathering spaces for our various spiritual and faith communities. In addition to the usual suspects, these communities include the Indigenous Alliance for the Protection of Sacred Sites, the local atheist and secular humanist society, and a community-minded coalition of proud agnostics. And since we now all realize that the LGBTQ dance club serves many spiritual and celebratory purposes in an unusually dogma-free way, they're here, too.

We won't give away the intricate and surprising design features that make it all work. Let's just say we took the idea that "what affects one of us affects us all" and translated it into actual structure. In one significant way, the fates of a big cross section of Backwater Bay residents are now visibly joined and all must share common spaces that no single group can dominate.

All problems are not solved. Tensions still arise, but our relationships across differences are slowly changing for the better. In time, our approach will need refining. Maybe we'll have to go back to the drawing board. That's OK. Having come this far, we know that as conditions change, and as we learn more, we also will change. Backwater Bay can't stay fixed in amber. But we can always tend the integrity of our relationships.

Right now, we are exploring what it means to try to live in the absence of supremacist notions, institutions, and practices. Because you know what? Right now: NONE OF US KNOWS WHAT THAT'S LIKE. Isn't that just the pits?

OK, so I know what you're thinking. "Bette, we think your approach, however well intended, is impossibly naïve and incredibly stupid and we can think of a gazillion reasons why it won't work."

**MUSICAL ACCENT FEATURING A DOWN-IN-THE-DUMPS, WAH-WAH SOUND**

Oh, friends. Remember: Backwater Bay exists In. The. Imagination. Use any irritation and scorn you feel about our approach to jumpstart your own creativity. What approaches might be more workable, over time, in your community? What can you do to help make them happen?

Here are a few questions to think about:

**THE SOUND OF A POLICE SIREN AS IT APPROACHES AND FADES IS HEARD AS BETTE CONTINUES TO TALK**

**BETTE continues:**

- Are you relying on "somebody else" to do "something" about "those terrible people"? If so, who will you rely upon, besides the police? How will you ever get free of the idea that policing others is the only way of creating justice?
- How much of your own justice imagination is rooted in wanting to exclude and get rid of people and groups you don't like? What kind of community can you build with this vision of justice?

**THE SOUND OF GEESE HONKING IS HEARD AND FADES AS BETTE TALKS**

**BETTE speaks:**

Well, that's Tempus, our reliable time telling goose and her faithful mate, Fugit, telling us it's time to hit the road. We're glad you dropped by. Join us next time to learn how Backwater Bay is incorporating flora, fauna, land, and water into community decision-making and governance. In the weeks and months to come, we'll also be featuring

some special guests you won't want to miss.

Until we see you next time, remember:  
Backwater Bay isn't just a community, it's a  
state of mind. Whatever comes your way and  
ours, we're in it together. You're never  
alone.

From all of us here, this is Bette "Cupcake"  
Crawford wishing you radical imagination,  
bold schemes, and sweet dreams.

**MUSICAL OUTRO IS AN A CAPELLA RENDITION OF THE WORDS  
"BACKWATER BAY"**

**BUSTER speaks:**

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