

An Apology For Detroit

Detroit, Michigan. Population: 707,000.

What comes to mind when you read those words? For most of you, I'm sure, you think of what you see in the headlines of newspapers or on CNN: a mayor behind bars, high crime rates, a government on the verge of bankruptcy. And that's completely understandable. It's unfortunate, but understandable.

But for others, those of us who've experienced Detroit, other images come to mind. Images like fireworks illuminating the Renaissance Center – Detroit's one identifiable skyscraper – on a warm summer evening. Parents and their young ones ice skating on a Sunday afternoon in the winter. Miguel Cabrera and Prince Fielder doing their signature handshake atop the dugout steps. And we recall these images with pride, with passion. And a smile.

I don't claim to be an expert on the City of Detroit. The closest I've ever come to living there is my last four years as a student in Ann Arbor, an upscale suburb some 40 miles outside the city. But some of my fondest childhood memories are of trips to Tiger Stadium, affectionately known as the corner of Michigan and Trumbull, with my dad. One of my all-time favorite pictures is of the two of us sitting in the front row of the right field overhang the last weekend in September, 1999. It was just a day or two before Robert Fick, a journeyman catcher, hit the last home run in the stadium's history in that direction.

I may not know Detroit as well as others, but I know Detroit better than most, enough to say that Detroit is a great city. Not just a good city, not just a city with the potential to get better. It's a great city. And it's a damn shame, too, because nobody outside of Southeast Michigan knows that.

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A friend of mine, an economics student named Jon at Indiana University, argued with me for quite some time a few years ago, during the Great Recession of 2009, about how not only was Detroit beyond saving, but that I was crazy for giving my support to a city that supports bad business. He was, of course, referring to Detroit's "Big Three": Chrysler, Ford, and General Motors. At the time, the Big Three were all verging on (or entering) bankruptcy. They had been so horrendous that foreign automobile companies had begun to dominate the industry, and the Big Three were taking a lot of heat for asking for and accepting a government bailout of several billion dollars.

My response to Jon was that Detroit is so much more than those three businesses. The vast majority of people living and working in the city have nothing to do with those companies, and that he was the ignorant one for grouping everyone together like that. I explained to him that Detroit is not about Ford, Chrysler, or GM. It's about itself. Detroiters have such a pride in themselves. And I told Jon about how when I went to a Tigers game in late 2009, the loudest ovation wasn't for either of the Tigers' superstars, Miguel Cabrera or Justin Verlander. It was for Magglio Ordonez, an over-the-hill outfielder who'd been having one of the worst seasons of his career, battling injuries and his wife's cancer diagnosis. But every time he took the field, the crowd erupted. Because Detroiters loved him and gave their support to him despite his on-the-field struggles.

Magglio Ordonez homered that night.

Oh, and how are those Big Three doing right now, Jon?

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People like Jon forget what Detroit has done for this country. I think Mitch Albom said it best around that same time, when he published a lengthy essay in *The Detroit Free Press* titled, "The Courage of Detroit." In it, he said:

We're not gum on the bottom of America's shoe. We're not grime to be wiped off with a towel. Detroit and Michigan are part of the backbone of this country, the manufacturing spine, the heart of the middle class -- heck, we *invented* the middle class, we invented the idea that a factory worker can put in 40 hours a week and actually buy a house and send a kid to college. What? You have a problem with that? You think only lawyers and hedge-fund kings deserve to live decently?

Despite what Albom says, however, people still look at Detroit as just that: the scum on the bottom of America's shoe. And, frankly, they have reason to. The governor of Michigan is threatening to install an "emergency financial manager" in the city because of growing concern it will go bankrupt in the next couple of months. Even with great strides in the past few years, the Big Three still face stiff competition from foreign automakers that continue to produce great vehicles. And, according to a recent report from *Business Insider*, citing FBI statistics, Detroit is the second most-dangerous city in America, behind only nearby Flint, reporting nearly 50 murders per 100,000 people – ten times the national average.

But statistics never tell the whole story. Not everybody is a murderer in Detroit, and to think otherwise is just as foolish as my buddy Jon thinking everyone there can't succeed because a few suits made some bad business decisions a few years ago. And every city has its problems. Chicago has sent a few politicians to the slammer. New York is the butt of more jokes on *Letterman* than Kim Kardashian and George W. Bush combined, and Dave's lived there for thirty years. And Los Angeles has the earthquakes, and traffic jams so bad they get named.

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What strikes me the most is that I know people from all of those cities, and all they ever do is complain. People from Detroit? They don't complain. They love what they do, where they live. This is a city that idolizes a wide receiver generally considered the greatest in the game, but who's too modest to even give postgame interviews. They immortalize their legends here: blue-collar success stories like Steve Yzerman, Mike Illitch, and Barry Sanders. Detroiters even make celebrities out of common citizens, like "Black Jack," a saxophone player on Brush Street near Ford Field and a singing hot dog man at Comerica Park named Charley.

People in Detroit are generally some of the nicest people you'll ever meet, too. I've gotten better customer service in downtown Detroit than anywhere else I've ever been. People will stop you in the middle of the street just to say hello. Strangers getting cozy on the bus actually engage in conversation, like they've known you your whole life. I was recently shopping on Chicago's "Miracle Mile" with my uncle, who asked a guy walking out of a clothing store carrying two mannequins, "are they doing the two-for-one deal again?" The guy wouldn't even give him the time of day. People in Detroit would eat that joke up.

Detroit is a city of culture, too. This is where Aretha Franklin, Slim Shady, Alice Cooper and Kid Rock rose to fame. It's the city that brought us Little Caesar's Pizza, the Motown Record Corporation, John Hughes, Jerry Bruckheimer, and Francis Ford Coppola. There's Greektown, a vibrant community in the heart of the city with authentic and original restaurants and shops, and a Mexicantown, too.

People say Detroit is ugly, that it lacks the curb appeal of the Miracle Mile, Hollywood, or Broadway. Woodward Avenue, the main street of Detroit, may not be

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as glitzy, but it's got heart and character. Off of Woodward you find Foxtown – home to the historic Fox Theater, Comerica Park, Ford Field, and the Detroit Opera House – and in the middle of the city is a park, Campus Martius, where old men sit and play checkers in the summer and families come to ice skate in the winter. There's a River Walk where you can picnic or go fishing, and while Detroit may lack the international monuments of other cities, it's got some good ones of its own: the Spirit of Detroit, the Jefferson fist, the Giant Firestone Tire.

And, of course, Detroit is the City of Champions. It's one of the only cities in the country to have a team in all four professional sports leagues. It's got the last two American League MVPs, the youngest quarterback to ever throw for 5,000 yards, hockey's premier franchise, and one of only seven basketball teams to hoist the Larry O'Brien trophy three times.

I had an opportunity recently to sit down with Brittany Galisdorfer, a budget analyst for the University of Michigan – Ann Arbor. Brittany also lives in Detroit and is actively involved in the community, including as a financial manager for her church, and was recently given the Dave Bing Future Leaders Award for her work with the Michigan Suburbs Alliance. She had a lot of interesting views on the city. I asked her for her general thoughts on living in Detroit and she told me that it was unfortunate that so many great things are happening downtown but that people aren't always aware of it because of bureaucratic flaws.

Brittany also told me that she believes the city has overcome the governmental problems that have plagued it for so many years, and finally has people in charge who are trying to make good changes.

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“The city has a lot of momentum,” she said. “It’s great and it’s just going to get better, (but) it’s a long road.”

A long road it is, indeed. But that momentum she spoke of isn’t made up, either. It’s real. It’s palpable.

I’ve got a slew of stories to prove it, too. There was the time I took my Japanese roommate downtown for the first time and he told me, “everyone says Detroit is really bad, but it’s really nice.” There was the time I surprised my friend with dinner at one of Detroit’s three upscale casinos. There was the time my dad was given the VIP treatment at a Pistons game just for calling the team to complain about their lack of TV coverage in my hometown.

My favorite story about Detroit, however, took place the summer after my sophomore year of college.

I was taking classes in the spring term, just to knock some credits out before going on vacation with my family. One random Monday night, my friend Julie came over to my house to hang out, except she was not in the mood for our usual routine of watching movies or playing video games. She wanted to take a spontaneous road trip. So, I offered to take her to Detroit. She’d never really seen the city and knew I could show her around, so she hopped aboard with the plan.

Another good friend at the time, Mava, was over at the house as well, and Julie and I invited her to join us. She felt uneasy about it, but we talked her into coming. She went to tell my roommates, Peter and Casey – Casey was her boyfriend and, pardon my language, a total dick. They laughed and said, “You’re going to get shot.” Their comments about how dangerous the city was convinced her not to go.

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It took a solid ten minutes of Julie and I begging and telling her it was still light outside and that we'd stay in the nice parts of town before Mava would even think about coming. Finally I said, "Mava, you're always telling me that you get upset because you miss out on fun things your friends do without you. My gut tells me tonight is gonna be awesome."

She reluctantly got in the car, and spent the entirety of the 40-minute drive complaining, hyperventilating, and almost crying out of fear. Then, as we got off the exit to park by Comerica Park, we were greeted by a traffic jam, police blockades at almost every intersection and dozens of cops walking around. Right away I thought, 'oh shoot I'm going to eat my words; there was a murder here.' We drove all the way around downtown with nowhere to park, and settled on the sketchy little 5-dollar lot we saw when we first exited the interstate. Mava, of course, was fearing the worst: that my car would be broken into and all our things would be stolen.

We got out and walked over to Comerica Park and took pictures with the gigantic Tiger statues outside the ballpark and by the beautiful Edison Fountain nearby. Then we headed down Woodward, which was mysteriously closed off to all vehicle traffic. It was then that somebody finally told us what was going on: the yearly summer firework show was that night.

The three of us went and bought some sweets at Astoria, a fantastic little bakery in Greektown, took another walk, and lined up in a crowd to watch the fireworks from the foot of the Renaissance Center. It was, by far, the best night of my college experience. We really enjoyed ourselves. And, of course, on the way home, I had to prove my point to Mava.

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“Is there anything you’d like to tell me?” I asked.

“Yes, Zachary,” she said, “you were right.”

Detroit is a great city. But don’t take it from her. Don’t even take it from me.

Come down and see it for yourself. I promise, the fish don’t bite.

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