

June 6, 2015  
(March Letter)

Hi Samantha

Your March letter provided me with a rundown on your summer plans. By now I know that what was then a hope, is now a reality. Congratulations on getting your Saanich job again. It's nice to see that someone else recognizes your skills and capacity.

My summer is turning out to be more active than I originally planned – but the activities sound very interesting. Last month, I spent a week in Memphis at a conference with the OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development). The conference was interesting since it was about regional development, but I particularly enjoyed exploring the city and a few spots it had to offer.

A very moving one was the National Civil Rights Museum. This was a museum about the Civil Rights movement in the USA – starting with the slave trade right up to the current struggles. Its most striking feature is that it is built as a renovation and extension of the motel where Rev Martin Luther King Jr. was shot by James Earl Ray in 1968. As you can see from the photo they have kept the exterior of the motel basically the same (including 2 old cars parked outside) and placed a wreath on the balcony where he was killed.



From the balcony, you can also see where the bullet was shot since they have created a line of paving stones along its path. I have included a photo of this as well.

The museum is very impressive. I was particularly moved as it took us through the 1960s sit-ins, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the Freedom Rides, and the rise of Black Power – events of which you might not have heard. I was shocked to realize that this was about my history as well! When I was in university, the SCM was very involved in several of these events – mostly by publicizing, marching, and discussing them (remember, there was no internet in those days) but they even organized a busload of students to go to the southern USA to support those who were involved. I wasn't one who went, but my perspectives on society, inequality, power, and politics were all strongly influenced by the sense of injustice, horror, ambivalence, and frustration that I felt during that period. I expect that this plus the events and discussions about the Vietnam war were largely responsible for my move from the pure to the social sciences as I went through university. You might enjoy the website for the museum since they take you through some of the elements in a virtual fashion (<http://civilrightsmuseum.org/>).

The other museum I enjoyed was the Rock and Soul Museum (<http://memphisrocknsoul.org/>). This was dedicated to the history of music with a Memphis focus. This was the city where the blues music of the south (largely developed by black people), the hillbilly music of the poor white people (largely

sharecroppers), black soul music, rock music, and the jazz of the more urban whites came together. Record labels like Sun and Stax were known for the way in which they ignored the prohibition against playing “black” music and musicians on mainstream music – and began recording crossover music in the



40s and 50s. Elvis, for example, was such a scandal in his heyday since he adapted “black” music for “white” audiences and caught the attention of the many youth of the baby boom. It was helped by the emergence of mass communication through radio (and later TV) so that a generation of young people were hearing the same music. Before Facebook, this was the only way in which so many people were connected.

You may know that Elvis Presley’s famous residence called “Graceland” is in Memphis. I didn’t bother visiting it, however, since it was probably mostly about his furniture and clothes. Besides, it was my brother Pete who was the Elvis fan – I preferred the music of the Kingston Trio, Bob Dylan, Pete Seeger, Gordon Lightfoot, and Joan Baez.



I also went a few times to Beale St.

This is a street in Memphis which is famous for the many clubs and stores that were frequented by the heros and heroines of the Memphis music scene. One of the most famous is B.B. King who was still playing his famous brand of blues up until this May when he died at age 90. I remember seeing him play many years ago at the Orpheum Theatre in Vancouver. His songs and playing style have been very influential in all sorts of music.

Since his death was so recent, there were plenty of memorials and tributes to him in Memphis. One of them was an informal memorial that emerged outside his nightclub on Beale St. I added a photo of it for you.

You can also get a sense of the scene on Beale street from a video clip I took while I was there. You can see it by putting the following link in your browser:  
<http://billreimer.net/workshop/personal/videos/BealeStreetMusicAndViews20150521.mp4>.

I was also amused by a tradition that they have at the Peabody Hotel in Memphis. It is a very old hotel and many years ago the owner made a deal where some ducks spent the day in a fountain in the lobby of the hotel. Since the 1930s when this tradition was established, the ducks come down the elevator from their rooftop location, hang out in the fountain all day, then head back up the elevator at 5 PM back to the roof. I took a video of this event as well. You can see it via <http://billreimer.net/workshop/personal/videos/PeabodyHotelDucks20150521.mp4>. The story of the ducks is also at <http://www.peabodymemphis.com/peabody-ducks/>.

Love,