

Thursday, 27 June 2019
Helen Keller Day (b. 27 June 1880)
Feast of Our Lady of Perpetual Help (OLPH)

**A Brief Statement in Support of the
Somerville City Council Resolution to
Honor the Life & Work of Ifeanyi Menkiti**

Good evening, Madame Council President, and Honorable Councilors All.

A special acknowledgment goes to the Honorable Wilfred Mbah, Councilor-at-Large, who graciously sponsors this Resolution, and to the Honorable Katjana Ballantyne, serving both as Council President and as Ward 7 representative, where the Menkiti family has long resided in Precinct 1, at 8 Malvern Avenue (near Teele Square).

I'm Jerome Maryon, and I rise to speak briefly on behalf of the Resolution to Honor the Life and Work of the late Professor Ifeanyi Menkiti. Ifeanyi wrote a poem here in Somerville that very much reflects the spirit of this City – reflects it in Somerville's remarkable threefold diversity, density, and deliberative self-government (let's call them the "3-D approach"). It is one of Ifeanyi's most famous poems, one I have been privileged to hear him recite on our panels at a number of international conferences in political philosophy, and it is entitled, "Before a Common Soil."

In relevant part, it reads:

And I have called out to you,
Children of an undivided earth,
That you join your hands together
And be of one accord before a common soil...

How does this poem reflect the spirit of Somerville? It does so in all three dimensions.

First, it embraces a beautiful *diversity*: not just any diversity, but a beautiful one, and one of long duration. After all, there is plenty of diversity in the refugee camps that have sprung up in Europe, the Middle East, and Africa, camps that could scarcely be qualified as "beautiful," and which were never intended to be long-standing. No, the diversity of Somerville is of an entirely different character; it's the character that John J. Murphy emphasized all the way back in the autumn of 1929. As we all recall, it was on "Black Tuesday," the 29th of October, 1929, that the New York Stock Exchange – the "Big Board" – crashed, marking the onset of the Great Depression. Just one week later, on Tuesday, the 5th of November, 1929, John Murphy assembled a coalition of Irish and Italians (which was already quite a feat in 1929), plus Portuguese and Greeks, to sweep City Hall, the Board of Aldermen, and the School Committee; Murphy's genius was a portent of things to come nationwide, in the November, 1930, midterm

congressional elections to the U.S. House and Senate: Somerville had helped to point the way for the nation. As the city motto says, "Municipal Freedom Gives National Strength".

Mayor Murphy, in his Inaugural Address of Monday, the 6th of January, 1930 – which I commend to you – built on that aspect of international unity in Somerville. For, as Ifeanyi says, we are "children of an undivided earth" – all divisions on the map of Earth are human, not natural, and what we divide, we can re-unite.

Second, Ifeanyi's poem revels in *density*: he calls us, joyously, to join hands together – and this is something we cannot do online, we can only do it as neighbor to neighbor. An expert in the Law once tried to grill an itinerant preacher, demanding to know, "And who is my neighbor?" The answer he received went far beyond the law books: it has become one of the building blocks of our civilization: my neighbor is none other than the Good Samaritan. For there is no community without mutual assistance; what's more, proximity intensifies the possibility of progress. We certainly see this here, for Somerville is one of the most densely populated cities in the nation: once again, it stands out.

But if diversity and density are pretty much givens, how do we enter the third dimension, *deliberative self-government*? Indeed, for that matter, if diversity can be divisive – think of the causes of those refugee camps – and density can be depressing – think of the favelas and barrios of our neighbors in the Southern Hemisphere, or the slums of our neighbors in Calcutta (Kolkata), then how does the third dimension redeem the other two?

Once again, in his own gentle, unassuming way, Ifeanyi speaks a word of wisdom. He implicitly defines deliberative self-government as one aiming to be "of one accord before a common soil..." A common soil: something we did not make, but which we inherit and pass along to future generations, so, something we hold in trust; as a trust, it's something we must develop – and yet also, we must share. And this is precisely the history of Somerville at its finest moments, as when John Winthrop and partners honorably purchased the land from Squaw Sachem, or when the first boat built in America was launched right here, partly to defend the property of all, or when the American flag itself was first flown in battle, on Prospect Hill, representing all thirteen colonies coming together.

Back in his Inaugural Address, on the Feast of the Wise Men in 1930, Mayor Murphy said that Somerville needed to address two tasks: first, of course, to alleviate and ultimately to correct the "urgent municipal needs" brought on by the Depression; but second, to initiate the first steps of "a comprehensive program looking to the fullest development of our civic life." That's enduring wisdom, the sort which has helped Somerville be recognized as one of the best-governed cities in the Commonwealth – and in the nation. Just 4.2 square miles, Somerville has often served as a model of a "common soil," a common trust, and so it is fitting that we honor Ifeanyi, his widow, Carol, and their four children, who modeled the very best of our civic spirit. The very best, those who understand, as Ifeanyi would keenly quote from the First Letter to the

Corinthians, "If one member of the body suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it."

Rejoicing in the gifts and the memory of Ifeanyi, I thank you.