

An Homage to Caffè Lena

By Bruce Piasecki

Anecdote of the Jar

I placed a jar in Tennessee,
And round it was, upon a hill.
It made the slovenly wilderness
Surround that hill.

The wilderness rose up to it,
And sprawled around, no longer wild.
The jar was round upon the ground
And tall and of a port in air.

It took dominion everywhere.
The jar was gray and bare.
It did not give of bird or bush,
Like nothing else in Tennessee.

— *Wallace Stevens*

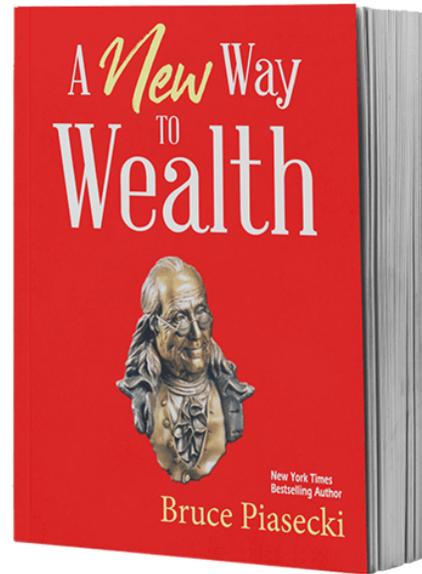
In 1960, Lena Spencer opened her coffeehouse in Saratoga Springs, New York. The world grew tall around her place. As in Wallace Stevens' magical poem about "a jar in Tennessee," the place grew tall because many people came round and saw the tallness in this small, entrancing place. A former woodworking shop became a venue of innovation and inclusion.

By 1961, Bob Dylan had played here on the same stage you see now. Last time I was on this stage, in January at the start of 2022, I met a doctor who had witnessed that 1961 magical performance by Dylan here. The doctor is now coming to this Caffè in his 90s. The doc said: "I told friends that boy could write, but he has no voice!"

Then Don McLean visited this stage before his "American Pie" boom. In fact, a generation of folk musicians and writers incubated with Lena Spencer, as the legend of Lena Spencer's generosity to Dylan and McLean spread fast.

This is the way history is made—by kindness and focus—not only through violence, and war.

In our next 90 minutes today, let's call this kind of history “the popular history of shared music and culture.” Think of my new book as a kind of prayer for hope, this *A New Way to Wealth* as a song for a near future, where we can address climate change and resource scarcities together, not apart.



Phase Two

Not long after this boom began at Caffè Lena with the musicians, they began their storytelling and open mic days.

Spalding Gray—what a total trip!—came to this stage to practice his massively funny storytelling scrapes with fate. It was fun, fabulous. Eventually, like Bob Dylan, Gray took to TV and the biggest stages. This stream of Caffè Lena storyteller-troubadours opened my style—as I left tenure at RPI and as the century turned into a more colorful set of cultural intensities on climate change, the rise of Chinese capitalism, and of course Mr. Putin.

Cultural history was blooming in Saratoga Springs, New York, like a new spring composite flower before our eyes—from the new solution-seeking stage of environmentalism in Sustainable Saratoga to the broad voices calling for greater diversity and inclusion and a democratic justice in our streets and with our police.

In keeping with Lena's devotion to presenting talent, Sarah Craig continues this special mix of programming. She and her special team set a stage for music and storytelling year-round that joins the feeling of being at home with livestream.

What the Caffè represents for me should now be clear. For this small Polish immigrant voice of mine grew each decade into a faith that you could be a troubadour, too, even in these dark days of Putin and Trump.

You could be a more inquisitive dog, barking out loud like a Beat, running along and picking up smells and foods that caused your further growth. Rather than the black and white shrills of fact and academics, you could write

in color, narratives of discovery and hope. As Leonard Cohen sings, you could enter “the Tower of Song,” and strive to hear King David’s chord more directly, less abstractly.

Thanks to Caffè Lena, this became a possibility for me.

You—Sarah Craig, sitting in this audience now, with a global stream of intelligent, selective guests at your side—are the country’s most continuous and generous folk venue, a live stage, a place where you can pursue the freedom in your phrasing and the music in your ears.

Thanks.

Phase Three: The Future

Now, my friends, I ask you: Who wrote this next paragraph on page 75 of their exceptional picture book of dreams, myths, and music, that sums up why I am here?

What makes America exceptional isn't our wealth or size or skyscrapers or military power. It's the fact that America's the only nation in human history that's made up of people of every race, religion, and culture from every corner of the globe. And that we've had faith in our democracy, our common creed, to blend this hodgepodge of humanity into one people. Nothing symbolizes this truth more than our music.

Have you figured it out yet? Can you detect the voice and cadence in this luminous jointly penned prose song?

Well, the book’s title is *Renegades: Born in the USA*. By “music” they meant not just music in the abstract, but also the protest songs of ordinary American people, our collective voice.

This picture book is written, with script writers, by Barack Obama and Bruce Springsteen. These two men, plus Ben Franklin, plus the strong women in my family and life, plus George Orwell, and especially the living legend Bob Dylan, confirm this claim on diversity and inclusion. Prejudice can never defeat this history, although it will try daily.

Thank you, Caffè Lena, for keeping the music, the troubadours, alive with a stage.

And thank you now, Sarah Craig, and others like Reese Fulmer, for expanding into this global venue that includes livestreaming with the greats like Mia Funk of ONE PLANET PODCAST. Amen.

