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Jon Stewart: We Need More than Amplification

I am a sucker for a meaningful gathering on the mall in Washington. Every year I come to the Fourth of July concert on the West Lawn of the Capitol and never fail to get choked up during the playing of the national anthem against the backdrop of the Capitol dome and the American flag. My family did not at first believe me when I said that we had to be at Obama's inauguration given the cold temperatures and the predictions of the size of the crowd, but we made it and were glad we did.

In the same vein, the Jon Stewart rally felt important even though the purpose seemed obscure in the days leading up to it. I got to the middle of the mall at 7th Street before being paralyzed by human gridlock. The stage was at 3rd street and the nearest Jumbotron was about a block ahead of me. Because the screens were not well elevated it was hard to get a visual. Even worse, except for the musical acts, the audio was insufficient for the size of the crowd. Periodically a chant went up from the crowd: "louder, louder". From what I could tell, with as many people behind me as in front of me, a good half of the audience saw and heard little of what was happening on stage.

Yet despite the problems in amplification, I was not sorry that I attended. People were excited to be there and it felt like America at its best. In my section there were young and old alike, mostly white but a smattering of people of color as well. We were packed in so tightly that I feared someone would get hurt or, at the very least, see tempers flare when some more aggressive people tried to move up in the crowd. It did not happen. Kindness was contagious. A few people in our section fainted and the crowd miraculously parted like the Red Sea to let emergency personnel through.

Yet never have so many people gathered for so little. Don't get me wrong. I love Jon Stewart. When I could hear him and other parts of the program, I got some laughs. It would not be fair to say that Stewart under-delivered. Neither he nor his partner, Steve Colbert, promised anything. Most of what took place on stage was an extended version of their respective TV shows.

But the crowd clearly wanted more. Each time there was an introduction of the next part of the program, I could see the anticipation in the faces of the people around me. They wanted to hear a message. They wanted to be inspired. Just a week ago a poll conducted of over half a million

people online voted Jon Stewart the most influential man in America. At a time when everything in our country seems to be going wrong, those who came to the rally expected comedy but secretly hoped for inspiration and guidance.

One telling moment in the rally came when Yusef Islam (the former Cat Stevens) was brought on stage to sing his classic song, "Peace Train." It was a message song and it created a hush over the immense crowd that reflected the desire to come together around something. Two stanzas in, Colbert interrupted the song and brought on a competing band (Ozzie Osbourne). For the next few minutes the two acts "competed" for air time. The crowd booed the interruption loudly. They came for a "I Have a Dream" moment, but Stewart and Colbert were serving up their version of Soupy Sales.

The closest the rally ever got to a message was in the final minutes when Jon Stewart donned a suit and tie and took on a serious tone. At this point, the crowd had been spoofed so often by a message turning into a joke that much of my section had stopped paying attention. I didn't take a poll, but I was feeling let down and I think that others shared my disappointment.

In what was a not so subtle dig at the excessive partisan rhetoric on Capitol Hill in this election cycle from the media pundits and from cable newscasters, Stewart declared: "If we amplify everything, we hear nothing."

That was it. That was the message. Everything else was irony, parody or comedy. It was not enough.

The breakdown of civil discourse in this country is a serious problem. It is eroding our confidence that our democracy can work. We hope that elected officials, pundits, NGO leaders, academics and intellectuals might engage in the kind of inquiry and purposeful conversation that could help find solutions to the very serious issues facing our country and the world. Instead we get the intellectual equivalent of 5th graders engaged in a spitball fight. If you want to understand why, in the space of 25 years, the United States has fallen behind so much of the rest of the developed world in key areas like education, technology, ecological responsibility and the like, look no further than the failure of our leaders to lead.

Jon Stewart did not ask to be the leader of the free world and never claimed that he was. But history has a way serving up opportunities when we least expect it. Saturday's rally was one of those moments. Half a million people were eager to be galvanized. Jon Stewart: "We never heard you."