by Dallas Trombley

Let's Make The Hudson Great Again

I don't like the way the Hudson River is characterized in the media. Should we disparage the river as a dirty toxic dump? I don't think so.

I grew up in New Baltimore, about a mile uphill from the Hudson. My dad and I used to take a walk to the river every March, and watch the icebergs flow south after the wind had warmed the air. Standing on the riverbank with my father meant the arrival of spring every year.

My father had a friend from high school, who bought an old building that was once an ice house, and then a spot where the Frangella brothers grew mushrooms. His friend cemented the floor and painted the walls and sold hamburgers and soft-serve ice cream in the old warehouse down in Coeymans. It was called The Muddy Rudder and it was in the building where Yanni's Too is today. The business only lasted a couple of years. My dad and I took walks down Main Street in Ravena on school nights, and then he'd drive me to his friend's ice cream spot. While they talked, I strolled to the dock at Coeymans Landing, and looked over the dark water. I was twelve, thirteen, fourteen years old then, in love for the first time, wanting to leave my home town. I'd watch a barge drone downriver, or hear a train across the river rushing through the woods, and imagine I was a stowaway on the ship or a hobo on the train.

Now I'm an adult, I've hitch hiked, visited other states and countries, lived in a city. I miss spending time by the river with my father.

President Trump's slogan "Make America Great Again" helped get him elected. I've worked in politics and sales and I just knew that the candidate was a salesman who came up with a slogan that he thought regular people would buy. Of course it worked, and I don't blame him for being a better advertiser than his competitor for office. However, I really believe in making America great again, and I believe it can only happen if we resurrect our small town communities and markets, and I resent that he used the phrase so flippantly without a real plan—like if my partner in a card game just threw out a trump card instead of using it when it would be most effective. After the last election, it's going to be harder to get people to help make their communities great again, because they will feel it's just a dog and pony show to get some millionaire elected.

I want to pursue my ideas to make our small towns in upstate New York great again. I really think we could do it, if only we focused on fixing up our local Main Streets and riverfronts. I've got plenty of ideas, but before any of them could happen, we've got to get over our discouragement and start to have pride in where we live again. That means not disparaging our local communities, and not disparaging the Hudson River.

The Hudson River is the greatest river in the world! New York City is the greatest city in the world because it sits at the entrance of the Hudson River. New York State is the Empire State because the Hudson, in conjunction with the Erie Canal, filled the need that allowed transportation of goods from the interior of the United States to New York City. The Hudson River was the subject of the paintings of the first artists in America after the Revolution (you can visit Thomas Cole's and Frederick Church's houses near Catskill). The Hudson Valley is the setting of the first novels in the history of American literature, where James Fennimore Cooper's characters scouted and Washington Irving's horsemen lost their heads, or slept for 100 years. It is the site of battles that preserved our liberty. It is the river where the environmental movement began. And yet, my entire life, I've heard the river disparaged as dirty, disgusting, and toxic. Just as, my entire life, I've heard my hometown disparaged. I'm sick of it. The sooner we start to appreciate what the river has to offer, the better.

My friend Jake is a schoolteacher. He is running for Town Council in New Baltimore. I'm nervous for him, because he goes to all the meetings, he's very smart, very friendly, has a lot of ideas. But for decades now, people have won office on the idea that "we're going to hell in a hand basket," and I'm afraid he won't be able to reach enough people who think, "But I want to make things better." Cynics are the worst sort of people. They think they're very smart. I think they're social parasites, since their negativity puts a check on positive action.

I have a vision of the future. In this future, people like to visit small towns, because there are interesting things to do there. In the towns straddling the river, in my vision, there are thriving riverfront communities. There are municipal beaches where people can swim, as in Ulster Landing. There are tidal boardwalks for people to stroll from one hamlet to another. There are water taxis to ferry people from one center of nightlife in, say, Athens, across the river to another in Hudson. A Swiss company proposed to build a gondola from the train station in Rensselaer across to the Empire Plaza in Albany a year ago—what a great idea! It seems to me that if people appreciated what the river has to offer, they would congregate there, and if people congregate in an area, it becomes a profitable place to site a business, and if multiple businesses congregate in one area, it becomes thriving and draws more people, and those businesses subsidize the tax base, which make buildings in the whole municipality more attractive, and people walk around and see their thriving community, and feel better about the way things are going, and are nicer to one another, and become more active citizens. And then they raise their children to be respectable and happy, and they save money, and there are more jobs for teenagers and retired people and entrepreneurs. But first we have to get over this idea that society is going downhill and our greatest historical resources, like the Hudson, are somehow bad. The Hudson River is a grand, ancient avenue of communication and transportation and beauty and ephemeral peace. Let us focus on that! It seems like a good place to start.