

HALF-TIME



Introduction

Cueing off FIFA 2026, I realized some moments in life are like getting to the half time. A time to reset, a time to say what's not working and what should change. Rehydrate, recharge and get into play again. Some answers do lie in the past. When I look back, I recognize moments when I retreated into my own space (my own half-time). When I wanted to be my own island of peace, so that I didn't become the chaos that surrounded me. Maybe this blog is simply a step in my play for this part of my life. Expression instead of silence. After moving into my brand new apartment early this year, I felt something magical within a few weeks—happiness finds you when you stop striving for it, and when it is least expected. Through this blog I want to share my experiences, thoughts, maybe even my favorite recipes. Anything from my life that can touch yours. I thought I would start with my visit to the JFK Presidential Museum and Library in Boston!

Profile in Courage

From fairy tales to daring adventures, the authors we read during our early school years were Enid Blyton, Carolyn Keene and Franklin W Dixon, among others. Apart from the plots that were gripping and exciting, I always wondered about the summer they described. Rapturous accounts of children basking in golden sunshine, or snoozing under shady trees. Or listening to bird song while puffy white clouds went sailing by in azure skies. Where we lived in India, summers meant shutting windows the minute the sun began its scorching ascent and finding succor in Monopoly or Chess till our brains felt fried.

By June this year, in New England, winter had finally loosened her grip. Excited about spending a day in the sunshine, I forgot the cardinal rule for avoiding heat stroke-hydrate well. No surprise then that my foolish bravado earned me my first ride in an ambulance, my blood pressure in the boots. I'm immensely grateful to the server and two nurses who took care of me till the EMTs arrived. I remember them chuckling when I offered to walk to the gurney so they didn't have to lift me. I also remember thinking if it weren't for the excellent hands I was in, I would have been knocking on Heaven's or Hell's door (partial credit to Guns N' Roses).

After my dramatic syncopal episode, as the 4th of July approached, I had sobered up enough to decide I should spend the day indoors. Since temperatures were showing no signs of abating, I said nay to fireworks and picked JFK Presidential Library and Museum, one of the many markers of Boston pride.

The library is a beautiful grey limestone building with a soaring glass atrium that offers sweeping views of the bay with the Boston harbor islands in the distance. On a self-guided tour, visitors can browse the many letters, photographs and personal artifacts on display of JFK and Jackie. Browse the exhibits at <https://www.jfklibrary.org/>

Of all the things JFK is known for, I have always thought of him as an agent of change. He reminds me of the same spirit Rajiv Gandhi ushered into India as its youngest Prime Minister. JFK died in '63, before I was born, but when I read about or hear about the tremendous optimism that he inspired, I recognize it through my memory of the love and hope that RG symbolized. Especially during the time he was running for a fresh term, after he had learned and grown wiser from his experiences. I recall how much people love charismatic leaders of change. And how much people hate them too.



Choices we Make

Growing up, JFK was the average student who demonstrated little of his promised potential, going by the words of his school teachers. As educationists, we encounter students who may not study hard or have clearly defined goals but still aspire for spectacular success. And there are students with tremendous potential, who do not thirst for the success that we clearly see them capable of. The salient feature about JFK's life is that he may have played truant at school, but what emerges from his actions is that he seems to have been driven by an unquenchable thirst for adventure. And a deep desire to make his own life matter.

And he made bold choices.

When WWII broke out, JFK enlisted and used his considerable influence not to bow out of the war, but to seek active duty. As Lieutenant JFK, he saw action in the Pacific theater, and commanded the Patrol Torpedo boat, PT-109. When his boat was rammed by a Japanese destroyer, two of his crew died instantly. He gave his life jacket to his injured friend, and pulled him with the equipment's straps between his teeth as he struck out for an island 3

miles away. For days, they swam from island to island, subsisting on coconuts till he met a native islander who told him about an Australian vessel nearby. He inscribed a message on a coconut and asked the islander to deliver his message. Rescue came for him and his 11 crewmen. The coconut and his dog tag wink from behind glass showcases, telling a feisty tale about a harrowing experience. He often spoke about serving in the Navy as his biggest badge of honor. To this day, he is the only president who won a purple heart.



*Left: Presidential Medal of Freedom with Distinction, conferred on him posthumously, 1963
For his service, JFK also received the Navy and Marine Corps Medal and Purple Heart*

Above: The two books JFK authored

In the course of one's life, many dreams fall by the wayside, but our choices make us who we are. JFK switched careers but ultimately, he painted his own life's canvas. He defied health and severe back problems to serve in the Navy, as a journalist and senator, before he became the President. He named his favorite boat "Victura" which is Latin for "about to conquer". Prophetic words. How we think about our lives, how we see ourselves and the words we choose to speak about ourselves matters. Perhaps that is why we mourn dreams that are cut short by an assassin's bullet, or a bomb, for they end the story of an indomitable spirit. A spirit that worked so hard to persevere.

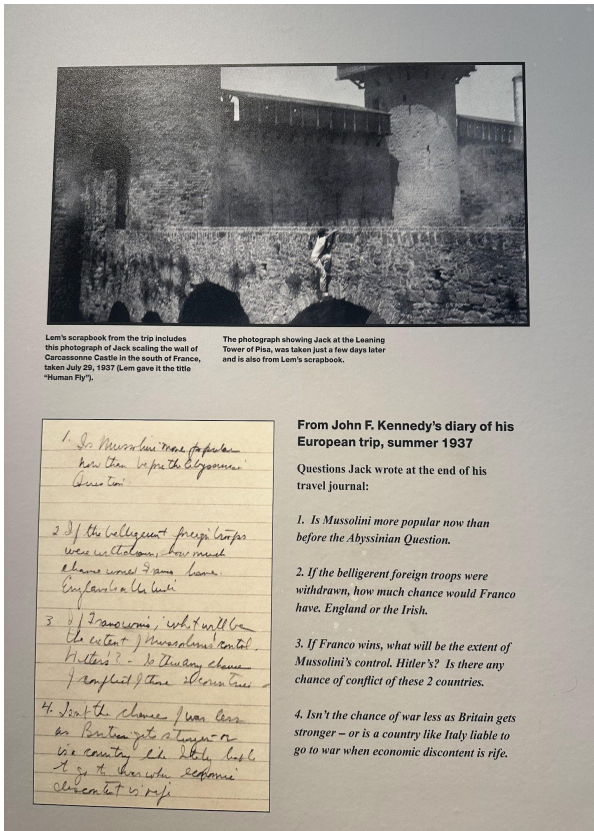


Left: Excerpts from John's report card. Right: His favorite boat, Victura

The museum also has several exhibits about Jackie in her role as the First Lady. Her contribution was immense, but more on that in a later post.

The Statesman

When people travel, their vision and understanding of who they are in the world expands. JFK's awareness as a global citizen was not accidental. When he was in Europe after graduating high school, he wrote a journal. The questions he jotted down offer a glimpse into his mental acuity, even if it appears sophomoric. Curiosity, after all, in Einstein's words, is the engine of achievement. I was impressed simply by the fact that he wrote a journal (and climbed like Spiderman over Carcassonne walls).



1. *Is Mussolini more popular now than before the Abyssinian Question.*
2. *If the belligerent foreign troops were withdrawn, how much chance would Franco have. England or the Irish.*
3. *If Franco wins, what will be the extent of Mussolini's control. Hitler's? Is there any chance of conflict of these two countries.*
4. *Isn't the chance of war less as Britain gets stronger - or is a country like Italy liable to go to war when economic discontent is rife.*

Above: A young JFK's journal comments

JFK set up the Peace Corp, the Alliance for Progress, besides giving a boost to the Apollo Space Program and Civil Rights. Some executive orders are all about improving communities, here and abroad. More than 50 years ago, he was a leader who tried to see the humanity of other peoples, and other cultures. "If we cannot now end our differences, at least we can make the world a safe place for diversity". Words spoken during his speech at my alma mater, American University in 1963. His commencement speech can be heard here: <https://www.c-span.org/program/white-house-event/k-commencement-president-kennedy-american-university-1963/117900>

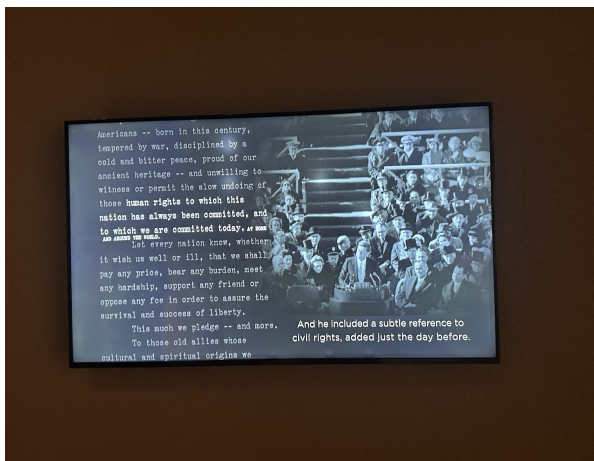
Echoes from a Distant Time

There are two auditoriums in the building. One screened his inaugural address, which I find captivating each time I listen to it. His words evoke a sense of disbelief now at where the

world is today: large pockets of conflagration inflicting unfathomable loss of life and property. Incomprehensible anguish and devastation that assail our minds.

Personally, I am easily enamored by heartfelt words and elegant speech, and it has landed me in more trouble than I care to remember. But I have also worked with many business leaders whose words carried the weight of their intent. And learnt to identify the tactical ones (even if brilliantly so) and those who held true vision. Most were leaders advanced in their careers, but sometimes, I did come across a few who were young, and truly visionary. A 36-year old CEO who wanted to turn his legacy enterprise into a professionally-managed one. A 40-year old CEO, who a year ago had joined the company only as a finance manager.

When JFK spoke, his words sounded genuine, and were followed with actions during his term, to not prove vacuous. "Let both sides explore what unites us instead of belaboring those problems that divide us." or "Let us never negotiate out of fear. But let us never fear to negotiate." He spoke with the measured, deliberate cadence typical of orators of those days. But listen closely, and you can also hear the care and conviction of someone who was actually stepping into his power, and one who held a vision for his country.



Left: He took care with words. I appreciate that so much in today's times of reckless and thoughtless social media posts

Right: Crowds during JFK's Inauguration Day

His memory has faded into nostalgia and his words “Ask not what your country can do for you...” attached as a permanent blurb to his persona by people who remember little else about him. But I have always thought his next sentence was even more powerful: “My fellow citizens of the world: Ask not what America can do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man.” Touche’, Mr President.

The transcript of his speech can be found here:

<https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/president-john-f-kennedys-inaugural-address>

And what does Youtube not have? <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PEC1C4p0k3E>

The second auditorium runs a documentary about recordings of discussions during the Cuban crisis. Historical accounts may assign credit heavily to one leader; but one realizes that Khrushchev's concession did as much to defuse the missile crisis as did JFK's. What's remarkable is that the two world leaders came from vastly different backgrounds--one was born into immense wealth and privilege, the other born into crushing poverty. One whose meteoric career path was independent of associated salaries, the other who worked as a farmhand. Both strove to avoid a possible Armageddon. Crucially, the common denominator was that they had served during WWII, and understood firsthand, the cost.



Left: Recreation of the 1960 Democratic National Convention

Right: The final electoral vote was 303 for Kennedy and 219 for Nixon

Peace is Difficult

Stepping out of the building I felt like I had returned from the past. Maybe nostalgia is also about believing that the people, values and beliefs of the past would fix all that is ugly and corrosive in the world today.

Modern international geopolitics, commerce and cultural exchanges have become increasingly complex. It's incomprehensible how despite this high level of interconnectedness, we live in a scenario that normalizes the threat of nuclear annihilation. As George Orwell famously said "To see what is in front of one's nose needs a constant struggle."

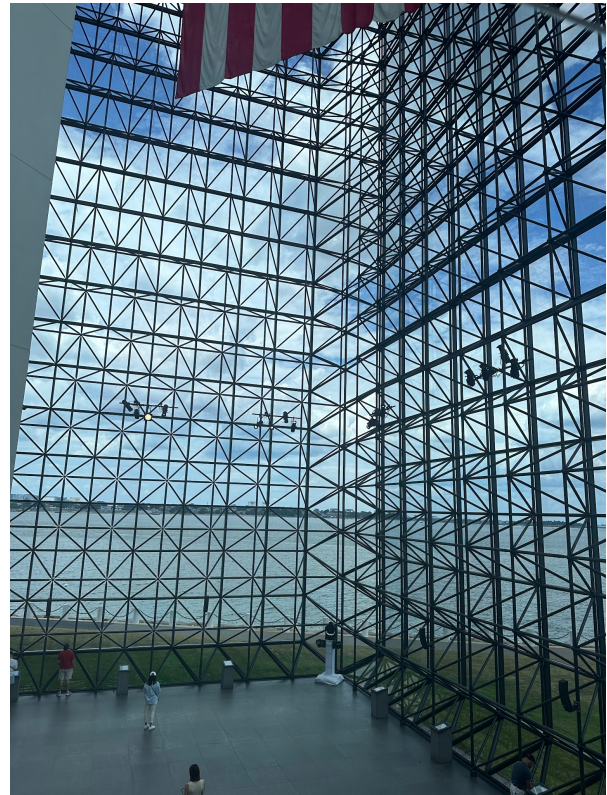
What is the ultimate inflection point for systemic change? Everyday we read about military actions that normalize civilian death, even those of thousands of children, as mere collateral damage. This normalization of violence sustains concepts like Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD), a concept of deterrence that works on the assumption that a full-scale nuclear war would result in global extinction.

JFK famously ignored hawkish political advisors and military leaders to negotiate a withdrawal of missiles during the Cuban Missile Crisis. In the face of the huge political, personal and historic risk. It must have taken an immense amount of emotional and intellectual courage to ignore the "groupthink" prevalent in DC at the time. Almost akin to committing political suicide.

True champions do not plunge the world into the mad pits of Dante's inferno. Instead, they strive tirelessly for peace creating social and economic interdependence which fosters global stability. JFK cannot escape criticism about Vietnam. But at least on one front, where the world teetered on the brink of Armageddon, he did what must have been incredibly difficult: he followed his heart.

On my way out of the museum, I thanked the attendants who take a deep, personal pride in working there, not because it's a swank museum, but for who it is dedicated to. It's like a permanent eulogy to JFK and Jackie. I felt a little sad that we have come so far away from

the vision of leaders who actually wanted to make the world a better place. I ordered my copy of the Pulitzer-winning “Profiles in Courage” even as I walked towards the car park. My 4th July pilgrimage felt quite complete.



Back to The Pavilion