

## Wilderness House Literary Review 18/2

*Elliot Wilner*

### **Viva Jose Andres**

WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE JOSE ANDRES elected as our next President? Or can't you express an opinion, because you don't know anything about Jose Andres? In either case, it might interest you to know that a couple of years ago I attended a World Series baseball game at which a plebiscite was held -- by voice vote -- that enabled the spectators to express a preference for either Jose Andres or Donald Trump. And Jose Andres won going away. As it so happens, Jose Andres *for sure will not* be elected our next president, because he wasn't born in the United States. He was born in Spain and later became a naturalized citizen of this country. Nevertheless, you should know who he is, because he has been doing some very important work for the past decade or more. So, I'll tell you a little about his work and, while I'm at it, I'll tell you about his memorable vanquishment of Donald Trump at the baseball game.

As for myself, I am an elderly physician long retired, and I have been a passive witness to the ongoing drama that is the covid-19 pandemic, now well into its third year. I haven't provided medical care to anyone during the pandemic, nor have I required any medical care myself, but I have marveled at the selfless, heroic services that have been rendered by many physicians, nurses, technicians, orderlies and other individuals across this country. One unlikely hero has been a "celebrity chef" by the name of Jose Andres, who has for years enjoyed considerable prosperity derived from the several upscale restaurants that he has owned and operated in the Washington, D.C. area. He has no doubt succeeded in these ventures by catering to the tastes of a wealthy and self-indulgent clientele. During the past decade or so, however, Jose Andres has pursued a second career -- in which he has once again succeeded admirably -- by catering to a quite different clientele: the victims of natural disasters around the world, people who have been unable to obtain sufficient food to sustain themselves or their families.

Through his charity, World Central Kitchen, Jose Andres has supplied millions of free meals to food-deprived people: in Puerto Rico and Haiti, when each country was devastated by a hurricane; in Yokohama, Japan, when it was inundated by a tsunami; and in several other countries that were stricken by natural disasters. Soon after the onset of the covid-19 pandemic, in early 2020, when millions of U.S. citizens were experiencing food insecurity, Jose Andres's charity stepped in and supplied free meals to many. His efforts here and abroad have been aided by cash contributions from philanthropists like Jeff Bezos -- but Jose Andres's own, far-reaching contribution has been his "genius idea" of providing food relief through subsidies to local restaurants in each disaster-stricken country. Without the subsidies, most of those restaurants would not have remained viable. The restaurants have, in turn, helped support local farmers through their purchases of fresh farm produce. In this way, he has not only sustained hungry people but has helped assure the survival of many businesses and jobs.

Not long ago, my friend Irmgard forwarded to me an update on some of Jose Andres's ongoing charitable projects: In response to the Covid-19

## Wilderness House Literary Review 18/2

pandemic in the U.S., she wrote, World Central Kitchen has already served more than forty million meals to needy families and frontline health workers in various regions of the country. In Washington, D.C., Jose Andres's efforts have been supported by the Washington Nationals baseball team, which has put the immense kitchens in their stadium at his disposal, enabling him to provide meals for thousands of D.C. residents. Irmgard closed her message to me by writing, "What an ingenious fellow! He has touched me more than once." Irmgard was, of course, alluding to the other food-relief projects that Jose Andres has undertaken in recent years, prior to his ongoing Covid-19 efforts in the U.S. and Spain. Earlier this year, soon after Putin's invasion of Ukraine, Jose Andres announced that his World Central Kitchen had been dispatched to Poland in order to provide food relief for Ukrainian refugees. With the war now entering its eighth month, he has served upwards of twenty-five million meals to those refugees. His vision, his energy and his humanity have no doubt been inspiring not only to Irmgard but to decent people everywhere.

It so happens that In October 2019, shortly before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, I paid a visit to the Washington Nationals' stadium in Washington, D.C., the occasion being the fifth game of the World Series. The Nationals and the Houston Astros had split the previous four games. My son-in-law had encouraged me to buy a ticket and join him, because he knew of my longtime and largely unrequited affection for the home team. (The Nationals' most recent appearance in a World Series had been in 1933, four years before I was born, but I never gave up hope.) So, I agreed to buy a ticket – the price of which had been reduced, in the wake of the Nationals' defeat the previous day, from "outrageous" to merely "absurd" -- and join my son-in-law at the game.

Just before the start of the game, an announcement was made over the public address system that Jose Andres had been given the honor of tossing the ceremonial "first pitch." There had been no publicity surrounding the Nationals' decision to honor Jose Andres in this way, but his reputation had evidently preceded him and he was accorded a rousing, prolonged, standing ovation. It was gratifying to realize that his charitable work abroad had been recognized and appreciated by many Americans. And what transpired at the stadium a short while later would prove to be -- in a somewhat perverse way -- equally gratifying.

President Trump arrived at the stadium in the middle of the third inning, having purposefully delayed his arrival because the ever-alert Secret Service had advised him of the honor that was to be bestowed on Jose Andres. (Trump was known to have harbored a grudge against Andres because of a disputed contract between the two of them.) The crowd was duly informed of Trump's presence by the public address announcer. Then, spontaneously, a rapidly escalating, crescendo chorus of "boooo!" issued from the throats of 47,000 spectators -- most of them, anyway -- and reverberated throughout the stadium without let-up for the next five minutes. The uproar actually caused play on the field to be delayed! It was wonderful! It was liberating! I had become disengaged from the game as the Astros built up a big lead over the Nationals, but now I felt alive, re-vivified! When I returned home that evening, I discovered, to my surprise, that my voice was hoarse.

## Wilderness House Literary Review 18/2

Although the Nationals did lose the baseball game that day, I cherish my memory of the morality play that attended the appearances of Jose Andres and Donald Trump at the stadium. Jose Andres was welcomed as a genuine hero, while Trump, a true anti-hero, was roundly roasted. If the Republicans could have nominated Jose Andres for President in 2020, instead of the other guy, they might well have won the election. But at least on that night at the baseball stadium, I had the satisfaction of knowing that it was Jose Andres who had been roundly acclaimed as the people's choice.