



WESTMINSTER
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The Healing of the Nations

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Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations (Revelation 22:1-2).

Peggy Noonan, who was a speechwriter for Ronald Reagan and still writes on public affairs, has a Memorial Day column this weekend describing the relationship between two generals on opposite sides of the Civil War. Lewis Armistead of Virginia and Winfield Hancock of Pennsylvania both graduated from West Point, and Hancock served as Armistead's quartermaster, which is how they became good friends. When the Civil War broke out, Armistead went with the South and Hancock with the North, but they met to say goodbye, along with some other officers who had served together and would soon be divided by the war.

Two years later, both generals turned up at Gettysburg. Armistead heard that Hancock was there, and he asked Robert E. Lee if he could try to find his friend to say hello. Soldiers occasionally did that sort of thing in the Civil War, since many of them knew people on the other side. Lee gave Armistead permission, but as it turned out, conditions were too chaotic at Gettysburg and the southern general never found his northern friend.

Armistead was mortally wounded during Pickett's charge, but he made it to the Union side of a wall, where he asked to see Hancock. When he heard that Hancock had been wounded, too, and was unavailable, the southern

general sent a message: “Tell General Hancock that General Armistead sends his regrets.” Armistead died shortly afterward in a Union hospital tent, and later it was learned that he had sent Hancock’s wife a package containing his own Bible as a sign of the men’s deep friendship, to be opened in the event that he was killed in the war.

Peggy Noonan’s gloss on the story is, “We’ve overcome a great deal. We see this best when we don’t deny our history but tell the whole messy, complicated, embarrassing, ennobling tale.” She closes with a suggestion for our own fractious time: “Show generosity to a foe this weekend. Or better, be brave and show love.”¹

Our country’s Memorial Day observance began with what was called Decoration Day not long after the Civil War. From the beginning, a great theme of Memorial Day was not only to honor those who died in battle, but also to recognize that war is a tragic thing, and sometimes even enemies used to be friends; and sooner or later, when the war is over, those who fought against each other will need to learn to live together.

Living together doesn’t necessarily mean agreeing with what the other side was about. John Meacham, the Pulitzer Prize-winning historian who, by the way, will be the first speaker next fall for Town Hall South, has a new book called *The Soul of America*. The subtitle is *The Battle for our Better Angels*, recalling Lincoln’s appeal to the country in his first inaugural address, shortly before the Civil War began. Meacham quotes Grant’s description of his feelings on

¹ Peggy Noonan, “These Generals Were the Closest of Enemies,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 25-26, 2018.

accepting Lee's surrender at Appomattox: "I felt like anything rather than rejoicing at the downfall of a foe who had fought so long and valiantly, and had suffered so much for a cause, though that cause was, I believe, one of the worst for which a people ever fought."²

We can have deep disagreements with other people, but we don't have to lose all respect for them as human beings—especially for those with whom we disagree on matters less than life and death. Meacham's larger theme in the book is the perennial struggle between hope and fear in American history, and how the better angels of our nature are driven by a generous hopefulness, rather than the egocentric fear that tends to bring out the worst in us.

Fear has so often been the enemy of our soul, feeding our ugliest impulses and producing the darkest episodes in our history. That's been true from the literal witch hunts of seventeenth-century Salem to the racial injustices of slavery and segregation to the recurring anti-immigrant hostilities in a whole nation of immigrants to the paranoid style of McCarthyism. We've seen fearful and divisive times before, and we've always gotten through them, though never without a struggle between the powerful motives that Lincoln described as malice and charity.

Tribalism of some sort has always been a factor, but no one party has ever had a franchise on virtue or vice. Meacham quotes Calvin Coolidge, one of our more understated presidents, as saying, "Divine Providence has not bestowed upon any race a monopoly of patriotism and character."³

² John Meacham, *The Soul of America* (New York: Random House, 2018), 52.

³ *Ibid.*, 133.

It's been said that America was the first nation in the world to be founded on an idea: the idea that all human beings are created equal, and ought to enjoy equal freedom and equal protections under the law. It has taken a while for that idea to become a reality for all Americans, but our national ideals are noble ones, and the world has always admired those ideals—especially when we do our best to live up to them.

Theodore Roosevelt, towards the end of his presidency in 1908, went to see a play called *The Melting Pot*, about a Jewish man who fled the pogroms of Russia to find a new life in America. The lead character says, in a climactic speech, “What is the glory of Rome and Jerusalem where all nations and races come to worship and look back, compared with the glory of America, where all races and nations come to labor and look forward!” Roosevelt was so moved that he led the audience in an ovation. The president commented later, “It is a base outrage to oppose a man because of his religion or birthplace, and all good citizens will hold any such effort in abhorrence.”⁴

In that sentiment, Roosevelt echoed the spirit of George Washington, who said, “The bosom of America is open to receive not only the opulent and respectable Stranger, but the oppressed and persecuted of all Nations and Religions.” And in between Washington and Roosevelt, of course, came the words of Emma Lazarus’s poem that eventually graced the Statue of Liberty: “Give me your tired, your poor / Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free
....”

⁴ Ibid., 74f.

During World War II, another President Roosevelt delivered over the radio a prayer on the evening of June 6, 1944. Franklin Roosevelt's old headmaster at Groton had written the president years earlier that "It is a great thing for our country to have before it the leadership of a man who cares primarily for spiritual things." On D-Day, Roosevelt's prayer said of the forces landing in Normandy, "They fight not for the lust of conquest. They fight to end conquest. They fight to liberate. They fight to let justice arise, and tolerance and good will among all Thy people...."⁵

Fighting despotism and intolerance and injustice has been a hallmark of America at its best from the very beginning, though we have not always been immune to those temptations ourselves. In the early 1950s, Senator Joe McCarthy found that he could gain a following among fearful folk by indiscriminately accusing all sorts of people of communism, often without any real evidence. While many politicians were afraid to stand up to him, Senator Margaret Chase Smith issued what she called a "Declaration of Conscience" against McCarthy's methods. She said:

Those of us who shout the loudest about Americanism in making character assassinations are all too frequently those who, by our own words and acts, ignore some of the basic principles of Americanism: The right to criticize; the right to hold unpopular beliefs; the right to protest; the right of independent thought."⁶

The world has always been full of challenges, with conflicts between right and wrong, and those conflicts have

⁵ Ibid., 152, 171.

⁶ Ibid., 190f.

always been not only against other tribes and nations but also within our own hearts and minds. The problem is at least as old as the Bible itself. That's one reason why the Book of Revelation, in the very last chapters of the Bible, lifts up a vision of all the nations of the world coming together into a New Jerusalem, into the one great City of God.

The word translated “nations” in our English Bible is *ethne*, the Greek word for tribes or peoples. The vision of Revelation is that one day all the peoples of the world will bring into the kingdom of God whatever is best about their own identities and traditions: “People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations.” They won't fight over who is the greatest or the most glorious any more, because they will know on that day that all glory and honor and power belong to God. It will be God's name written upon their foreheads, not the name of any lesser loyalty. There will be no temple in the city, because people will worship God in spirit and in truth everywhere. And Revelation says that the gates of that city will never be shut.

In the middle of the city, the writer sees the river of the water of life. On either side of the river is the tree of life—the very tree that Adam and Eve forfeited when they thought they knew better than God and were driven out of the Garden of Eden, as Genesis tells the story. The tree of life produces its fruit each month, to feed and sustain the spirit of all the peoples gathered there, and “the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.”

What a glorious and hopeful image that is! It says that one day all the things that divide and diminish the peoples of the world will be set aside, and the very food of heaven will be for healing and peace and reconciliation. The Bible says this is the destiny that ultimately awaits us.

That's the way things will turn out in the end, by the grace and goodness of God. In the meantime, those of us who claim to be people of God need to remember that we live with a kind of dual citizenship. We are Americans and we love our country, of course, as most of the world's people love their own country; but we are also, as St. Paul says, citizens of heaven. If that's true, then we need to live, to the best of our ability, according to the values of that heavenly kingdom.

And we know what those values are, because the Bible tells us. They include love and mercy and justice and compassion for all people, as well as freedom and opportunity. They are the qualities we strive for, at our best, and sometimes we even manage to achieve them. They are the values that shine through us whenever we live with malice toward none and charity for all. They're the kinds of qualities that can make an individual, or a whole nation, truly great, because they are among the greatest gifts that come from God.



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