

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Seeking wisdom from others



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“These are the times that try men’s souls.” These words of Thomas Paine seem to describe our situation today. It is hard to know how to respond, so I have sought help from historical perspectives. Today’s Insight will rely heavily on the wisdom of others.

“A house divided against itself cannot stand,” Abraham Lincoln said in a speech during the Senate campaign of 1848. It likely lost him that election, but two years later he was elected president of the United States. The speech brought to mind the passage in the Gospels where Jesus spoke the words, “If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand.” (Mark 3:24-25)

Lincoln’s First Inaugural Address of 1861 included the words, “We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory ... will yet swell the chorus ... when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.”

In the midst of the Civil War, Lincoln concluded his address at Gettysburg with resolve “that the government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.” In his second inaugural, he said “With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation’s wounds ... to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.”

Historian Jon Meacham, in his book “The Soul of America: The Battle for Our Better Angels,” quotes Lincoln frequently as well as other national leaders as he provides a historical perspective on our nation’s challenges.

“For all of our failings — and they are legion — there is an abiding idea of an America in which anyone coming from anywhere, of any color or creed, has free access to what Lincoln called the ‘just and generous and prosperous system which opens the way for all.’” Meacham continues, “In our finest hours ... the soul of the country manifests itself in an inclination to open our arms rather than to clench our fists; to look out rather than to turn inward; to accept rather than to reject. In so doing, America has grown ever stronger, confident that the choice of light over dark is the means by which we pursue progress.

“The measure of our political and cultural health cannot be whether we all agree on all things at all times,” Meacham writes. “We don’t, and we won’t. Disagreement and debate — including ferocious disagreement and exhausting debate — are hallmarks of American politics.” He continues by quoting one of the leading theologians of the 20th century, Reinhold Niebuhr, who in 1944 wrote, “Man’s capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but man’s inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.” In that same era, President Franklin D. Roosevelt wrote, “The Presidency ... is pre-eminently a place of moral leadership.”

Meacham notes other recent presidents and their responses to national crises. In the 1990s, a white nationalist, anti-government terrorist bombed the federal building in Oklahoma City, killing 168 people, including 19 children in the building’s day care center. President Bill Clinton responded, “When there is talk of hatred, let us stand up and talk against it. When there is talk of violence, let us stand up and talk against it. In the face of death, let us honor life. As St. Paul admonished us, let us ‘not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.’”

President George W. Bush, following the 9/11 terrorist attack, stated clearly that America was not at war with Islam. “The terrorists are traitors to their own faith, trying in effect, to hijack Islam itself. ... The enemy of America is not our many Muslim friends; it is not our many Arab friends. Our enemy is a radical network of terrorists, and every government that supports them.”

Jane Addams, a social worker, activist and reformer from the early 20th century, warned against what today we might call being caught in a limited tribal worldview. She wrote, “We know instinctively that if we grow contemptuous of our fellows and consciously limit our intercourse to certain kinds of people whom we have previously decided to respect, we not only tremendously circumscribe our range of life, but limit the scope of our ethics.”

Meacham’s historical sweep does not give him cause for despair. He writes, “History, however, shows us that we are frequently vulnerable to fear, bitterness, and strife. The good news is that we have come through such darkness before.”

“The opposite of fear is hope,” he concludes. “Fear feeds anxiety and produces anger; hope, particularly in a political sense, breeds optimism and feelings of well-being. Fear is about limits; hope is about growth. ... Fear points at others, assigning blame; hope points ahead, working for a common good. Fear pushes away; hope pulls others closer. Fear divides; hope unifies.”

Our religious traditions also provide us with hope. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the Psalmist wrote, “Let your steadfast love, O Lord, be upon us, even as we hope in you.” (Psalms 33:22) Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount declared, “Blessed are the Peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.” (Matthew 5:9)

The following is a prayer from the Mishkan T’filah, the prayer book of Reform Judaism:

“O Guardian of life and liberty,

“May our nation always merit Your protection,

“Teach us to give thanks for what we have by sharing it with those who are in need.

“Keep our eyes open to the wonders of creation and alert to the care of the earth.

“May we never be lazy in the work of peace;

“May we honor those who have died in defense of our ideals.

“Grant our leaders wisdom and forbearance.

“May they govern with justice and compassion.

“Help us all to appreciate one another and to respect the many ways that we may serve You.

“May our homes be safe from affliction and strife and our country be sound in body and spirit.”

A prayer from St. Francis of Assisi also gives us guidance:

“Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.

“Where there is hatred, let me sow love.

“Where there is injury, pardon.

“Where there is doubt, faith.

“Where there is despair, hope.

“Where there is darkness, light.

“Where there is sadness, joy.”

Earlier this year, we announced that 2021 would be the Year of Interfaith Healing, with one of the themes being “healing for our political divisiveness.” As we work for peace and healing, let us learn from our history and from our faith to never give up hope.

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