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1968/2022: The Seeds of Our Discontents
(Last of 9 Parts)
The Fusion Thread





What must we do to overcome “The Seeds of Our Discontents”?

Although they go back far in American history, during these past 50, 60, 70 years or so those seeds fouled the garden of liberty transforming parts of it into a patch of weeds squeezing out freedom’s flowers.

What must we do to weed our garden of those rancorous growths threatening to overrun and strangle the American people’s common understanding of ***The American Tapestry***, the tapestry of American stories binding us together as a nation and a people?

What must we do?

So that those weeds do not choke out America as a beacon of hope, Americans must recommit to the protean story, the story of the American people’s ongoing experiment in self-government while simultaneously attempting the exceedingly difficult challenge of continually expanding, of continually growing the inclusiveness of the “We,” as in “*We the People...*,” in our founding documents.

So that those weeds, the outgrowth of the divisive 1960s – “*The 60s*”— do not signal the beginning of the end of the great American experiment joining diverse people from diverse lands together into one grand democratic (small “d”) nation of “government by the people, for the people,” so that “*The 60s*” and their “seeds of discontent” do not signal the beginning of the end of the idea of America, we need to put aside our tribal instincts and rediscover the beauty of our founding ideals.

As former CBS news anchor Dan Rather says in ***What Unites Us***, “We the people, all of us, are living together in perhaps the greatest social and governmental experiment ever conceived.” [1] As acclaimed historian Jon Meacham says in ***The Soul of America***, “Progress in American life ... has been

slow, painful, bloody and tragic.” But “our greatest leaders have pointed toward the future – not at this group or that sect.” [3]

Rather and Meacher illustrate that America is a protean nation in a perpetual state of becoming. From the 1790s’ Naturalization Act, which limited American citizenship to “free white people,” America has continually grown and expanded the definition of who “**We**” are. In 1790, not all white people were included. Indentured servants were excluded and women, denied the vote and bound by vestiges of the laws of coverture, were consigned to second-class status. From that narrow beginning, not always with good grace and almost always with strife and turmoil, America has increased its citizens’ inclusiveness to embrace all the world’s people.

Not everyone agreed or even today agrees that this was a good thing, but America’s greatest leaders have always been inclusive. As early as 1790, an interesting coincidence of years, we find President George Washington writing a letter *To the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island*: “May the children of the stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants; while everyone shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree, and there shall be none to make him afraid.” [4]

What does it say about Americans that the leaders they honor have always championed inclusiveness and those they admonish exclusion? I recognize that I risk sounding naïve uttering what some might call empty platitudes. I recognize that there are those among us who will instantly rebuke what I am about to say. But that both the leaders and simple folk Americans honor advocate inclusion and justice for all says to me that in their quiet hours, away from the fracturing din of mediated noise, many (most?) Americans are decent people who want to live in peace with their neighbors. It tells me that they embrace those truths we say are self-evident: equality, opportunity, the rule of law, and the pursuit of happiness “with liberty and justice for all.” [5]

Whether grand historical figures or humble but determined people, like Joan Southgate, who in 2002 walked from the Ohio River to Ontario retracing the steps of fugitive slaves seeking freedom along the Underground Railroad, by the people we honor, Americans unconsciously reveal their commitment to those foundational truths. [6] Simply looking at presidents of the United States, we honor, above all, Abraham Lincoln, author of the Emancipation Proclamation and martyred hero of the Civil War; George Washington, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Harry Truman, who integrated the armed forces in 1948; Lyndon B. Johnson, who succeeded in gaining the passage of the great Civil Rights Acts of the 1960s; and Ronald Reagan, who in his final speech from the Oval Office “put immigration at the center of American exceptionalism: “We lead the world

because unique among nations, we draw our people, our strength, from every country and every corner of the world.” [7]

Those we hold, if not in contempt, then in very low esteem sought either directly by overt act or indirectly by inaction to deny inclusion to Americans of African ancestry, to excoriate immigrants, and to deny women full participation in the American experiment. They include, while not exactly humble, such noxious weeds as Prescott Hall and Henry Cabot Lodge, Sr. of the early-20th century’s Immigration Restriction League or their 21st century offspring Stephen Miller and Steve Bannon and presidents like James Buchanan, Millard Fillmore, Franklin Pierce, and Woodrow Wilson, the latter for seeking to purge African Americans from government employment.

As we prune freedom’s garden of the weeds sown by “the seeds of our discontents,” we have to ask, “Into what are our greatest leaders including us?”

They’re including us in Lincoln’s “My dream is of a place and a time where America will once again be seen as the last best hope of earth.” [8]

They’re reminding us, as Whitman said, “The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem.” [9]

How so? In what way?

Restoring freedom’s garden does not require returning to a homogenized “1950s America,” which, as we have seen throughout this series, never really existed. As we discovered in **Book Notes #108**, “Music, Music, Music,” in one of those ironies that makes the study of history so enjoyable, it was 1950s’ rock n’ roll that returned the protean story of a richly diverse America to center stage.

No, restoring, refreshing, freedom’s garden does not require going to an America that never existed. It only requires being true to our founding. It only requires, to paraphrase Martin Luther King, Jr., “being true to what we said on paper.” [10]

To be American is not an ethnicity of blood and soil. It is a shared commitment to our founding ideals – those glittering truths we hold to be self-evident. As Frederick Douglass said, Americans “are a country of all extremes – ends and opposites; the most conspicuous example of composite nationality in the world.” [11] Americans are an ethnicity composed of all the peoples of the world. Americans are a nation of immigrants and their descendants. Everyone reading this is descended from an immigrant: some sooner, some later; some willing, some unwilling, but everyone came from somewhere else.

“Just be true to what you said on paper.”

It sounds as if that should be easy enough, but as we have discovered it might be the most difficult challenge confronting Americans. It might be the most difficult challenge Americans have ever confronted. Being true to what we said on paper is the defining thread intertwining *The American Tapestry Project's* two meta-threads. It weaves through both the exclusive essentialist story that says America is, and only is, a white, Christian, patriarchal society and the protean story that says America is a universal and versatile society continually growing in its inclusiveness as it seeks to perfect its experiment in self-government. Throughout American history, all those – Americans of African descent, women, immigrants of every ethnicity, religion, and hue, and those of differing sexual orientations – initially excluded from full participation in American society fought for their inclusion by appealing to those profound truths America's founders committed to paper. The entire history of the civil rights movement from Frederick Douglass just after the Civil War to W.E.B. DuBois and the founding of the NAACP to Thurgood Marshall successfully arguing *Brown v. Board of Education* to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s moral crusade to the present, has been based on the appeal to America's core values. So, too, the history of the women's movement from Seneca Falls' "Declaration of Rights and Sentiments" [12] modeled after the Declaration of Independence to the suffragists petitioning for a constitutional amendment granting women the right to vote to the present, has been based on an appeal to America's core values. So, too, every excluded group's struggle for inclusion has been based on challenging America and Americans 'to be true to what it said on paper."

And, at every instance, they found their inclusion opposed by adherents of various incarnations of the essentialist story who denied those values. Whether 19th century "Know Nothings" of the American Party opposing Irish and Roman Catholic immigration; enslavers and secessionists who explicitly rejected the Declaration of Independence (cf. Alexander Stephens, vice president of the Confederate States of America, making his "Cornerstone Speech" [13]); or the long list of anti-immigration activists championing the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the Immigration Act of 1924 with its racial and nationality quotas, the Mexican repatriation acts of the 1930s, and a former president's "build a wall" program, all of these either explicitly or implicitly denied those foundational values Americans hold to be true. And it continues into the present, as the right-wing Edmund Burke Society, a society that the actual Edmund Burke would almost certainly not join, in its recent statement of American values stands starkly silent on those truths we hold to be self-evident. [14]

Yes, to prune freedom's garden of the weeds sown by the seeds of our discontents and to prevent the end of the great American experiment in freedom, self-government, and inclusion, we need to recall the genius of America.

What makes America exceptional is our commitment to an ever-expanding definition of the “**We**” in our founding documents.

As *The Preamble to the U.S. Constitution* begins, “**We** the People in order to found a more perfect Union ...”

As *The Declaration of Independence* (we annually celebrate with picnics, music, and fireworks) states so grandly: “**We** hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men (*sic*) are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness ...”

As Lincoln said at Gettysburg, “(America is) a new nation conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.”

In that “all” he meant “**We ...**”

As Emma Lazarus wrote in her poem at the Statue of Liberty:

“Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses
yearning to breathe free ...
send these ... to me ...”

She meant “**We ...**”

As Martin Luther King, Jr. averred, “When we allow freedom to ring ... when all God’s children will be able to join hands and sing ‘Free at last, Free at last ...’”

He meant “**We ...**”

What might truly inspire us to revive freedom’s garden by being “true to what we said on paper,” what might truly inspire us to a renewed commitment to our shared ideals just might be to listen to John Winthrop – he who first said, “we shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eyes of all people are upon us.”

Now I’m not naïve. After having spent years exploring the seeds of our discontents and studying the many manifestations of the American story, I don’t think simply re-reading an almost 400-year-old sermon is going to magically heal our political divisions. But it just might help begin the process of remembering who we are and what is meant by “the better angels of our nature.”

John Winthrop is frequently quoted (misquoted and paraphrased more accurately), but he is very, very rarely, if ever, actually read. Whenever someone

wants to affirm American exceptionalism and the sanctity of the essentialist story, whenever someone wants to proclaim America a special place, the envy of the world, they trot out a highly selective reading of Winthrop's famous phrase. America might in fact be a special place, but that is not what Winthrop meant. And he did not say America would be a "shining city on a hill." He would not have understood what America, at least as a synonym for the United States of America, meant. He died almost a century and a half before the United States' founding. It was Ronald Reagan's speechwriter Peggy Noonan who inserted "shining" to give the phrase more "pop." [15]

Winthrop might strike some as an odd exemplar to choose to defend America's protean story. He almost certainly would not have espoused it. One of the founders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, Winthrop was a member of the gentry in his East Anglia home of Groton. He was a highly successful lawyer. But he was also a deeply religious person who through study and prayer developed into an ardent Puritan. He sought a refuge in the New World from the wickedness and temptations of the old. He sought religious freedom, but only for those who thought like him. In 1629, he joined the Massachusetts Bay Colony to help plant a colony in New England. He opposed representative government, set limits on religious freedom for non-Puritans, and, while it would be an anachronistic error to use 21st century values and call him a misogynist, he did not believe in women's rights.

Still, it is possible for someone to say something whose meaning resonates far beyond their original intent.

That's how, in an ironic reversal, I see the profound relevance of Winthrop's famous assertion for our polarized, fractious, and divisive times.

Let me explain.

After a difficult North Atlantic crossing, Winthrop made his legendary assertion in his sermon *A Modell of Christian Charity*, which he wrote aboard the *Arbella* in 1630 on Massachusetts Bay. He was addressing his fellow Puritans before landing to found the Massachusetts Bay Colony. He wanted to inspire them to meet the test before them. He understood that they faced an extreme challenge. With the forest primeval before them, the howling North Atlantic behind them, Winthrop understood that if they were to survive, they must bond together one to another and all to all.

What did Winthrop say his fellow Puritans would have to do to meet their challenge, which by extension is what 21st century Americans must do if they want to meet the challenge presented by our weed nourishing seeds of discontent?

What did Winthrop say his fellow 17th century Puritans must do if they wanted to be a model of Christian charity? And, by extension, what did Winthrop say we 21st century Americans must do if want to be “as a city upon a Hill”?

Winthrop believed he and his fellow Puritans had entered into a new covenant with God; that they were a covenanted people bound to be faithful to their creed. 21st century Americans, in many ways, are also a covenanted people, but in a fashion different than Winthrop could have ever imagined. 21st century Americans, citizens of the United States of America, have covenanted with their Founders to abide by a creed embodied in those truths we hold to be self-evident. In both instances, it is a creed bound together by a commitment to mutual assistance and mutual caring.

Winthrop said (in the original spelling), “wee must brotherly love without dissimulation, wee must love one another with a pure heart ... wee must beare one another’s burthens, wee must not looke only on our owne things, but allsoe on the things of our brethren ...” [16]

Or, in sum, quoting Matthew 7:22, Winthrop exhorts, “Whatsoever Ye would that men should doe to you do yee the same to them allsoe.” [17]

Winthrop asserts that if his fellow Puritans do this they shall be as a city upon a hill, a light for all. Similarly, if 21st century Americans truly want to be as a city on a hill, a beacon to all, then they must be true to their creed of liberty, equality, and opportunity by tending “not only to their own things, but also to those of their brethren” – their fellow Americans.

But what happens if we fail to do this, if we fail to be true to our creed, if we permit the seeds of our discontents to strangle and smother our values? Well, as Winthrop warned his fellow Puritans, we shall still be as a city upon a hill, but, in the part that is never read and never quoted, he admonished them that they and we shall be “an evil story in the mouthes of our enemies ... wee shall shame the faces of many of God’s worthy servants and cause their prayers to be turned into curses and wee be consumed out of the land.” [18]

When Winthrop said, “we shall be as a city upon a hill,” he did not mean that either he and his fellow Puritans, or by extension we 21st century Americans, would be a shiny, wonderful thing for all the world to envy. No, he meant we would be as a city upon a hill exposed to the eyes of God and all others; there would be no place to hide. God and all others watching us in our exposed position would know whether we were faithful to the covenant we had made, whether or not we were faithful to our creed, whether we were faithful to those truths we proclaim to be self-evident, or whether we were simply vile hypocrites who betrayed our commitments and the values we preached.

In short, if Winthrop's fellow Puritans were to survive, if we 21st century Americans are to be exceptional, a word Winthrop did not use, if we are to avoid the seeds of our discontents being the beginning of our end, if we are to continue America's protean becoming, we need to understand one simple thing.

We are all in this together.

Sounds simple; sounds banal.

It is not banal; it is in its simplicity the most profound of truths.

It's not simple. Just as trying to live up to the Golden Rule, some version of which is the essential ethic of virtually every religious creed in the world, has proven to be humanity's most difficult, almost impossible challenge, so, too, living up to the American Creed is Americans' greatest challenge. Americans have fumbled it numerous times, but over the long arc of American history the creed has survived to challenge "the better angels of our nature."

If Americans and the American Creed are to survive, we need to join, we need to fuse, one to another, one to all, and all to all; if we are to be a "shining" city upon a Hill, if we are to be a model of Christian charity, if we are to be Lincoln's "last best hope of earth" we must love and care for one another.

What the seeds of our discontents threaten is that which truly makes America exceptional. It is our commitment to our ideals. It is our commitment to an ever more inclusive understanding of the "**We ...**" at the heart of the American experience.

An understanding that "**We** the people" are truly "e pluribus unum" – out of many one.

That's what makes America exceptional.

That's what makes America worth fighting to preserve.



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