

## SERMON for October 14, 2018

### AMERICAN CIVILIZATION: DO YOU THINK THAT WOULD BE A GOOD IDEA?

#### The Effect of American Culture on Your Spiritual Potentials

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### READINGS

<b><u>Gathering</u></b>	Thoughts from Mohandes Gandhi and Ruth Bader Ginsburg
<b><u>Invocation</u></b>	<i>Without First Discovering</i> , adapted from Thomas Berry's <u>The Dream of the Earth</u>
<b><u>Meditation</u></b>	<i>Let America Be America Again (I)</i> , by Langston Hughes
<b><u>Readings</u></b>	<i>Let American Be Great Again (II &amp; III)</i> , by Langston Hughes
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### SERMON

On Friday our family went to the zoo. Or perhaps it is more precise to say we as a free-range family zoo went to where the wild things are caged at Tampa Zoo. The Tampa Zoo had animals, plants, cages, pens, roller coasters, boats, splash pads, snack stands, piped music, and educational programming live, electronic and print. It also had a variety of human tribes and packs of all ages, colors, genders, abilities, languages, even religions.

The nature creatures in our family zoo were seven year old Daisy, four-and-a-half year old Bear, and two year old Stella which means Star (and she is one). Our family's adult nature creatures were Alisun (spelled with S-U-N), Erin (meaning all the good green Earth), Jack (which is either a fish or whatever handy thing you choose), and Andrew (who is an engineer, and we don't yet know if that plays out Earth-friendly or not).

Young or old at the zoo, some were exhausted from traipsing the winding paths and ponds; others were renewed by their brief consciousness-raising with Mother Nature. It's all happening at the zoo - another Florida road-side attraction – or if you're more Buddhist you might say another Florida road-side distraction from what's really happening.

American culture: how you assess it depends, I believe, on how it influences you and what you learn from it. Your view of it also depends, I think, on how those with you on the journey are influenced and respond to it – kids in the zoo alternately thrilled, inspired, exhausted, collapsed, confused, lost, found – and adults in the zoo alternately thrilled, inspired, exhausted, collapsed, confused, lost, found. Culture does that to you, I think. And in America, it often seems like roller coaster, roller culture whiplash. But where else do you get to compare and consider so many varied cultural perspectives. But is there time to consider?

One of the eye-catching exhibits at the zoo was a billboard printed with bird wing-spans, from crows to condors. I admit, with the kids dashing wildly about, I was also reflecting on life-spans. But one of the more impressive wing-spans was that of the bald eagle. And I remembered a time - I think it was 1977 or '78 - when I was visiting some friends at their summer place on a lobster-fishing island off the coast of Maine. I took my friends' bike one very early morning and headed out, gradually pedaling up a mountainside till I came to a grand panoramic view overlooking a bay and I stopped to take it in.

It so happened there was a little house there, not far down a drive, with an old man sitting on a swing bench. He waved me over and, according as he beckoned, I sat down with him.

“Beautiful, eh?” he said. I nodded, feeling somehow very privileged. He pointed to the bay far below and the several fishing and sail boats making their way and he shook his head as if after a lifetime he still was struck new by their elegance and function.

“I worked those lobster boats all my days,” he said. “When I was growing up, you got all the lobsters you needed in a few hours in a few foot of water. My grandfather said that in his day you didn’t need a boat - you just walked the shore and lifted up the seaweed. My son and grandson, they have to set a lot of traps out in the deep water to make half a living.”

The old man’s gaze shifted to the sky and he pointed straight out. Before us, high over the bay, three or four birds were circling in a narrowing gyre. “Bald eagles,” he said and handed me his binoculars. Magnificent – the American symbol despite old Ben Franklin advocating for the wild turkey (and still today many Americans seem to prefer Wild Turkey over the nation’s fountainhead of equal rights for all). “Just a few years ago, they were almost gone,” said the old man. “Hardly ever saw one. Now, they’re back.” He saw the question on my face and he added, “Since they banned that DDT. Saved the eagle and lots of other things. Maybe they’ll do something for the lobster.”

Thirty-four summers later Alisun and I vacationed in the town of Blue Hill, Maine, just on-shore from the old man’s island. The Maine Marine and Environmental Research Institute is located in Blue Hill, in an inviting old storefront. The Institute was celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Rachel Carson’s The Silent Spring. I had read it long ago, but was still impressed by information in the Institute’s anniversary lectures and documentary film – for example, that Carson’s book and her advocacy had led directly to the ban of DDT, to establishing the EPA, and to making us aware that pesticides lead to genetic mutations that evolve pesticide-resistant pests. I was also semi-surprised to hear how fiercely unrelenting and false-hearted the Monsanto Corporation executives were in trying to discredit not only Carson’s findings, but her personhood and her gender. But even through a finally fatal battle with cancer, Rachel Carson persisted and Earthkind won, at least for a little while.

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For children’s time in Sunday services, I used to like to read a story book called The Mountains of Tibet. The story starts with a little boy who lives in a mountain village in Tibet and who loves to fly kites. Even as he grows old till he finally dies, he loves flying kites. When his soul is transmigrating, as Tibetan culture anticipates, it has to make a set of choices: which galaxy to be born in, which solar system, which planet, which nation and people, which community, and finally, which gender. And this soul incarnates as a little girl who loves to fly kites in the mountains of Tibet.

It’s a lovely book, with beautiful pictures – but I’m not sure I want to read it to the children anymore. I don’t actually like the idea that, before they are born, people make choices about where and who they will be. Better to explain to children, I think, that other people may be making choices before we are born that can influence our life and conditions. But our making of choices comes after we are born and with those choices we influence who we become.

The trajectory of human spiritual potential seems to be something like the moral arc of the universe – life-long and subject to many influences. It is a trajectory from baby soul to elder spirit, described in surprisingly similar ways by many cultures for well over 3000 years. One description of the stages of spiritual development notes that we start in infancy with sensing and discerning what is good and not good, then sensing and discerning what is trustworthy and not, then what is willable and not, then right and not, healthy and not, productive and not, nurturant and not, expansive and not, inclusive and not, worthwhile and not. The fulfillment of these potentials is what human culture and human will can influence. Since our lives depend on it, this is worth pondering.

The cultural subsystems having the greatest influence seem to me to be the political, the economic, the social, and the ecological. You may ask, what about the religious subsystem – and I would answer for today, the cultural system is the religious system. Religion can be understood, I think, as whatever influences the growth of the potentials in us, our community, and our ecosystem.

To set standards by which to evaluate the influences of the subsystems, I'd list these questions:

- Is your culture's political subsystem fully inclusive and empowering of all?
- Is your culture's economic subsystem fully responsive & productive for all?
- Is your culture's social subsystem fully just and nurturing for all?
- Is your culture's ecological subsystem fully sustaining & sustainable for all?

To assess the adequacy of our American culture's influence on America's human potentials, we'd also have to consider its impact on all kinds of Americans: infants, children, youth, householders, and elders; rulers, managers, workers, dispensables, and criminalized; genders, races, foreign-born, religious, personalities, and abled; saints, heroes, artists, lovers, dreamers and thee. I think perhaps we could each draw up our own chart and do this assessment. It is what we do intuitively all the time – and more explicitly when we hold our FAST house meetings or our Thursday Citizens' Cafes.

My wife bought a tank top for our daughter the lawyer who was visiting along with kids and husband this week. The appealingly cartoonish but dignified prints on the shirt are four women in black judicial robes. Their names are printed, too, in case you don't recognize them - Elena, Sandra, Ruth, and Sonia – and the underlying caption in large capital letters reads, "The Supremes." I am going to get one of those shirts, even if it's a tank top.

These are the four people in whose powers of persuasion rests a great deal of our hope for each of our human and communal potentials – all the potentials that lead to justice, domestic tranquility, general welfare, a more perfect union, and the blessings of equal liberty for ourselves and our posterity. But even more, the future of our human, national, and Earth potentials will abide with the legislators we elect to represent us in formulating the laws which the courts apply. And still even more, I'd say, the future of all these potentials abides in the power of the volition and voice and vow and vote possessed in sacred honor by you and me.

It has been said, "Everyone can be great, because everyone can serve." Our job then, I think we could say, is to make sure everyone feels how great their potentials are and how the fulfillment of these potentials may be used to joyously serve. I think we should be talking about that. We no longer have time, do we – we've really never had time - for anyone to say, America is not America for me.

## READINGS

### Gathering Thoughts

*What do I think of Western civilization? I think it would be a good idea.* - Mohandes Gandhi

*The equal rights amendment would dedicate the nation to a new view of the rights and responsibilities of men and women.* - Ruth Bader Ginsburg

### Invocation

*Without First Discovering*, adapted from Thomas Berry's The Dream of the Earth

Be awake now:

**we cannot discover ourselves  
without first discovering the universe, the earth,  
and the imperatives of our own being.**

Be aware now:

**each of us has a creative power and a vision far beyond  
any rational thought or cultural creation of which we are capable.**

Be appreciative now:

**we are not isolated from earthkind in our beings or communities.**

Be caring now:

**we have no being except within the universe and earth.**

### Meditation and Readings

*Let America Be America Again (I)*, by Langston Hughes

Let America be America again.

Let it be the dream it used to be.

Let it be the pioneer on the plain

Seeking a home where they themselves are free.

*(America never was America to me.)*

Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed—

Let it be that great strong land of love

Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme

That anyone be crushed by one above.

*(It never was America to me.)*

O, let my land be a land where Liberty

Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,

But opportunity is real, and life is free,

Equality is in the air we breathe.

*(There's never been equality for me,*

*Nor freedom in this "homeland of the free.")*

*Say, who are you that mumbles in the dark?*

*And who are you that draws your veil across the stars?*

I am the poor White, fooled and pushed apart,  
I am the Negro bearing slavery's scars.  
I am the Red tribe driven from the land,  
I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek—  
And finding only the same old stupid plan  
Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak.

I am the young person, full of strength and hope,  
Tangled in that ancient endless chain  
Of profit, power, gain, of grab the land!  
Of grab the gold! Of grab the ways of satisfying need!  
Of work your workers! Of take their pay!  
Of owning everything for one's own greed!

I am the farmer, bondsman to the soil.  
I am the worker sold to the machine.  
I am the Negro, servant to you all.  
I am the people, humble, hungry, mean—  
Hungry yet today despite the dream.  
Beaten yet today—O, Pioneers!  
I am the one who never got ahead,  
The poorest worker bartered through the years.

Yet I'm the one who dreamt our basic dream  
In the Old World while still a serf of kings,  
Who dreamt a dream so strong, so brave, so true,  
That even yet its mighty daring sings  
In every brick and stone, in every furrow turned  
That's made America the land it has become.  
O, I'm the one who sailed those early seas  
In search of what I meant to be my home—  
For I'm the one who left dark Ireland's shore,  
And Poland's plain, and England's grassy lea,  
And torn from Black Africa's strand I came  
To build a "homeland of the free."

The free? Who said the free? Not me?  
Surely not me? The millions on relief today?  
The millions shot down when we strike?  
The millions who have nothing for our pay?  
For all the dreams we've dreamed  
And all the songs we've sung  
And all the hopes we've held  
And all the flags we've hung,

The millions who have nothing for our pay—  
Except the dream that's almost dead today.

O, let America be America again—  
The land that never has been yet—  
And yet must be—the land where *every* one is free.  
The land that's mine—the poor one's, Indian's, Negro's, ME—  
Who made America,  
Whose sweat and blood, whose faith and pain,  
Whose hand at the foundry, whose plow in the rain,  
Must bring back our mighty dream again.

Sure, call me any ugly name you choose—  
The steel of freedom does not stain.  
From those who live like leeches on the people's lives,  
We must take back our land again, America!

O, yes, I say it plain,  
America never was America to me,  
And yet I swear this oath— America will be!

Out of the rack and ruin of our gangster death,  
The rape and rot of graft, and stealth, and lies,  
We, the people, must redeem  
The land, the mines, the plants, the rivers.  
The mountains and the endless plain—  
All, all the stretch of these great green states—  
And make America again!

### **Benediction**

*May the Spirit of Life,*

Adapted from *The Pilgrims' Covenant* by Alice Blair Wesley

May the spirit of life so fill us  
**that we will walk together**  
**in the ways of understanding and caring**  
as best we've learned them  
**or may learn them in days to come --**  
that we and our children will be fulfilled  
**and that we will speak to the world**  
**in words and actions of peace and good will.**