

What Does It Mean for our Nation to Be “Great”?

Cantor Shoshana Brown

for the *Herald News*, March 19, 2016

I hear the rallying cry “make America great again!” almost every time I turn on the TV these days. Yet I do not hear the cable news commentators ask *what* exactly these words *mean*: *when* was the period of “greatness” that this slogan is alluding to; and what does “great” mean? And - oh yes - great *for whom*?

As a religious leader, this subject concerns me, for it is dangerous to confuse *might* with *right*. As a 14-year old (in 1974), I was stunned when I first heard Bob Dylan’s ballad “With God on Our Side,”:

*Oh my name it is nothin’
My age it means less
The country I come from
Is called the Midwest
I’s taught and brought up there
The laws to abide
And the land that I live in
Has God on its side.*

*Oh the history books tell it
They tell it so well
The cavalries charged
The Indians fell
The cavalries charged
The Indians died
Oh the country was young
With God on its side. (from *The Times They are a-Changin’*, 1964)*

It is easy to romanticize the past as a time when all the men were strong and virtuous, all the women chaste and self-sacrificing, all the children polite and obedient to their parents; as a time when we were all unquestioningly patriotic, a time when a man could earn enough money with just a high school diploma (or less) to feed his family and pay down a home mortgage, as a time when every family attended their chosen place of worship on Sunday (or if you were Jewish, Saturday) morning. And yet it was a time, as mentioned in Dylan’s song, when “Indians” were seen (at least in the cowboy movies) as “enemies,” when African-Americans and others were discriminated against in a thousand different ways,

when women faced enormous hurdles in the workplace, when non-heterosexuals trembled in fear in the closet, when the handicapped were hardly ever accommodated for and often institutionalized, when children were taught that they could survive a nuclear war by ducking under their school desks, when industrial America poured lead, mercury, DDT and a long list of other environmental poisons into our air and waters without a thought.

When was this period of “greatness”? In the first chapter of Tom Brokaw’s 1998 best-selling book “The Greatest Generation,” he writes:

The year of my birth, 1940, was the fulcrum of America in the twentieth century, when the nation was balanced precariously between the darkness of the Great Depression on one side and the storms of war in Europe and the Pacific on the other. It was a critical time in the shaping of this nation and the world, equal to the revolution of 1776 and the perils of the Civil War. Once again the American people understood the magnitude of the challenge, the importance of an unparalleled national commitment, and, most of all, the certainty that only one resolution was acceptable. The nation turned to its young to carry the heaviest burden, to fight in enemy territory and to keep the home front secure and productive. These young men and women were eager for the assignment. They understood what was required of them, and they willingly volunteered for their duty.

Born in 1940, Brokaw did not serve in World War Two himself, and, having come of age during the era of the Civil Rights and anti-Vietnam War movements, the resolve and courage of the generation that preceded him seems to have created a halo of magnanimity in his mind over that generation. Members of the “greatest generation” were willing to overlook the indignities of racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, and environmental degradation to do their duty to their country – unlike subsequent generations who frequently “complain” about such things as equality and human rights, about the need for peace and environmental justice. In Brokaw’s view, these later generations are more narcissistic, less courageous.

It is true that the generation that returned from fighting fascism in Europe raised a bumper crop of children, many of whom knew a more comfortable standard of living than any previous generation in America: suburban home-building took off, every family (it seemed) could own a home with a yard for their children to play in, a car, a refrigerator, a washing machine. This generation was pampered; they had the *luxury* of asking questions that their parents had not had time for: What is it all about? Is there more to life than the “rat race”? Should I conform to my society’s expectations without examining them? Because these young people dared to question the previous generation’s mores, some see them as “self-indulgent.” But when I watch footage of those who marched in Selma, or remember those who

were willing to go to jail to protest a war that they felt was unjust and inhumane, I feel inspired by their moral courage.

The truth is, in order for America to be “great,” we must endeavor to make true the words of the Pledge of Allegiance – that our nation offer “liberty and justice for all.” As a member of an ancient people who were admonished over and over again by the Hebrew prophets not to judge “greatness” by standards of wealth or military might, but by the ability to “do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly” before God (Micah 6:8), I feel uncomfortable designating any one era of American history as one of “greatness.” Greatness, holiness, righteousness...these are not attributes that any person, any generation, or any nation can ever *possess*—rather, they are ideals to *strive after*. It is hard work. We may want to be able to rest, to stop examining ourselves, our nation, to feel proud and self-satisfied. But true “greatness” resides in a humble recognition that none of us deserve to be here in this nation, or on this planet, more than any others, that we are all just “sojourners on the earth.” Let us then follow the prophet’s advice to “do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly” while we are here, striving to leave a juster, healthier, more peaceful and compassionate nation *and world* for our children and grandchildren to come. I cannot imagine any greater endeavor for our nation.

Cantor Shoshana Brown is co-spiritual leader, music director and religious school principal at Temple Beth El of Fall River.