

The Fireplace

By Doris H. Goldstein

It was one of those days when the whole world seemed enveloped in grey. Not the angry grey swirling clouds of an approaching storm or the benevolent streaks of soft grey before dawn but an oppressive, never ending steel grey that marched across the sky, engulfing the tangled branches of the bare trees. A penetrating damp chill hung like overripe fruit, clinging to every blade of grass and fallen leaf.

A perfect day to light a fire.

On most days, weeks, months and years my fireplace and chimney are merely the most prominent architectural features of my otherwise traditional house. Constructed of handmade bricks that once were the façade of a late 19th century courthouse in McDonough, Georgia, the home of mythical Tara, it can be seen from two sides and soars in the open atrium two stories through the roof. Not just a straight column, the chimney is attached on each side by wings, covered in the same brick that houses matching mini closets whose slanted roof peaks, seven feet from the floor complete the distinctive design. While one side is closed, the opposite side houses a large open fireplace topped by a massive, hewn redwood mantle.

The logs on the grate from a recently fallen tree, usually decorative and now very dry, quickly caught fire; the inchoate flames dancing along the surfaces amid puffs of smoke and an occasional pop. Not yet engaged enough to produce warmth, it should have been comforting and inviting just to sit, gaze; mesmerized by the shifting lights and shadows, trying not to think about anything.

That however proved to be impossible. My brain was exploding. December, 2020 had been a terrible few weeks. As predicted by all the scientists, Covid-19 was ravaging Americans not only among the elderly and those of color but also those much younger and white. On December 31, 2020, 3,462 men and women died. (NYT's, Jan. 8, 2021)

The death toll to that date surpassed the number of servicemen and women who died in WWII, over 400,000 or were killed on 9/11 when a little over 3,000 men and women were lost. While the promised vaccine had been developed and tested for efficacy and safety, distribution was complicated and uneven. Grasping for every iota of information from any source, I had spent hours on the computer, going to every county health department web site within 100 miles trying to make an appointment for the shot or on the phone, following any lead from any probable source. It was a continuation of the mismanagement and chaos of the past four years but this time it was very personal. Who could have imagined a time when every conversation with family or friends would begin with, "Have you gotten your shot yet?"

The much anticipated election of November 3, that was supposed to bring a modicum of peace to the country, had, in spite of the obvious result, turned into a continual alluvium flow of accusations of voter fraud, conspiracy theories and law suits from a president and his supporters who refused to accept defeat. Republican officials in Georgia had to stand up for the integrity of

the election against the attacks and phone calls from the president and others who were asking (i.e. demanding) that they overturn the will of the people. Newspaper articles, TV, radio and social media were aflame with accounts from one state or another, claims and counterclaims.....in the eyes of many, the election was not over even eight weeks later. Every day was another 'tweet', another law suit, another accusation of discarded ballots.....anything to cast doubt on the outcome. This was unbelievable; elected officials of every political stripe agreed that this was a well-run and fair election but the relentless attacks continued. I have voted in every presidential election since Dwight Eisenhower (my first) but could never imagined any of this. What was happening to my country? Would January 1, 2021 bring some relief?

Probably not. The pending January 5th, 2021 runoff election in Georgia for two Senate seats which would determine which party held the majority was looming. Political ads flooded the airways, oversized postcards in full color occupied the mailbox, urgent solicitations for money, Robo calls for one candidate or another.....I was bombarded from every side when all I wanted was a respite from all of this.

As 2020 became 2021, this was the state of mind when I lit the fire. I settled into the sofa, hoping for a rush of serotonin or some other magic substance to calm me so that I could relax as the flames grew in height and intensity.

Sometime ago, I had concluded that the only upside of being home bound for almost a year was to realize that having 'free' time could be a welcomed luxury that not everyone could afford. Fortunate to not have the responsibility of child care or generating a paycheck, I could do my quotidian household tasks and still have time to browse around the world of ideas wherever I wanted to go.

Something I have been thinking about for some time is all of the 'God Talk' in America. Many politicians end major speeches with the soaring admonition, "God bless the United States of America." The Pledge of Allegiance recited daily in many classrooms contains an additional phrase, 'under God', added some years ago. Taking high office, one places a hand on a Bible, repeating whatever is required and ending with the optional but usual last sentence, "So Help Me God." For many years, those testifying in Congress also used the same words after promising to be truthful.

'In God We Trust', designated in 1956 as the official motto of the United States after many years of use in other areas, appears on all U.S. currency. The patriotic anthem, God Bless America of WWII can still bring a lump in the throat. A newer version by Lee Greenwood was titled, God Bless the USA was sung at the inauguration of Donald Trump while another country artist, Dana Kamide, penned a song with the line, "God Bless Trump and the USA."

Where did all of this come from? Why is God so ingrained in our national psyche and conversation? Do we deserve a blessing? Is it an Ask or a Demand?

"In the name of God" are the opening words of the Mayflower Compact, signed by 41 of the 102 passengers while still aboard the ship anchored in Cape Cod Bay, November 21, 1620. These adult males, known as Separatist (Puritans), fleeing religious persecution in England, were hoping

to build a new society according to their religious beliefs. However, the document was a civil covenant affecting the entire group that would govern the colony for the sake of order and survival. This founding document of American secular government invoked God, albeit their version of the Christian God.

Our Declaration of Independence, signed on July 4th, 1776 mirrors in some ways these references to the higher power in the world. The words 'God' and 'Creator' appear in the opening paragraphs while it ends with "a firm reliance on divine Providence". Again, it was the exclusive God of the writers who could not imagine future citizens embracing a different reality of a deity or opting for no deity at all.

'In God We Trust' also has a long history in America. It originated in the fourth stanza of the poem which became The Stars Spangled Banner, penned by Francis Scott Key in 1814. The phrase was used by a division of the Union Army as a way to communicate that God was on their side. It first appeared on a coin in 1864 and is now engraved on all coins and written on paper currency.

God Bless America has an interesting back story. Written by a Jewish immigrant, Israel Isidore Baline, i.e. Irving Berlin, in 1918 while serving in the U. S. Army, it was not introduced until Armistice Day, 1938 as the Nazi terror engulfed Europe while the U.S. hoped the Atlantic Ocean would save it from the coming conflict. Certainly, by 1938 Berlin knew what was happening to the Jewish communities of Europe; perhaps, on a sub conscience level, he was seeking God's protection for the Jews of America. It quickly became widely popular and became the signature song of Kate Smith, known as the First Lady of Radio. By then, Berlin had written a revised version which included an introductory stanza which Smith always used.

*"While the storm clouds gather far across the sea,
Let us swear allegiance to a land that is free,
Let us all be grateful for a land so fair,
As we raise our voices in solemn prayer."*

The popularity of the song quickly invoked the ire of the Ku Klux Klan who protested against it because it was written by a Jew. Interestingly, it was adopted by the early Civil Rights Movement perhaps in an attempt to associate themselves with white America. They certainly knew that in many ways they were not free from injustice and prejudice in this 'land so fair.' At the opposite pole, Conservative Christian groups used it support their beliefs and to show disdain for the increasingly secular liberalism of the 1960's and for increasing opposition to the Viet Nam War.

Kate Smith and God Bless America even became embroiled in a controversy in the sports world. During the late 60's and 70's The Philadelphia Flyers hockey team often played the song at the beginning of their home games that became a 'good luck charm.' Smith also performed the song live at some important games. The team recorded 100 wins and 29 losses when the song was sung or recorded. In her memory and in gratitude, the team erected a statue of Smith outside of their arena in 1987. But it was removed in 2019 due to the revelation that she had performed songs with offensive racist lyrics early in her career. God works in curious ways.

The swearing of oaths to assume leadership leaps back through the ages to Biblical times. In Genesis 24:3, Eliezer, Abraham's chief of his household, swears he will go and find a proper wife for his son, Isaac. In ancient Rome, a leader swore on the Jupiter Stone; Jupiter being the divine law-maker responsible for maintaining order. Throughout the millennium governments around the world developed ceremonies which often, but not always, referenced a deity of one kind or another.

Americans are very familiar with scene on the West side of the Capitol where the new president is inaugurated. The left hand is placed on a book of some kind, usually a Bible, the right hand is raised and the Oath of Office repeated. Then, the phrase, "So Help Me God" is spoken. There is a lot of God in this ceremony. Whose God.....Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist? Suppose the president is an atheist or agnostic? What Bible....Hebrew, New Testament, Quran, The Sutras?

As a matter of fact, the word 'God' does not exist in the prescribed oath. Instead, the text is found in Article II of the Constitution:

*"I do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will faithfully execute the office of President
Of the United States and will to the best of my ability, preserve, protect and defend
The Constitution of the United States."*

Some claim George Washington is responsible for adding 'So Help Me God' at the end of the oath, thereby beginning the custom. Historians, however, dispute that contention by quoting written statements by eye witnesses who said he did not utter the phrase but did lean down and kiss a Bible that someone brought to the ceremony. The presence of a Bible would be consistent with popular culture of the time and possibly was an attempt to replicate in some way the swearing in of members of the British Parliament. Pres. John Adams (1802) placed his hand on a law book and Pres. Theodore Roosevelt (1901) didn't use a book at all. Pres. Chester Arthur (1881) was the first president to add 'So Help Me God' which is still completely optional. It was spoken inconsistently by following presidents but did not become expected practice until Pres. Franklin Roosevelt (1933) uttered it and has been added by every president since.

Yes, there is a lot of 'God Talk' in American culture. But has it been evoked to make us more God-like, responsible citizens? Or, used as a guise as we uprooted and decimated Native inhabitants, enslaved Africans, burned so called witches, persecuted and marginalized waves of immigrants, mistreated common laborers, refused to grant voting and equal rights to women and all of the other inequities in our history some of which, including many others, continue to this day?

Does/Should God, any God, 'bless' America more than Brunei, Yemen, or Madagascar? Did the God that Americans frequently call on convince us to bestow on ourselves what has been termed 'American Exceptionalism'? Does that mean that in all of recorded history no country has, or can in the future, match what has developed here? Really? Perhaps we can indeed deserve to be

exceptional if we are constantly striving to address the inequality intrinsic in so many areas of society; hence qualify for a God's blessing. Only future actions will determine if that happens.

Here is the advice regarding self-aggrandizement by the 5th B.C.E. Greek historian, Herodotus:

"For those cities that were great in earlier times have become small.....

..... Man's good fortune never abides in the same place."

The fireplace is dark now; the formerly coruscating logs have been reduced to mounds of soft, formless ashes. The sky is still the same shade of grey as it was before and I am still obsessed with securing an appointment for a Covid vaccination.

But it is time to leave God alone.

Early January, 2021

Addendum. It is now January 7, 2021, a day after the riot at the Capitol. I rarely watch daytime television but yesterday, January 6, for some unknown reason today the TV was on; ablaze with rampaging bodies, flags unfurled and Trump slogans of all varieties. Today, my eyes are still weary and my mind numb from the events of yesterday. I am trying to search for adequate words to express all I am feeling. Horror.....Disbelief.....Shame.....Fear.....there are hardly enough words in the dictionary to describe what I saw in real time on the screen.

Where were the police? Who are these people? Why do they think violence is the answer to solve a political issue? What caused this mob to assemble and attack the Capitol? Is it possible that this was the culmination of weeks of Trump and his enablers shouting 'a stolen election' from every rooftop?

Is America sliding into anarchy?

STOP!

I wanted to turn it off and make it go away but I was hypnotized, frozen in place. The turmoil continued for several hours becoming more violent by the moment; each act feeding off the other. Shattered glass, shouting, a gunshot, looting, Confederate and American flags waving, their poles used as battering rams against the doors and the Capitol Police. In some scenes, it looked festive.....rioters taking 'selfies', smiling, high-fives in the air.....maybe I am the crazy.

If ever there was a time and place for a Higher Power to be present in hearts and souls it was on January 6, 2021. Unfortunately, instead, there were, Christian symbols carried by the marauders, as if this was a sacred cause in the name of their version of God. Is this what 'God Bless America' means? Is this why we stamp "In God We Trust" on our currency? What an affront to the very notion of God, any God.

Neither the fireplace nor the hope for a vaccination will calm this trauma. Can America enlist its view of 'Exceptionalism' to overcome this permanent stain on our history? Will we summon the best that is in us to rise above the rancor and distrust and build a "More Perfect Union"?

