

“Mixed Feelings”

A talk by Rev. Jim Foti, Assistant Minister
First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis
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The reading was the poem “Let America Be America Again” by Langston Hughes.

When I am working in my capacity as a minister, in the pulpit of the congregation where I am employed, federal tax rules keep me from saying very much about political candidates. But I am allowed to talk about hats. So that’s where I’m going to start today, on this last Sunday of our month about ambiguity.

Right now, in many places on the internet, you can buy a red baseball cap that says “Make America Great Again.” You’ve probably noticed such caps in news coverage, or maybe you got to see one up close at a recent family reunion. And you may be aware that the message on the hat has inspired a number of parodies and variations. One hat that’s available for purchase says “Make Baseball Fun Again,” which sounds to me like a cry for help from our local fans. There’s also a hat that says “Make America Great Britain Again” (some history majors having a little fun there).

Many of the hat variations are light-hearted, but some offer a pointed counterpoint to the original. You may have heard the story of a young New York woman named Krystal Lake. Lake ordered a hat with lettering that says “America Was Never Great.” She wore her custom-made cap to work one day, and a photo of her went all over the internet, with predictable results. Lake, like Langston Hughes, is African-American. Hughes’s poem that we just so beautifully heard is from 1935 and contains more than six hundred words; Lake’s brand-new hat contains only four words. But the two messages are the same. There are indeed large groups of Americans for whom America has not been great really ever, Americans for whom the past was certainly not something to celebrate as an ideal or something to create again. As a gay man, I can relate to this; I am not one to pine for days of yore. Just a year ago, I didn’t even have the nationwide right to marry. For many kinds of people, there’s not much we’d like to go backward to. Nostalgia is so often a privilege of the privileged.

This weekend the American calendar tells us it’s Memorial Day, a holiday created not for mattress sales or cabin trips, but rather so we might honor or at least think about our war dead. This can make it an appropriate weekend for each of us to do some serious reflection on our relationship with our country – our large, messy, gorgeous experiment of a country, a country that seems to be in the midst of a harrowing and sometimes sinister identity crisis. It can be hard to know how to feel about a country that gets so much right, and has gotten so much wrong. But it’s worth thinking about as citizens who are invested in where we go from here.

I want to go back for a moment to the hat, the original hat, the one that says “Make America Great Again.” I’ve realized that I’m 75 percent in agreement with the hat – the first three words, “Make America Great,” are something I can get behind. I’d prefer that we all work to

make the whole world great, but America should be great, too. “Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed.”

But conversations about America’s greatness can deteriorate very quickly. One problem is when we take the step of labeling ourselves as “the greatest nation on earth.” It’s not a good sign when any country feels a need to assert its superiority or its supremacy. This kind of thinking is misplaced, dangerous, zero-sum tribalism. And by many measures of human well-being, America’s supposed “greatest” status is demonstrably untrue.

Another danger is that the military-industrial complex relies on the idea of the greatest. Greatness becomes a justification for so many things, such as invasion, conquest, imperialism. We’re here to take over, because it’s our job as the greatest to try to fix things. As the greatest, we must know best, and everything we do is unquestionably great. Framing our country as the greatest also serves as a military recruitment tool. You want to sign up to serve and fight for the country that’s the greatest, especially if you end up sacrificing a limb, or your mental health, or your life. In the struggle to make meaning out of war, violence, and death, there can be a strong desire to believe that the suffering and loss happened in the service of something great. As we have seen across the past few generations of veterans and their survivors, it can be shattering to realize that the greatness wasn’t true.

To the vast majority of Americans who are not directly involved in the military, seeing our country as the greatest can provide a different form of comfort. If we’re the greatest, there’s nothing to fix. There’s no reason to get out in the streets, to work for change, to ask hard questions, or even vote. If our country is the greatest, it must be all those struggling individuals who have flaws. Many among us can be complacent consumers and compliant citizens, content to know that we’re already part of the best, viewing our own comfortable lives as proof.

But the biggest question that the “Make America Great Again” hat raises is “great again for whom?” “There’s never been equality for me,” Langston Hughes wrote in 1935, and he could say it still today. “America was never great,” says Krystal Lake’s hat. For large segments of society, the “again” is what seems off. But I have an idea of whom the original hat is addressing, of what the hat is referring to; I have an idea about what “greatness” used to look like and why a person might dream of its return. I see this and understand this whenever I go to my mom’s hometown, when I drive past the site of the motel we used to stay at when I was a teenager, the motel that has since been chopped up and carted away. I see it when I drive past the bars that used to be open, the gas stations now abandoned, the industrial sites now closed. Even the newer motel, the one I stayed in just last year for my uncle’s funeral, has gone out of business. Working-class people never got rich in my mom’s hometown, but they have seen better times – earlier, more prosperous decades when America, to them, seemed greater than it does now.

This underscores the fact that feelings about one’s country are rarely separate from what one has seen with one’s own eyes. If you’ve witnessed a great economic decline in your hometown, the idea of making America great again is an acknowledgement of the reality you’ve lived through, and you may have been very hungry to have that acknowledged. If you’ve been in the

military and traveled overseas and witnessed the difficult daily lives of the citizens of Afghanistan or Iraq, the relative peace of daily life back in America can seem miraculous, though you might at the same time question the greatness of the country that keeps redeploying you, and refusing to fund services for veterans. And while white working-class Americans are in increasingly bad shape, blacks in America can see how much more prosperity and freedom the average white person still has. It can be hard to think of America as ever having been great, given that true justice has yet to be achieved. No full freedom in this “homeland of the free.”

My ambivalence about the United States of America, my inability to see it as uniformly great or as the greatest, has less to do with my direct experience than with my empathy. If I paid attention to only my own life story, to my own personal trajectory, I really should think America is the greatest. I grew up safe in the middle of the middle class, I went to good public schools and a good public university, I’ve never been downsized. My many privileges – being a non-disabled, cisgender male from a European-American family – have contributed to this narrative of my life. Being gay did reduce some options for me, particularly in terms where I felt I could live openly. But my privileges helped me find safe places to be.

And, somewhat paradoxically, there was a type of discrimination that I found liberating. I know that thousands of people were very hurt by these laws, but when I was in my late teens and had to register with Selective Service, I thought it was fantastic that gays couldn’t be in the military. (At least there was one perk, right?) I knew the dismal track record of my country’s military adventurism, and I thought, “if straight men want to start another war, they can go fight it.” It was a relief to know that I could not be roped in, that I could never be another casualty remembered on Memorial Day.

Eventually, I came around on this, to the idea that the Pentagon’s discriminatory policies were wrong and harmful to many GLBT people. I realized that, if we were going to have a militarized society, it should at least treat all citizens equally. And I knew that, even though I was safe from being sent to war, war was still taking a huge toll, overseas and at home, particularly in communities less privileged than the ones I came out of, communities where they don’t need a holiday to think about war and what it does. I came around on these issues because I had the ability to learn about and feel what other people were going through. That’s what leads to ambiguous feelings – to grown-up, complicated feelings – about one’s country. Ambivalence comes from understanding the problems, the misery and deprivation and death caused by American policies and actions, both within our borders and well beyond them. Understanding all that and how it co-exists with all the goodness that Americans have done and can do can make ambiguity the only choice. Even if one’s individual life is fine, America has not fully realized the dream the dreamers dreamed.

I’m reminded of this every time I look at the news, about violence or politics or socioeconomic inequality. And if I ever do someday, somehow forget, if my life ever gets so comfortable that I go numb to the needs all around me, all I have to do is get in touch with my partner’s Swedish cousins. I got to meet these Swedish cousins three years ago, and they all speak excellent

English, so we were able to have fascinating conversations about the differences between our two countries. There are two moments from those discussions that I will never forget. One was when we Americans were trying to explain to the Swedes the concept of college tuition. We were like, you know, *tuition*, the money you pay the university. And they kind of looked at us blankly, like well, yes, you have to pay for food and a place to live. And we were like no, the money you pay attend the classes. And they were like “Why would you do that? The government pays to run the university, there’s nothing more to pay.” If Swedes even have a word for tuition, it doesn’t get much use.

In another conversation, the topic was elementary schools, and it came up that school lunch is free for every student across Sweden. We explained that in America, some students get free or reduced-price lunches, depending on how low their family income is, while other kids pay full price. The Swedish cousin we were talking with appeared to be near tears at hearing this. You shame the poor by requiring them to prove their poverty? We didn’t have an answer for that, other than “yes, we do.” We explained that American culture puts a high value on wealthy people being able to keep their money, and we explained that Americans tend to have an underlying suspicion that the poor deserve their fate and don’t deserve help. There is nothing great about any of that.

I had no idea at the time, but my conversations with the Swedish cousins could have been straight out of the latest Michael Moore movie. I know that some of you have seen “Where to Invade Next,” in which Moore visits countries that are treating citizens better than we are in a wide variety of ways. He talks to the locals in places like Finland and Italy, and he gets baffled looks when he asks about student debt, or when he shows them photos of what American pupils eat at lunchtime. (“Frankly, that’s not food,” says a school chef in France.) The movie has many hilarious moments, but it’s also utterly heartbreaking for those of us who understand America’s unrealized potential. We have the wealth but not the will. We have made an idol out of a disconnected, consumption-based concept of freedom. And radical individualism and a valorization of greed and violence have damaged so much of our shared life.

There is no perfect country, of course, but with its egalitarian sensibilities, and its abundance of lakes, pine trees, and atheists, I sure did like Sweden. If I had a custom-made cap, it would probably say “Make America More Swedish.” But other than opening a few more IKEA stores, I don’t know how realistic that is. Sweden is a fairly homogenous and prosperous country with fewer than 10 million people. The USA is a sprawling, diverse country of 323 million people. Translating Scandinavia’s success on our shores would be no easy task, even if the dominant value systems weren’t so different.

So what are we to do with America? What are we inspired to do, and able to do, to make it great, or at least greater? Critical thinkers in the United States have long been told to “love it or leave it” – a simplistic false choice that omits the option of “loving it into something better.” This is part of the ambiguity. If we didn’t love it at all, if we didn’t feel at least some way at home here, if we didn’t have any hope whatsoever for it, maybe more of us with the means and privileges to do so would try to leave. Google searches for “moving to Canada” have spiked in

recent months; it's true. But becoming expats is not something that most of us are really going to do.

One thing we can do, and one thing this congregation has always done, is continue to be keepers of the truth. This flame we light every week is a symbol of truth, something reason-based humanists hold dear. And truth is in grave danger right now. We have reached a point at which facts and fact-checking do not change Americans' minds about public figures or major issues. Earlier this month, Marty Baron, the editor of the Washington Post, implored Americans to ask ourselves: "How can we have a functioning democracy when we cannot agree on the most basic facts?" It's a fair, and scary, question.

We may not be able to get everyone to accept facts. But we can start by making sure we're being truthful with ourselves. Michael Moore says this in his film: "The first step to recovery, the first step to being a better person, or a better country, is to be able to just stand up and honestly say who and what you are. I am an American. I live in a great country that was born in genocide and built on the backs of slaves." Acknowledging such truths can inform our decisions as citizens and demonstrate how to live with ambiguity and integrity.

The second thing we can do is to remember that positive change is possible. As Moore points out in his movie, the Berlin Wall came down quite quickly. I've already mentioned the sweeping legal changes for GLBT people. We are on the cusp of seeing our first female major-party presidential nominee. Such stories of human progress are good to keep in mind in times like these.

And a final thing is to remember that all the struggles are interconnected. Economic inequality makes it easier to recruit lower-income Americans into the military. Public military spending boosts private corporate profits. Corporate profits fund the political campaigns of public officials who see nothing wrong with inequality. Around and around it goes, these systemic cycles of greed and exploitation. It usually takes some concerned citizens or a civic-minded public official to throw a wrench into the works, in the form of a lawsuit, or legislation, or protest. The gears may not grind to a halt immediately – in fact, it can take generations -- but the work of change is worth doing. There's no one but us to do it, but we are enough.

I want to close this morning with words, again, from Langston Hughes:

*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!*

May it be so.