W. Douglas Tanner Jr.

The Truth Can Set Us Free

Toward a Politics of Grace and Healing

Essays on Deepening the American Dream

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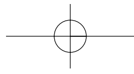

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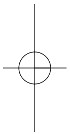

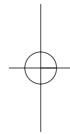

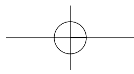

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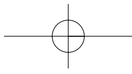
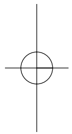
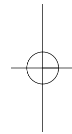
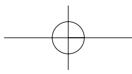

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Toward a Politics of
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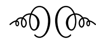

W. Douglas Tanner Jr.

Essays on Deepening the American Dream

A SERIES SPONSORED BY THE FETZER INSTITUTE

Fall 2007, Essay Number 13

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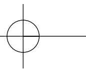

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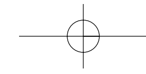


Gratitudes

Especially . . .

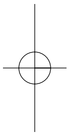
To Mark Nepo and Sheryl Fullerton
for their encouragement and their patience

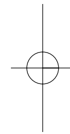
To The Faith & Politics Institute
for providing me many of the experiences from which I write

To Will Campbell, John Lewis, and Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela
for their unique roles among my many excellent teachers

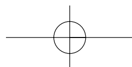
To Mike Cross, singer and songwriter
from my native North Carolina

and





To my wife, Kathy Gille,
my companion and counselor in writing this essay
and in living my life



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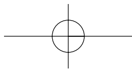
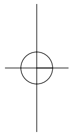
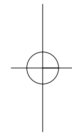
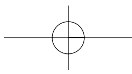
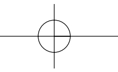










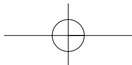
Preface

Sowing the Seeds of a National Conversation

During the past several decades, many observers of our culture have suggested that faith in the American dream is dying, that a collective vision of hope for the future is fading from view. It has taken a series of national crises—placing us all in direct awareness of our own vulnerability and mortality—to awaken us to the truth that the American dream is not dying, but deepening. Recognition of this truth has never been more essential as we struggle to respond with compassionate strength to the events of September 11.

The Fetzer Institute's project on Deepening the American Dream began in 1999 to explore the relationship between the inner life of spirit and the outer life of service. Through commissioned essays and in dialogue with such writers as Huston Smith, Jacob Needleman, Gerald May, Cynthia Bourgeault, Kathleen Norris, Robert Inchausti, Carolyn Brown, Elaine Pagels, Parker Palmer, and others, we are learning a great deal about the intrinsic nature of this human relationship. These essays describe some of the ways in which attention to this relationship (in communities and nations as well as individuals) does invariably lead to more compassionate and effective action in the world. What's more, each in its own way illuminates the essential qualities of the common man and woman—the global citizen—who seeks to live with the authenticity and grace demanded by our times.

In the 1930s, the poet Langston Hughes observed that the origin of a deeper American dream is not to be found in some distant, abstract idea but very near, in the story of our own lives. His insight rings true to this day:



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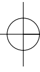
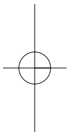
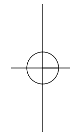


An ever-living seed,
Its dream
Lies deep in the heart of me.

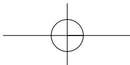
The deepening we seek can be found in our own hearts, if only we have the courage to read what is written there.

—Robert F. Lehman, Chair of the Board,
Fetzer Institute





From Hughes, L. "Let America Be America Again." In *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*. New York: Knopf, 1994. Copyright © 1994 the Estate of Langston Hughes.



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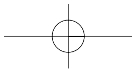
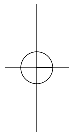
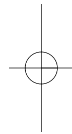
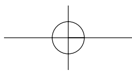
The Deepening the American Dream Series

Fetzer Institute's project on Deepening the American Dream began in 1999 to explore the relationship between the inner life of spirit and the outer life of service. Through commissioned essays and in dialogue with such writers as Huston Smith, Jacob Needleman, Gerald May, Cynthia Bourgeault, Kathleen Norris, Robert Inchausti, Carolyn Brown, Elaine Pagels, Parker Palmer, and others, the project is beginning to sow the seeds of a national conversation. With the publication of these essays, the thinking and writing coming from these gatherings is being offered in a series of publications sponsored by Fetzer Institute in partnership with Jossey-Bass. The essays and individual volumes and anthologies to be published will explore and describe the many ways, as individuals and communities and nations, that we can illuminate and inhabit the essential qualities of the global citizen who seeks to live with the authenticity and grace demanded by our times.









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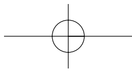

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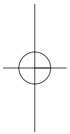
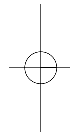
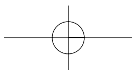

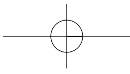
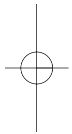
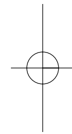
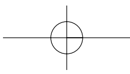

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THE TRUTH CAN SET US FREE

TOWARD A POLITICS OF GRACE AND HEALING

I say to you today, my friends, even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

—Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., spoken on August 28, 1963, at the Lincoln Memorial

FROM 1991 TO 2006, I served as chief executive of The Faith & Politics Institute, an interfaith organization in Washington, D.C., that works primarily with members of Congress, their staffs, and others professionally related to Capitol Hill. I often summarize the mission as helping the people with whom we work hang on to a piece of their soul. I have spent much of my life at the intersection of faith and politics. This essay addresses points at that intersection that I believe to be essential to the development of a deeper American dream. It also covers the history of my own development in some detail.

Parker Palmer, my friend and colleague in this series of essays, has written of the Möbius strip as an image of wholeness and health in the relationship between our inner lives and our outer lives. The Möbius strip is a geometric form in which, rather than inner and outer being clearly separate and distinct, the outer flows inward and the inward flows outward. Parker's image provides a window to how, after considerable reflection, I have come to address the theme of deepening the American dream. My inner personal development has shaped my outer expression and understanding of the subject. Likewise, my experiences of society and politics have worked to shape my inner life. In this essay, I seek to convey an integration of the two—inner and outer, personal and political—that represents my experience.

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The concept of the journey inward and journey outward came to me first from another friend and writer, the late Elizabeth O'Connor. Elizabeth used the phrase to refer to the essential spiritual journey to which each of us is called, the journey toward healing and wholeness. I pray that what I write here points toward healing and wholeness, for us as individual human beings and as citizens of the United States of America in a world that is ever more interconnected and interdependent.

On September 11, 2001, the vision of a dominant and independent America ensuring security to its free and independent citizens and offering us unlimited opportunities to pursue material wealth became less compelling than perhaps at any time in the previous half-century. The American dream long carried by that vision is, I daresay, both foolish and shallow. If our life together in this land is not to become similarly superficial, a deeper dream must guide us. That dream, I believe, must trust in authenticity, truth, compassion, forgiveness, and grace as the paths toward wholeness and maturity.

I have turned sixty in the course of writing this essay. There's more memoir here than I had anticipated, and perhaps more than most readers would prefer. I've determined, though, that the source of any wisdom I may have to offer on deepening the American dream is so interwoven with my own experience that I cannot speak to it in any other way. I can only hope that the personal dimension of my perspective serves to enhance, rather than diminish, its value in the reader's mind and heart.

The Dream Unexpressed

I was born in 1947 and spent my childhood and adolescence in Rutherfordton, a small town in the foothills of western North Carolina. The expression "the American dream" did not convey any substantial content to me during those years, nor did it have the same power I suspect it carried in other cultural communities in other parts of the country. I learned, of course, of pilgrims who came to Massachusetts to escape religious persecution, and I understood their search for a land where they could live according to their own precepts as part of the vision that shaped America. I saw Daniel Boone's moving ever westward in search of "elbow room" as another strong natural desire that animated the American spirit. But Ellis Island simply wasn't a reference place for southerners whose families had made their way across the Atlantic centuries before. Nor do I remember anyone citing the American dream as a source of inspiration, guidance, or authority.

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For a few weeks each summer, we visited my mother's family in Norfolk, Virginia. I might have picked up a sharper sense of the term there, but I didn't. In retrospect, I believe that may have been due to Tidewater Virginia's history of slavery and a general awareness (conscious or otherwise) among white Virginians that neither slavery nor the racial segregation most of them defended at that time fit any notion that could imply freedom and equal opportunity. They agreed at least subliminally, I suspect, with fellow Virginian Thomas Jefferson, who wrote in reference to the role of slavery and race in America, "I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just." Yet they were no more keen to correct the contradictions between the country's ideals and the region's culture than Jefferson was eager to free his slaves.

To the degree that the concept of "the American dream" may have entered the family lexicon, it was born out of the popular sense in the 1950s that a time finally had come when the generation of my parents and aunts and uncles could look forward to something other than the suffering and sacrifices they had undergone during the Great Depression and World War II. In those years, their hopes and dreams for America were, above all, of a nation whose citizens came together to lend each other a hand and to prevail over a malevolent and fearsome external enemy. After VE Day and VJ Day, though, both a reasonable measure of economic security and a world of long-lasting peace seemed within reach.

Following the defeat of one form of totalitarianism in fascism and in the face of another in communism, my parents' generation in North Carolina and Virginia had also come to see spreading democracy as part of the American dream. Truly believing in democracy can lead one to tremble just as surely as can reflecting that God is just. The American dream was about to receive an articulation that would inspire both embrace and resistance. The difference lay in whether one chose to advance or to retreat while trembling.

The Dream Defined

If it was not impossible for a white teenaged boy in that time and place to resist absorbing the attitudes that dominated his culture in regard to race, it was at least a formidable challenge at which I failed. Adolescent identity seems often to involve defining oneself over and against someone or something else—and a readiness to fight that against which one chooses to stand. In my case, it was racial integration. I didn't really know any black people, nor did I want to. I resented those whom I saw to be pushing

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themselves upon white society as contemptibly "uppity." Perhaps most of all, I saw them as radically different from me, my family, and my friends. In my mind, difference in skin color reflected a difference of essential humanity.

By the grace of God, pressing against my prejudice, came Clarene Lincoln Robertson. A family friend and a demanding teacher of American history my junior year in high school, she refused to let me be comfortable in such a mental and emotional space. Less than five feet tall, born in southwestern Virginia, and married to a bear-hunting, North Carolina mountain-born fellow educator, Mrs. Robertson also refused to be intimidated by the common assertion—encouraged by local textile executives who were members of the John Birch Society and influenced the county school board—that she was a communist. She knew she was anything but. What she did was force her students to think, to consider perspectives beyond those most familiar to us. She did it all within the context of teaching American history, American government, and American ideals. She also did her best to open us to feelings beyond those in which we tended to insulate ourselves. Mrs. Robertson assigned me to read and report on John Howard Griffin's *Black Like Me*. By the time the school year ended in May 1963, my heart and mind were closed less tightly. Experiences the ensuing summer would lead me trembling forward.

Church was an important part of life in Rutherfordton and in my family. "MYF"—Methodist Youth Fellowship—nurtured several of my closest friends and me in a comfortable measure of piety, provided healthy recreation, and gave us a fun place to go on Sunday evenings. A week of Senior High Assembly at Lake Junaluska on the edge of the Great Smoky Mountains offered all that in abundance, plus attractive Methodist girls from Greensboro, Charlotte, Asheville, and elsewhere. For some of us, it also led to recognition and the development of leadership potential through the Western North Carolina Conference Methodist Youth Council. I went to the Assembly that June and won election as vice-president of the Conference MYF. I remember it as the last such gathering at which everyone was white.

In July 1963, I experienced my first serious encounter with African American peers at a training session held at Pfeiffer College for Conference MYF officers from across the southeastern United States. Few things changed my life as much as that week. I arrived unaware that it would be an interracial gathering, and I continued to resist that dimension of it for at least three days. I promptly developed a crush on Ellie Warr, who was Junior Miss Alabama, lived next door to Governor George Wallace

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(another "good Methodist"), and found her perspective challenged at least as substantially as I found mine.

More profoundly memorable than moments near Ellie, though, was the Thursday morning when I sat down with a small group of fellow attendees, listening to an African American minister from Mississippi describe what it had been like for him a month earlier when his good friend Medgar Evers was murdered. He spoke clearly but quietly. His voice was sad but conveyed neither anger nor bitterness nor accusation to his young audience, which was largely white. He seemed to trust us to hear his words and search our own souls for the implications of his story. I walked away knowing that something in me had broken. I couldn't look at the world any longer as I had up to that point, nor could I look at those around me as I had before. Though Bob Dylan hadn't yet released his song, I saw that the times were a-changin'. Again by the grace of God, this time mediated through black Mississippians, so was I. So, also, was the American dream.

One month later, the vision that sustained the civil rights movement and offered a radical deepening of the American dream was immortalized in the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., spoken on August 28, 1963, at the Lincoln Memorial:

> I say to you today, my friends, so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.
>
> I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."
>
> I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.
>
> I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice. . . .
>
> I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low; the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight; and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.

The day before, Dr. King had spoken in Chicago to a national Methodist conference on "human relations"—a euphemism of the time for race relations. That week was my second heavy exposure to a new vision and set

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of understandings that wouldn't let go of me. At points, I became uncomfortably sensitive to criticism of the ways of my native Southland being articulated in accents to which my ear wasn't yet accustomed. When a bishop from Georgia shared sentiments similar to those of his northern, midwestern, and western colleagues, I could relax—and welcome the authority of his voice as well as his title. Comedian Dick Gregory's act the last night of the conference left me laughing at my prejudices. The warmth of humor invited further self-examination and greater change.

Until then, the dominant dream of my life was to seek an appointment to Annapolis and pursue a career as a naval officer. Family visits to Norfolk had already instilled in me a lifelong love for the sea, and the image of an officer nobly serving in the defense of his country held a powerful romantically patriotic appeal. At the summer's end, however, I pondered all that I had experienced and turned toward the institution in which I had experienced it most profoundly. My internal compass pointed toward the vocation of a clergyman and a particular dimension connected to politics. Though I would know neither the intricacies of the course nor the depth of the channel for years to come, I knew at the time that a transforming inner experience was shaping my outward expression of vocation.

Dr. King, the Mississippi minister, and thousands of others were calling us toward a dream that I awakened *to,* not *from.* They led me to understand it as the proper goal of both Christian faith and American politics. I held to it as the "true" American dream, a dream *of America* as it was meant to be, if not the dream yet *held by most Americans.*

A Painful Journey Inward Toward Self-Awareness and Authenticity

> Ladies and Gentlemen . . . I have some very sad news. . . . Martin Luther King was shot and was killed tonight in Memphis, Tennessee. . . . In this difficult day, in this difficult time for the United States, it's perhaps well to ask what kind of a nation we are and what direction we want to move in. . . . My favorite poet was Aeschylus. He once wrote, "Even in our sleep, pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart, until, in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God."
>
> —*Robert F. Kennedy, spoken on April 4, 1968, in Indianapolis, Indiana*

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The four of us representing our high school graduation class at commencement exercises in the spring of 1964 developed our speeches around the verses and chorus of Bob Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind." We reflected on the questions of "How many roads? . . . How many times? . . . How many years?" As the winds of change blew across the land, into and through Congress and the White House, I came to think that the best way for me to pursue the civil rights movement's version of the American dream lay in my becoming an officer in the "forces of righteousness" that were pressing for changes in laws and other social institutions.

I graduated from Duke University in 1968 with a bachelor's degree in psychology, followed in 1972 by a master of divinity degree with a concentration in social ethics. I spent my first stint in Washington in 1970 and 1971 as an intern with a group of liberal-to-moderate Democratic members of the House of Representatives. The program was designed by Duke Divinity School in partnership with Virginia Episcopal Seminary to offer those of us bent toward political activism an opportunity to taste it in the halls of Congress. It had an unfortunate side effect on me of enhancing my already strong tendency to divide the world into the "good people" in politics acting on the right side of "truth and justice" and the "bad people" acting in opposition on the wrong side.

Curiously enough, little of my theological education at the time involved searching my soul about much of anything. The late years of the sixties and early years of the seventies were heavily marked by social and political upheaval. Race riots rocked northern cities in the summers. Dr. King was assassinated. The controversial and divisive war in Vietnam tolled on. The Watergate burglary, its accompanying political scandal, and congressional hearings led to President Nixon's resignation. In such times, seriously attending to the formation of one's spirit seemed self-indulgent and irrelevant. The proper American dream, as many of us understood it, had more to do with changing the system than with changing ourselves. In truth, we were oblivious to the ways in which the brokenness of the system reflected the brokenness of individuals, including ourselves.

For a considerable period, through seminary and into my first clergy appointment, I came to forget about inward soul-searching and embraced an outward vision with increasing passion. In my chosen identity as a social-activist clergyman, I sensed little need for grace; I held instead to an illusion that I was earning my salvation, and it was incumbent on everyone else to see the light of justice and do the same. Personal authenticity and wholeness had little meaning for me. Perhaps I simply hadn't been psychologically ready for the depth of self-examination I needed. In

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any case, neglecting my journey inward over several years led to a place where I could continue to do so no longer. From the vantage point of thirty years later, I see my earlier version of—and my path toward—a deeper American dream lacking something essential. That something had to do with self-awareness, honesty, acceptance, and learning to trust in grace. A major personal crisis emerged as I pursued a noble vision sorely out of touch with parts of myself.

In my late twenties, my career was flourishing. My marriage—entered into when I was twenty-one—was failing. I had spent a good bit of my life defining myself in terms of personal qualities I neither exhibited nor possessed. I had believed myself somehow a son of the gallant and the good, clear and strong enough to resist any temptation toward tending to my own needs at someone else's expense. In truth, I had been terribly out of touch with my own emotional, psychological, and spiritual depths. Eventually I had to face that I had acted in ways destructive of a healthy marriage and had caused immeasurable pain to my wife. I also had to face that what I really wanted was a divorce and a fresh start.

The rarity and general unacceptability of clergy divorces at that time fed my fears and increased my anxiety—but failed to change my honest outlook. It took me some years to face that truth head-on and to find the courage to act on it with a reasonable measure of integrity. Eventually, at thirty-two, I left my home, my established identity, and my supposedly bright future in the ecclesiastical establishment. There had been security in each of those. There also had been, for me, an inner Egypt where I felt checked and bound. My exodus, like that in the Bible, came with turmoil, confusion, and doubt. I wandered in the wilderness for a period that sometimes seemed like forty years. The cloud by day and pillar of fire by night that guided me forward was a faith that somewhere on the other side of the desert lay a promised land of greater personal integration and wholeness.

If I was going to get there, I would have to face ever more honestly and deeply the ways in which the self-image I had constructed earlier was a myth. Worse than a myth, it was truly false. I would have to own a different side of my soul and psyche that I had been much more comfortable projecting onto others. No longer able to trust my salvation to the false self I had exalted and served, I opened myself to the grace of God as I never had before. It came, abundant and sufficiently, just as it had that summer before my senior year in high school. Just as then, fear and resistance to truth had been its major obstacles. This time, it refused to take me on an outward journey in ignorance of the call to an ever-deeper

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inward one. My life demanded the shape of a Möbius strip. So did my belief in any dream worthy of a truly great nation.

Grounding the Dream in Forgiveness and Grace

My personal dream at this point was no longer simply to be involved in society "on the side of the angels." It now included becoming a whole human being. My understanding of the American dream expanded to make room for citizens, individually and collectively, to honor inner truth, however disruptive and dishonorable it might appear.

Precious encouragement came through the Wellspring program, Elizabeth O'Connor, and Gordon Cosby of Washington's Church of the Saviour, and in the writings of two other maverick clergymen, each older than I, who later became my friends and mentors. Robert Raines had abandoned his place of universal high regard in the world of progressive "mainstream" Protestantism to come to terms with the inner truth that led him to leave his marriage. Bob became the director of Kirkridge in Bangor, Pennsylvania, where he and his second wife, Cindy, arranged retreats that helped participants become more authentic and more whole. Mississippi-born Will Campbell had come to understand that his admirable engagement in the civil rights movement had inadvertently led him to divide the world up between the enlightened good folks who supported racial justice and the benighted bad ones who fought it, without examining the history and forces beyond their own will that had shaped identities and attitudes. Transformed through painful wrestling with that awareness, Will began to advocate recognizing the humanity of Ku Klux Klansmen and to reach out to them as fellow children of God. Financial support that had been there for his earlier work dried up, but he persisted in an approach that made increasing sense to me. I have yet to encounter anyone with greater wisdom about the spirit and perspective needed to heal the wounds of our nation's racial history.

Once when pressed by a gadfly friend to summarize the Gospel in ten words or less, Will replied, "We're all bastards, and God loves us anyway." My personal journey had forced me to recognize that I could definitely fit that categorical description. It also had taught me that God does love me anyway, and trusting in that truth for both myself and everyone else, new dimensions of grace—previously hardly imagined—can indeed come into being.

The onetime slave trader John Newton wrote the hymn "Amazing Grace" following an experience of religious conversion that transformed

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his perspective. (Readers may be freshly aware of Newton's experience from the recent film *Amazing Grace,* centered on the work of William Wilberforce to end the British slave trade.) Though I had sung the song as long and often as anyone, as I made my way through the changes of my early thirties, I had finally become conscious of its profound truth. I had learned that there is a source of healing at the heart of the universe that seeks honesty and wholeness. Its nature is love and forgiveness. It is the ultimate source of life, strength, and beauty. Its flow is blocked by dishonesty, by fragmentation, by hubris, and by fear.

To deepen the American dream, we need a deeper acquaintance with grace and its dynamics. Clearly, grace can be a transformative force in the very private and personal dimensions of our lives. Many of you, I suspect, are acquainted with this truth and readily affirm it. Grace also has the power, I'm convinced, to transform our public life, if we will but trust it. Though its dynamics are essentially the same in the private and personal as in the public and corporate spheres, we're generally less familiar with grace as a force in public life. It tends to seem foreign and less trustworthy there, for reasons both understandable and legitimate. More fully opening ourselves as a society and a nation to the healing power of grace is a new frontier.

Abraham Lincoln, in his second inaugural address, directed us toward the task. Grieving greatly over the terrible costs of the war that he knew to have been caused by slavery, which he had prosecuted with determination and which he understood to be somehow serving the purposes of the Almighty, Lincoln called on American citizens not to judge each other but with malice toward none and charity toward all to bind up the nation's wounds. That his assassination preempted Lincoln's leading both North and South in the period of Reconstruction is among the foremost tragedies in American history.

Almost a century later, Dr. King and his colleagues demonstrated the power of grace in the philosophy of nonviolence that was at the heart of the civil rights movement. They saw their opponents as adversaries to be won over, rather than enemies to be destroyed, and developed strategies and tactics accordingly. Not everyone who supported the movement understood the distinction or embraced its implications. But those who made the greatest difference did. In Montgomery, in Nashville, in Birmingham, and in Selma, they invited everyone into "the beloved community" they envisioned and created.

Opening ourselves to the healing power of grace requires our daring to trust it enough to face the sometimes painful truths of who we really are; to remember and reflect on our history and grieve for parts of it, including

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those that strip us of innocence; to experience the compassion that flows readily when we know beyond doubt our common humanity with *all* others; and to receive the hope and creativity that come when we cease pouring our energies into denial and self-justification. It requires letting down our guard and risking vulnerability. It also involves being still and attentive enough to receive the type of profound awareness that is unavailable in the crowded, busy moments of our lives.

Singer-songwriter Mike Cross bears witness to much of this process in a piece called "Rock 'n' Rye."

> I'm sittin' 'n' rockin', in front of the fire,
> Watchin' the flames as they dance,
> Sippin' a glass full of old rock and rye, and
> Drinkin' a toast to the past:
> Here's to the people and places I've known.
> Here's to the love and the pain that is gone.
> Here's to the joy and the sadness I've seen.
> Here's to the unfinished dreams, and
> Here's to what memories mean.
>
> Rock 'n' rye, rock 'n' rye,
> I'm sittin' here rockin' with tears in my eyes,
> Sittin' here rockin' with tears in my eyes.
>
> I'm sittin' 'n' rockin', in front of the fire,
> Thinkin' of things as they are,
> And how all that I am is just pieces and parts
> Of the memories I've gathered so far.
> Here's to the goodness and kindness I've shown.
> Here's to the people that I've treated wrong.
> Here's to mistakes that I wish I could change.
> Here's to the pride and the shame,
> And the growin' that comes with the pain.
>
> I'm sittin' 'n' rockin' in front of the fire,
> Thinkin' of things yet to be:
> How the present's a doorway that leads from the past
> To a future that I've yet to see.
> Here's to the man that I was in the past.
> Here's to the man that I am now at last.
> Here's to the man that I someday will be.
> Here's hoping he's better than me,
> Because of these old memories.[1]

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Cynics may dismiss the lyrics as those of a crying drunk. But I doubt that many will argue for a better path to the depth of reflection, wisdom, and wholeness than sitting and rocking in front of a fire. For a long time, most Americans did it practically every evening from October until April. In the summer, they sat and rocked on the porch. It's hard to reach the same depth of consciousness in front of a TV set, whether it's tuned to a sit-com, a ball game, a "reality" show, or CNN.

Can we imagine where it would take us if we, as a nation, could collectively sit and rock in front of the fire, toasting the past with all its love and pain, joy, sadness, and unfinished dreams, because it provided the path to who we are now? Thinking together of things as they are, of the goodness and kindness we've shown, of the people we've treated wrong, of mistakes we wish we could change, of the pride and the shame, and the growing that comes with the pain? Thinking of things yet to be, hoping that who we will be is better than who we are because of the memories we carry together? It's easy for me to imagine tears in our eyes—tears of gratitude for the grace that has led us, in James Weldon Johnson's words, "thus far on the way." The closest image I have of such a national experience is Franklin Roosevelt's "fireside chats." They were before my time, and as valuable as they may have been in sustaining the American dream, they were a long time ago.

Seeking a Fireside to Sit By

> We didn't even know what moderation was. What it felt like. We didn't just work: we inhaled our jobs, sucked them in, became them. Stayed late, brought work home—it was never enough, though, no matter how much time we put in. . . . We ordered things we didn't need from the shiny catalogs that came to our houses; we ordered three times as much as we could use, and then we ordered three times as much as our children could use. . . . There were times, coming into the house from work or waking early when all was quiet, when we felt uneasy about the sense of entitlement that characterized all our days. . . . When did the collision between our appetites and the needs of our souls happen? Was there a heart attack? Did we get laid off from work, one of the thousands certified as extraneous? Did a beloved child become a bored stranger, or a marriage fall silent and cold? Or, by some exquisite working of God's grace, did we just find the courage to look truth in the eye and, for once, not blink? How did we come to know that we were dying a slow and unacknowledged death? And

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> that the only way back to life was to set all our packages down and begin again, carrying with us only what we really needed?
>
> —*Barbara Cawthorne Crafton, "Living Lent"*[2]

I came into American politics two decades after FDR's fireside chats, passing out "Kennedy-Johnson" bumper stickers at the Rutherford County Fair the fall of my freshman year in high school. I am among many in my generation whose political orientation and party affiliation were formed in response to Kennedy's charisma and, on the issues of the civil rights movement, to Johnson's commitment. After college, during the Nixon, Ford, and Carter years, I paid more attention than most people did to politics. I spent my intern year on Capitol Hill when I was in divinity school. After I had finished at Duke and moved to Greensboro, North Carolina, I assisted in grassroots lobbying efforts for causes I believed in, voted regularly, contributed a bit of money, put bumper stickers on my car and signs in my yard, and usually worked a telephone at campaign headquarters on election day. But that was it. I wasn't involved deeply enough to observe the inner workings of government very closely or to know much of anything more about politics first-hand. It was easy enough to think about the way things "ought to be." How to help move things in that direction, however, was another matter. I had a few personal notions—like a retreat ministry among people professionally involved in politics that could help them hang in when they felt like hanging it up—but little experience to test their validity.

Preparation for a change on that front began in 1979 in a meeting at Duke Divinity School with Sen. Mark Hatfield, who had come to address the alumni convocation. Complementing my encounter with Sen. Hatfield in that same year was exposure to Dunamis, a mission of Washington's Church of the Saviour. "Dunamis" is a Greek New Testament word meaning "power of the Spirit." Sen. Hatfield's experience, about which he spoke often and wrote regularly, shaped substantially the Dunamis approach to ministry among politicians.

Sen. Hatfield noted that the "church people" who came to his office tended to be either "pastors" or "prophets." "Pastors" were attuned to the stresses and strains of public office, and they were eager to be spiritually supportive. They weren't necessarily well informed, however, on issues of public policy. "Prophets," on the other hand, often knew the issues but evidenced little appreciation of the heavy demands of political life and seemed not to see the politician as a person. Neither was sufficiently helpful. Dunamis trained those who would minister in the political realm to

seek to be "pastor/prophets." That involved learning enough about the life of the politician as a person to be present pastorally, and enough about at least one issue to offer a prophetic perspective. It also involved becoming truly prayerful.

If I knew anything at that point, it was a bit about a few issues I had studied for several years. My seminary year on Capitol Hill hadn't afforded me any real insight onto the personal struggles of a member of Congress, and I'd never thought much about them. Hatfield's framing of what he needed gave me a new understanding. As I think of it now, I see that it was about combining the journey inward and the journey outward, about life on Parker Palmer's Möbius strip. It also was about a version of the American dream that held to the importance of both the inward and the outward life.

In 1982, two years into the first Reagan administration, I accepted a task that would lead me back to Washington and a deeper immersion in electoral politics than I had previously experienced. My friend Robin Britt, who had shared in the conversation with Sen. Hatfield three years earlier at Duke, decided to run for the U.S. House of Representatives from North Carolina's Sixth Congressional District, where both of us had lived for a decade. It was a long shot. The campaign treasury couldn't afford anyone who knew what he or she was doing, and I ended up undertaking my first serious responsibility in the role of campaign manager. I quickly learned that the understanding of the American dream I had grown to embrace in the 1960s was not dominant in 1982—not even among relatively hard-core Democrats. Conventional political wisdom encouraged promoting instead a version of the dream especially appreciated by real estate agents and home-building contractors: namely, a single-family dwelling on a spacious lot in an aesthetically attractive neighborhood. I was troubled. I wondered what had happened and where we were going.

At least part of the answer probably was that nothing significant had happened. We were headed the same place we had been heading for a long time. Except in the black community, Greensboro may never have embraced Martin Luther King Jr.'s version of the American dream very widely, very deeply, or for very long. But that didn't explain it all. Significant numbers of white citizens had become skeptical of the ideals underlying the vision of Johnson's Great Society and Carter's human rights–based foreign policy. Others had been downright hostile to such notions all along (just as some had enthusiastically championed them). But the notable change was among voters "in the middle" who had traded one version of the dream for another. Something seemed to have shifted in the atmosphere.

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Partly because the brash style and out-of-the-mainstream positions of our incumbent opponent offered a great target, partly because 1982 was a Democratic year across the country, and partly because we ran a reasonably good campaign, we won the election in spite of the shift I had sensed. In 1984, strengthened by President Reagan's general popularity and his place at the top of the ticket, the shift in political climate had become more pronounced. Though theoretically we were better positioned than we had been in 1982, and though Robin ran well ahead of all the candidates above him on the ticket, we lost his campaign for reelection.

My two seasons as a campaign manager and my two years as a congressional aide taught me more than that the version of the American dream that had awakened and shaped me had given way to a much more individualistic one of personal prosperity. Working with Robin Britt from 1982 through 1984 taught me also that both true pastor-prophets and spiritually grounded, self-aware politicians are hard to come by.

I found it very tricky to be an effective pastor-prophet myself, in spite of a solid friendship with and ready access to a new member of Congress. The pace of life in the office dizzied me. There was constant stimulation—rarely, if ever, a dull moment—and the headiness that comes initially with being "where the action is." The pressures of reelection dulled my desire to press any prophetic stance that might jeopardize winning the next term. And being on the payroll had a way of checking my tongue when my close point of observation revealed that a forcefully challenging pastoral word was in order.

My experience of those two years was one of being caught in a whirlwind that carried me wherever it spun, with dust and leaves flying all around me and impairing my vision—or perhaps more accurately, a whirlpool that sucked me in and carried me down to a place where it was easy for my better self to drown. If this describes my life as a senior staff member to a freshman congressman, multiply it several fold for the life of the freshman congressman himself!

Most people run for Congress, I've observed over many years now, with both a genuine desire to serve the nation and a passion for at least one public issue toward which their energies flow. Those who are elected usually come to Washington with a strong sense of personal direction. They may or may not be as pure as "Mr. Smith," but neither are they "Boss Jim Taylor"—the corrupt antagonist of Jimmy Stewart's Mr. Smith in Frank Capra's classic film *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. But it isn't easy to stay in touch with the better side of themselves, and using their office to call forth their deepest capacities to serve the common good requires exceptional attention and determination.

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A member of Congress is charged with representing the diverse interests of several hundred thousand people from a particular part of the country in a setting shaped by national issues and fierce partisan competition. To keep the job, he or she must be perceived, at least by a simple majority of the constituents who vote, as doing that reasonably well. The role requires not only considering how to vote on legislative proposals several times a day but also continually communicating back home through the press, the mail, and now the Internet. For most members of the House of Representatives, who are elected every two years, it also requires constantly raising campaign funds and regularly returning to their districts on weekends for a wide range of work-related activities. To be effective in helping shape the legislative agenda, the member must develop positive relationships with congressional colleagues and representatives of numerous interest groups. Time pressures are enormous; appointments typically scheduled no more than thirty minutes apart become backed up when members are summoned to the House floor to vote.

All this is basically to keep the boat of one's elected office afloat. Tending to these tasks doesn't determine the course or destination of the vessel. It can be carried along by the tides of public opinion and the currents of partisan interest without a great deal more thought and effort; the work required to simply hold the office makes it easy to understand how that often is where it goes. Neglecting personal health and family life comes at a cost to politicians, and the more sensible ones set limits on how much of either they're willing to do. How and when can they find time and space to "journey inward" to "sit 'n' rock in front of the fire," to think of their pride and their shame and the growing that comes with their pain? How do they reconcile within themselves the conflicts that inevitably exist between their public personas and their inner truths? How do they come to really know themselves? When they don't, what are the public consequences of their private projections? Can they ever lead us as citizens to face the harsher side of our own collective history and truth?

Working as a congressional aide, I remembered a column by Ellen Goodman titled "Why Is Truth Always an Exit Line?" In it she pondered, among other examples, the difference it might have made for President Eisenhower to warn the nation about the military-industrial complex in his inauguration speech instead of his departing speech. Surely, in part, truth tends to be an exit line because it can be problematic politically. But maybe, I thought, it's partly because people in political life are rarely encouraged to face the truth. They're too busy, too preoccupied, too fragmented. Can they possibly come to terms with the truth of themselves and the truth of the nation's direction before they're out of office?

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I realized that the reflective time and space that had awakened my own awareness of myself, the world around me, and the interconnections between the two seemed practically impossible to come by on Capitol Hill. Yet I was convinced that without serious examination of the broken places along with the seeds of promise in both themselves and the world, the positive leadership potential latent in elected officials could not emerge. Any chance members of Congress might have to find or take such time would require very serious intentionality, a supportive structure both strong and flexible, and ready experiences of genuine community with colleagues of like mind and heart. It would require creating settings, relationships, and encounters both pastoral and prophetic. If elected officials—particularly those in legislative bodies—were to help guide the nation toward an American dream deeper than that promoted by real estate developers, they needed a structure of encouragement, support, and challenge to journey both inward toward greater personal grounding from which to serve the public interest and outward toward greater knowledge of the true nature of the common good.

Fireplaces Need Chimneys: Living and Learning on Virginia's Eastern Shore

> Ideals are like stars: you will not succeed in touching them with your hands, but like the seafaring man on the ocean desert of waters, you choose them as your guides, and following them, you reach your destiny.
>
> —*Carl Schurz*[4]

Believing with Herman Melville's Ishmael "as everyone knows, meditation and water are wedded forever,"[5] I determined to move closer to a body of water that had called to my heart since I was a child. Returning to an earlier idea of developing a retreat center, I set out to do it in a distinctive part of Virginia that appealed to me both in its geography and its history: the Eastern Shore of Chesapeake Bay on the tip of the Delmarva Peninsula.

After Robin's defeat in 1984, I took a parish assignment on the Eastern Shore. I began to work on the side with a United Methodist district camp I envisioned becoming the site of retreats for politicians as well as preachers. The ideal that drew me forward was to create a place in that beautifully natural, nautical setting that would become the site of regular pastoral and prophetic encounters and relationships. I had been on the

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Eastern Shore only a few months when I returned to Washington for a fundraising reception for an anti-hunger effort I had helped found. There I crossed paths with Kathy Gille, an attractive congressional staffer from Michigan. We had known each other casually for a couple of years and had worked together on policy issues related to Central America. When I was again in Washington a couple of weeks later, we had dinner. Our conversation was rich and led us to want to see more of each other. Kathy was drawn from some place deep within her soul toward the vision of a retreat center for people in politics. Soon we were married.

I lived in a parsonage on the Eastern Shore where I continued to serve as a pastor and to explore the ideal that had led me there. Kathy lived in an apartment in Washington where she continued to work with ever-greater responsibilities as an aide to the congressional leadership, particularly in efforts to end the intensifying wars and support a peace process in Central America. Kathy usually made the five-hour-each-way trip to the Shore on the weekends, and I often went the other way to spend a couple of days in Washington during the week. After two years, we faced our limits with the commuting lifestyle and I moved back to Washington. The still-fermenting idea of a retreat center needed a new wineskin that eventually took the shape of The Faith & Politics Institute. I brought back with me to Washington, though, a set of wonderful experiences from my time as a "country preacher." They would inform the development of The Faith & Politics Institute as much as my time as a campaign manager and congressional aide. One of the most powerful experiences dealt, once again, with American identity and ideals in relation to race and history.

Several weeks after arriving on the Eastern Shore, I considered inviting Rev. Godfrey Tate, an older, well-respected African-American colleague from Richmond, to fill in for me one Sunday when I needed to be away. Response to the idea in the all-white congregation ranged from cool to heated opposition, the latter finding voice in a phrase familiar to my southern ears from decades past: "We're just not ready for that yet." It was 1985. In my late thirties, I had received at least a bit of maturity and resisted the temptation to force my will. I responded, "All right. If we're not ready for that, I'll find someone else. But let's ask ourselves what we need to do to get ready and get at it." We began to work with that task through the congregation's committee on religion and race, a standard part of United Methodist structure that often lies moribund.

January of the following year turned out to be the first national holiday in honor of Martin Luther King Jr. Virginians tend to be a proud lot. They can also be stubborn. I believe that everyone, at some level, conscious, subconscious, or unconscious, holds sacred his or her particular

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heritage and identity. Virginians are among those who do it very consciously. Their regional heritage includes many of the nation's "founding fathers," but the identity of countless white native Virginians is at least equally tied to Robert E. Lee, Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson, and other figures in Confederate history. If Virginia was going to honor Martin Luther King with a holiday, the legislature vowed, it would also equally honor Generals Lee and Jackson; Virginia's designation of the third Monday in January would be "Lee-Jackson-King Day." When the holiday arrived, we used the exceptional occasion it offered to explore issues of race, history, memory, and healing in the context of Christian faith.

The next summer, on a Sunday when I would be there rather than when I would be absent, I invited Godfrey to preach. A few folks stayed away in protest, but the great majority not only willingly accepted his presence but also truly appreciated it. "We're just not ready for that!" moved to "I'm glad we did it." It was like everyone had known deep down that their hearts and minds weren't where they would have liked for them to be on a number of things that the thought of Godfrey's presence in the pulpit symbolized. They welcomed being "shepherded" along a journey that would take them closer to their authentic spiritual aspirations. Key to the process, I saw, had been an acceptance and appreciation of them where they were *and* a determination to try to help them move to a different, deeper place.

Gathering Hearthstones, Rocking Chairs, and Companions: Return to Washington

The new wineskin finally fashioned to hold the ever-fermenting wine of my understanding of a deeper American dream took the shape of The Faith & Politics Institute. A few friends—Anne Bartley, Joe Eldridge, Congressman Glenn Poshard—and I established the institute in 1991. We had shared some poignant experiences of the value of a trustworthy spiritual community among people whose lives were intensely immersed in politics.

Glenn's religious sensitivities reflected a rare combination of fundamentalist Southern Baptist roots in his native southern Illinois, regular retreats at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky, and avid reading of the Abbey's best-known monk, Thomas Merton. Our most unforgettable time together had surrounded the evolution of Glenn's commitment to run his first re-election campaign with a small fraction of the money that conventional wisdom dictated he needed to raise. He thereby could avoid spending the time and energy most of his colleagues did raising money.

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He also could pass up feeling uncomfortably beholden to the interests of those whom he would have been asking for major contributions. When Glenn was outspent as much as five to one and continued to win by ever-greater margins over the course of his ten-year congressional career, he looked back at the small group of us that had met together early each Wednesday morning to reflect on the challenges of life in the political arena, to pray, and to seek direction at the intersection of faith and politics. "Without it," he said, "I wouldn't have had the clarity to make that decision or the courage to stay with it." Glenn's life in politics came to follow the model of Parker Palmer's Möbius strip. He journeyed inward with us to see clearly what he needed to do to be true to himself; he then journeyed outward with integrity and authenticity.

Before the founding of the institute, we all had at times experienced the need to encourage a political vision to counter the views prevalent on both sides, which divided the electorate into the "good people" like us and the "bad people" who see things differently. Anne and I worked in a Senate campaign in my home state of North Carolina and faced the painful consequences of politics that plays to fears and resentments, especially those related to race. We knew that the ancestors of many who voted one way and many who voted the other way had "come over on different ships." We knew also that we were all in the same boat now. We would live into the future alongside each other. We all had gifts and graces. We all had limitations. We all had untapped potential to make things better for everyone. Let's learn, we dared pray—even in the national political arena—to open ourselves to one another, forgive one another, embrace one another, respect and even appreciate—yes, love—one another, and go forward together.

It came down to believing in the possibility of a politics of truth, grace, and healing. Not cheap grace, as the German Lutheran theologian and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer warned against, but the costly grace that comes with honesty, self-awareness, conscience, courage, and compassion. We created The Faith & Politics Institute seeking to awaken and strengthen leadership that would share this understanding, could grow into it more fully, and could contribute to developing an approach to politics grounded in it. We knew it would require creating space for reflection and community. We knew it would involve encounters, both individual and collective, with painful truths and promising prospects. We knew that *faith* would mean following the promising prospects—both in regard to personal potential that emerges from self-awareness and spiritual discernment and in regard to societal possibilities that emerge when fear yields to trust.

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In the years since, I have been afforded a remarkably gratifying wealth of experiences with members of Congress from both sides of the aisle, with congressional staff from across the political spectrum, and with lobbyists representing a wide range of competing interests. The Faith & Politics Institute has facilitated several weekly "reflection groups" inspired by our early experience with Glenn Poshard. We have sponsored and coordinated numerous weekend retreats. We have organized luncheon and dinner events on Capitol Hill with speakers such as Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu, Sister Helen Prejean, and the Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh to address the intersection of faith and politics in profoundly stirring and unforgettable ways.

Without a doubt, we have a lot yet to learn about how to pursue a politics of truth and healing grounded in grace. We have gained some lasting lessons, though. I share here the experiential sources of what I have come to believe most deeply.

Cutting Firewood: Pilgrimage as Metaphor and Practice

Richard R. Niebuhr once wrote, "Pilgrims are persons in motion, passing through territories not their own, seeking completion or clarity; a goal to which only the spirit's compass points the way."[6] It's an interesting way to think about those who landed at Plymouth Rock in what was to become Massachusetts in the early seventeenth century. It's compelling, I believe, as a way to think about those in the nearly four centuries since who have carried forward an ever-evolving American dream: "persons in motion, passing through territories not their own, seeking completion or clarity . . . to which only the spirit's compass points the way."

Almost every year since 1998, The Faith & Politics Institute has carried self-selected members of Congress and their guests on a pilgrimage to historic sites of the civil rights movement in Alabama. Enhancing the experience immeasurably has been the presence and leadership of Rep. John Lewis, a Democrat from Georgia who was a true hero of the civil rights movement long before he was a congressman. We travel to Montgomery, where Rosa Parks refused to give up her bus seat and Martin Luther King Jr., the new pastor at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, answered the call to a leadership role he neither sought nor anticipated. To Birmingham, where four young African American girls attending Sunday school died in a bomb blast because their church was a rallying place for courageous people of faith and where others faced dogs and fire hoses in response to their nonviolent demonstration against racial segregation.

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To Selma, where John Lewis and his colleagues initiated a march to Montgomery that would lead to the 1965 Voting Rights Act, but only after they had been beaten terribly by state troopers under orders from Gov. George Wallace on a day that came to be remembered as "Bloody Sunday." We visit memorials and museums and hear stories from Congressman Lewis and others who lived through those days and contributed profoundly to deepening the American dream. In Selma, we walk together over the Alabama River on the Edmund Pettus Bridge, where the marchers met the troopers.

Participants come with a wide range of experiences, sensitivities, and knowledge. Some are southerners old enough to have known both racial segregation and the civil rights movement personally. Some from other parts of the country of comparable age watched it attentively from a distance—and some came to lend a hand to the movement in Alabama or Mississippi. Others are young enough to have learned only in their grade school classroom about the history through which we've come to walk.

There's so much to cover in such a limited time that we maintain a brisk pace—leaving no question as to whether we meet Richard Niebuhr's definition of pilgrims as persons in motion! The territory through which we pass is more familiar to some than others, but for members of Congress from disparate backgrounds, ideological perspectives, and political persuasions, passing through it together creates for all of them "territories not their own." Everyone comes seeking either completion or clarity or both; some very consciously, others in ways of which they may be only partially aware. Toward that goal, on every trip, the spirit's compass unfailingly points the way.

Though well over one hundred members of the House and Senate have joined the pilgrimage, some actively resist. One southern member whom I know and with whom I have had very positive experiences told me, "I've never been inclined to go. It seems like a big guilt trip. I knew it was wrong when it was happening. I know it is wrong now. I don't need to go down there to find that out." My case that the weekend is one in which inspiration trumps guilt hasn't yet convinced him otherwise. My hunch is that he failed to act on his knowledge that it was wrong when it was happening as he might have, and he regrets that failure to such an extent that the trip seems "like a big guilt trip." If he were to risk walking into the emotional and spiritual depths of the pilgrimage, I believe an encounter with the redemptive power of nonviolence could release the energy he spends avoiding feeling guilty. He then could channel that energy in a positive and creative response to the heavy lasting legacy of slavery and white supremacy in the South and in the nation.

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Some white participants arrive clinging tenaciously to their self-image as righteous advocates of racial justice, as the ones who never tolerated prejudice among those around them, who stepped up and spoke out and are therefore innocent of ever having served as accomplices to bigotry or racism. Not all let go of that notion as quickly as they might have. Eventually, though, in the painful honesty of the weekend, almost everyone comes to see that we've been caught together in America's sordid racial history. If we are to become whole as a multiracial democracy, we must face the truth to be set free by it. A powerful river of grace flows over all in moments of story and song. The need to defend or justify oneself yields to appreciation for the opportunity to experience the amazing nature of grace to save us all, wretched as we are. We were blind, but now we see.

For many participants, it's a first encounter with the nature and power of nonviolent resistance to evil. John Lewis, Bernard LaFayette, Dorothy Cotton, Fred Shuttlesworth, Bettie Mae Fikes, Bob Zellner, and other civil rights movement leaders who travel with us convey a warmth, clarity, and spirit deeply grounded in the philosophy and practice of nonviolence. Some participants at first don't know what to make of this. The very idea of choosing to put yourself in a situation where you're going to be hit and determining you are not going to hit anyone back seems insane. Then, as they listen more closely, it begins to sound wise. It becomes worth learning more about. It becomes worth considering. It merits respect, honor, and—perhaps—even allegiance.

The journalist Ellis Cose describes a comparable encounter with John Lewis in his book, *Bone to Pick: Of Forgiveness, Reconciliation, Reparation, and Revenge*:

> When I asked John Lewis, the congressman from Georgia, how—in his life as a grassroots civil rights leader—he had avoided anger while being beaten, repeatedly, by cops in the Jim Crow South, he answered like the seminary graduate he is: "If you believe there is a spark of the divine in every human being . . . you cannot get to the point where you hate that person, or despise that person . . . even if that person beats you. . . . You have to have the capacity, the ability to forgive."[7]

The first Congressional Civil Rights Pilgrimage to Alabama occurred during the last year of former Alabama Governor George Wallace's life. The delegation was invited to visit Gov. Wallace in his Montgomery home, where he lay in bed, frail but attentive. The first members to step toward him and take his hand were John Lewis and Earl Hilliard, the local African American congressman. Everyone else was provided a model

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lesson in forgiveness: if these two, who suffered most directly from Wallace's actions decades before, could embrace Wallace, who am I—save someone trapped in self-righteous hubris—to choose otherwise?

> Here's to the man that I was in the past.
> Here's to the man that I am now at last.
> Here's to the man that I someday will be.
> Here's hoping he's better than me,
> Because of these old memories.

And here's to the land that we were in the past, here's to the land that we are now at last, here's to the land that we someday will be, here's hoping it's better than we, because of these old memories.

The emotional defenses public figures are so trained to maintain break down on the pilgrimage. Participants open themselves to the moment and to each other. Journalists who travel with us comment that it's very unusual to see members of Congress cry. Sometimes tears come down the journalists' cheeks as well. I believe it happens because a thirst for water from the deepest well of authentic humanity has just been met. Everyone has experienced it together, and to deny it would be foolish. The spirit's compass points the way.

I share this in such detail partly because it is a story of public figures—politicians, elected representatives. If we can see and believe in such an account of even partial transformation among them, we may readily see ways to carry comparable processes further among us "ordinary" citizens who elect them, hold them accountable, and yearn for them to reflect an American dream deeper than that currently apparent in national politics.

Rock 'n' Rye from Another Land: South Africa as Paradigm and Partner

> I come here today because of my deep interest in and affection for a land settled by the Dutch in the seventeenth century, a land taken over by the British, and at last independent; a land in which the native inhabitants were at first subdued and relations with whom are a problem to this day; a land which defined itself on a hostile frontier; a land which was once an importer of slaves and now must struggle to wipe out the last traces of that form of bondage. I refer, of course, to the United States of America.
>
> —*Robert F. Kennedy, University of Cape Town, South Africa, June 6, 1966*

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> Forgiveness and reconciliation are not cheap. . . . Forgiveness is not to condone or minimize the awfulness of an atrocity or wrong. It is to recognize its ghastliness, but to choose to acknowledge the essential humanity of the perpetrator and to give the perpetrator the possibility of making a new beginning. It is an act of much hope and not despair. It is to hope in the essential goodness of people and to have faith in their potential to change. It is to bet on that possibility.
>
> —Archbishop Desmond Tutu[8]

In 1998, Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu officially presented the report of the hearings of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission to the Library of Congress at a Faith & Politics Institute–sponsored luncheon in the Cannon House Office Building. I had traveled to South Africa in 1974 as a young representative of the United Methodist Board of Global Ministries and met with a number of South African anti-apartheid activists. None had envisioned a transition to nonracial democracy that would, though terribly painful at points, ultimately be accomplished so admirably twenty years later. None knew to expect the wisdom that marked the collaboration between Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress on one side and F. W. de Klerk and the Nationalist Party government on the other. I doubt that anyone could have imagined the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

At the luncheon, Archbishop Tutu spoke to sixty-nine House members, both Republicans and Democrats. Throughout his remarks, one could have heard a pin drop—if the floor of the cavernous Cannon Caucus Room had not been carpeted. Everyone seemed to sense the herald of a spirit that not only had begun to open hardened hearts, heal broken ones, and create a new possibility in South Africa, but that also held within it the power to create new possibilities throughout the world. There began that day a promising relationship that continues to unfold between The Faith & Politics Institute and leaders of South Africa's reconciliation process—some in government, some in business, some in organized labor, some in the religious community, and some in other expressions of civil society.

Through that relationship, we have come to see ever more deeply and in ever greater dimensions the challenges that face a nation seeking to overcome the legacy of many centuries of profound racial injustice. We also have come to see more clearly that the wisdom needed often comes against our will through the awful grace of God ushered in by pain and despair. Robert Kennedy grasped deep connections between South Africa and the United States well before Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, and

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their colleagues received the wisdom to address the countries' common challenges with the extraordinary insight and creativity that emerged from the crucible of South Africa's experience. To describe South Africa's truth and reconciliation process in any detail is beyond the scope of this essay.[9] Here I attempt simply to describe the essence of its spirit, its impact on my understanding, and its implications for deepening an American dream that could lead us further into the twenty-first century with strength and wisdom. Those have to do with journeys both inward and outward, with authentic leadership, with truth, grace, and healing.

In 1995, the year following Nelson Mandela's election as president, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was set up by South Africa's parliament through the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act with Mandela's active and wholehearted support. Tutu was named to chair the commission. Described as a "third way" between Nuremburg and national amnesia, the TRC received testimony from both victims and perpetrators of gross human rights abuses on both sides of the country's heavy internal conflict between 1960 and 1994. The hearings lasted for three years, were conducted across the country, and were so thoroughly covered by the press that anyone in South Africa could hardly avoid facing the painful and often horrific truths the hearings exposed. Under Tutu's skillful and profoundly spiritual leadership, the truth telling sometimes led to dramatic experiences of grace and forgiveness.

The TRC process was far from perfect. South Africa's deep wounds will take many decades to heal completely, and the country faces a myriad of daunting political and economic challenges. But the spirit, wisdom, and energies released in the carefully conceived and conducted reconciliation process represent an approach to healing the wounds of conflict that is radically different from anything preceding it anywhere else in the world. I believe that it is also radically more promising. Its promise lies in the recognition that violence begets violence that begets more violence and that retribution begets retribution that begets further retribution. There truly is no future without forgiveness. Nor can there be forgiveness without confession, healing without truth.

The two most prominent American leaders who thoroughly grasped the centrality of forgiveness for the common good were assassinated. One died in April 1865 and is enshrined in a memorial at the west end of Washington's National Mall. The other died in April 1968 and gave his best-known speech from the steps of that site; he will soon be honored with a memorial not far away. In contrast to Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr., both Mandela and Tutu, by God's grace, have lived well into their senior years. They bring to the world a wisdom hard

earned in a decades-long struggle against injustice and a determined, intensive effort to heal the wounds of both the injustice and the costs of its correction. These iconic figures are among many South Africans from all races and all sides of their country's conflicts with whom and from whom we in the United States have much to learn. Their wisdom could lead us to deepen the American dream profoundly. Given our precarious place in the world and the failure of our limited vision since September 11, 2001, the deepening cannot come too soon.

At some future point in Iraq, God willing, there will be a time for healing the wounds of Saddam Hussein's reign compounded by the war we both initiated and executed in a manner marked by both ignorance and arrogance. Neither Nuremburg-like trials nor national amnesia will deliver that healing.

In the meantime, American soldiers return to limited and inadequate care with wounds both physical and psychological calling them—and the rest of us in this country they serve—to face and tell painful truths, in some cases to seek forgiveness, and to learn to trust in grace. War inevitably involves the dissemination of propaganda that dehumanizes the enemy, frames one's own cause in heroic goodness, diminishes consciousness of collateral casualties, and enables the warrior to cope with its costs. The effectiveness of this war's propaganda has run its course. In the crisis of its failure lies an opportunity to come to terms with truth that quick military victory can cover up and avoid. The challenge before our body politic will be to own the truth, resist the temptation to seek or inflict additional punishment, correct the course of our policies, and promote national unity and reconciliation in our own country as well as in Iraq.

In Front of the Fire in the Capital of the Confederacy

Richmond, the capital city of Virginia, is steeped in a history both distinctive to it and woven into the fabric of the nation. Part of that history has been both claimed and celebrated. Statues of Robert E. Lee, "Stonewall" Jackson, and Jefferson Davis erected between 1890 and 1907 line Monument Avenue. The city served as the capital of the Confederacy during most of the Civil War (the preferred designation by many Virginians is the War Between the States, the label preferred by a few is the War of Northern Aggression, and one still hears the term "the late unpleasantness" spoken with tongue in cheek). That part of its past is a source of identity and tourist income.

Another part of Richmond's history has been buried and largely ignored—until recently. Between 1776 and 1808, slaves brought from

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Africa were unloaded at night on the James River docks and, chained together in a coffle, driven to holding pens and jails next to the auction houses where they would be sold to Virginian and other mid-Atlantic planters. When importation of Africans from overseas was banned in 1808, Richmond rapidly improved its transportation system and developed a massive trade in slaves born to those brought earlier from Africa. Richmond became the largest source of enslaved Africans on the east coast of America from 1830 to 1860. By the 1850s, as many as ten thousand people a month were "sold downriver" to markets in the Deep South and the Caribbean.

Much of America's economy by the mid-nineteenth century was based on *slave labor.* Richmond has the distinction of its substantial wealth being built on the *slave trade,* a dimension of the system harder for its wealthy white citizens to defend with paternalistic platitudes about how well they cared for their slaves. Better, it must have seemed to them, to ignore that part of its contribution to the Confederacy and the Civil War. As the city grew in the twentieth century, Interstate Highway 95 was routed directly over the area of the slave auction houses. Literally buried and paved over, the shadow side of Richmond's history nevertheless cast a shadow on the city's and America's soul.

In the early 1990s, a small group in Richmond determined to lead the city to learn about and acknowledge the part of its past that many had determined to ignore. Marking a "slavery trail" from the sites of the docks to the sites of the markets, they led a publicized march to begin to "heal the heart of Richmond." A headline in the major local paper read "Guilt Trip." Refusing to let that shallow verdict be the final word, the group continued in an effort that has resulted in establishment by the city of a Slave Trail Commission, appropriate markers being placed at sites along the way, archaeological work being undertaken, educational materials being produced, and the beginnings of a "heritage tourism" more soundly based in truth.

In the spring of 2007, Richmond unveiled a Reconciliation Statue identical to ones in Liverpool, England, and Benin, West Africa—key points in the triangular British-African-American route of the slave trade. The same Richmond paper carried a favorable front-page, above-the-fold story the previous Sunday under the headline "Slavery Statue Symbolizes Forgiveness."

A year earlier, the *Times-Dispatch* also covered a Faith & Politics Institute pilgrimage led by Rep. John Lewis and Sen. George Allen to nearby Farmville in Prince Edward County, Virginia, where county leaders had chosen to close rather than integrate the public schools between 1959 and

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1964. A generation of black children missed out on the education that should have been theirs; a generation of white children was implicitly taught to believe it didn't matter. The 2006 pilgrimage was one among several efforts undertaken by the community and the state to address the lingering wounds of that period. A few days after the pilgrimage, an editorial titled "Reconciliation" appeared: "Both Senator George Allen and Governor Tim Kaine used the correct word to describe county leaders' actions: evil. Yet the Saturday evening session where they spoke belonged to Johannesburg Bishop Peter Storey and his emotional tale of post-apartheid South African racial reconciliation," read the editorial. After describing Dr. Storey's account of his work with Desmond Tutu in South Africa, the writer continued, "The South African's message to Prince Edward and all of Virginia as it seeks to curb the 'addiction to division' was to answer the call to forgive. To those who directed injustice, ask for exculpation. To those who have suffered great wrongs: Do not carry a corrosive hate in the heart."[10]

The spirit of South Africa's energies for reconciliation had made its way to Richmond's preeminent newspaper in the capital of the Confederacy and the heart of the slave trade. That spirit represents an essential direction in which I believe we are being called to deepen the American dream.

Because they are at the heart of the American story and because I know them in my own heart, the historic divisions between black and white in my native South are those of which I write here in a call for truth, forgiveness, grace, and healing. They are not, however, the only part of the nation's racial and ethnic history that cries for healing and redemption. American citizens not only in Richmond and Selma but also in Boston and New York, in Detroit and Chicago, in Tulsa and San Antonio, in Los Angeles and Seattle—in cities and towns all across the country—*all* live in places where painful histories of insensitivity and injustice have been suppressed and repressed. New energies for new possibilities and deeper dreams of what America means wait to be released as citizens honestly and creatively come to terms with those histories and their lingering effects.

The process surely involves research, the production of educational materials, and new museums and memorials. Sometimes it may involve formal public apologies issued by official bodies. At its core must be the coming together of ordinary citizens to openly and honestly share the ways, well studied or ill informed, in which their own senses and sensitivities of history have been shaped; to listen to each other deeply; to build bridges toward common understandings; to experience grace together; and to commit themselves to a common quest for wisdom and will to stay the course toward healing.

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With Tears in Our Eyes: Grief, Grace, and Wholeness

From western North Carolina when I was an adolescent; to Greensboro when I was a young adult; to Virginia's Eastern Shore, in Washington, and in Alabama when I was middle-aged; to South Africa and back to Virginia as I approach senior citizenship, I've come to know this about grace: we most often experience it with tears in our eyes. Tears of joy and gratitude that flow when we face our pain and brokenness and receive insight, inner acceptance, and new energy directing us toward new possibilities for ourselves, our country, our world.

A major obstacle to grace and its gifts flowing freely in the world of politics is the perception by public figures that they cannot afford to be open and honest; they must instead present a posture and a persona pleasing to the prejudices of the public. The electorate, they are conditioned to believe, doesn't welcome the confusion, questioning, and soul-searching involved in transformation; voters prefer instead candidates they perceive to be upbeat, confident, certain, and strong. There's ample truth behind this belief to explain politicians' reticence to allow tears to come to their eyes in public or to appear emotionally vulnerable in the manner that invariably accompanies any deep searching, transformation, or maturation. The reaction to Jimmy Carter's "malaise speech" offers one memorable case in point. Those of us who seek greater honesty and personal authenticity in our elected officials should not be naïve about the political perils of transparent vulnerability.

But the path of careful positioning and posturing easily leads politicians to lose touch with their souls. If they lose the capacity to be fundamentally honest—first with the public and eventually with themselves—their capacity to experience grace and to be its instrument is seriously impaired. If we don't admit into our consciousness memories of not only the goodness and kindness we've shown but also the people we've treated wrong, the mistakes we wish we could change, both our pride and our shame, then there's no growing that comes with the pain. Without the growing, painful though it may be, we develop into neither our full humanity nor our mature citizenship. Without experiencing that kind of growth, our elected officials cannot play their appropriate role in leading us toward our deeper potential as a nation. Moreover, when preoccupation with posturing prevents us from knowing ourselves, we fall prey to projecting onto others whatever we repress and disavow in ourselves. That dynamic can grossly distort our perceptions. In politics, such distortion leads to

unsound policies, inhibited statesmanship, and a range of consequences disastrous to the public.

Lyndon Johnson knew all too well that there was no viable path to victory in Vietnam. Nevertheless, his inability to accept becoming the first American president to lose a war kept him on a tragic, costly course. What might have been different had he found within himself the courage to choose to take the risk of whatever accepting that reality might mean? To choose, through painful honesty, to strengthen the capacity for growth, both in himself and in the country? What if he had dared to trust the grace—sometimes truly amazing—that waits to flow when fear, and the coercive power to control that fear calls forth, yield to the truth of their limits?

What if Richard Nixon had journeyed inward to face the demons of his paranoia and determined to overcome it rather than reinforce it with an enemies list and a burglary team among his campaign staff? If Jimmy Carter had faced the control tendencies in his personality that evoked in him a need to be the one who determined the White House tennis court schedule, what else might he have learned to entrust to others whose insights and wisdom could have strengthened his own? If Bill Clinton had sought to know and come to terms with himself well enough, once he was in the White House if not before, to invite a team of pastoral counselors to keep him from yielding to his well-known temptation instead of calling on them to help him recover from a costly disaster?

What if George W. Bush were to acknowledge and come to terms with whatever led him to embrace a direction that required highly selective use of intelligence, would prove calamitous in Iraq, and would alienate most of the rest of the world from the United States when credible advisers counseled against it? What if he and key members of his administration were to honestly and openly admit their mistaken assumptions and change course? Admitting some distinction between the contexts, nevertheless would it be so different from what F. W. de Klerk and the Nationalist Party did in South Africa in the early 1990s when they determined to negotiate with Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress after having for decades designated them as terrorists?

What if we, the public, came to value awareness of one's "shadow side" and the capacity to integrate it into responsible behavior sufficiently that we looked for evidence of psychological wholeness in candidates for public office as closely as we search their stands on policy issues? Might we—and they—become instruments of the grace that flows in honest encounter with who we have been, who we are, and who we someday could be?

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To a Future That We've Yet to See

I entered divinity school at Duke in the fall of 1968. Martin Luther King Jr. had been assassinated in the spring. Bobby Kennedy had been assassinated in the summer. Cities had burned and continued to smolder. The war in Vietnam raged on. No longer could we who had come of age in that tumultuous decade embrace a naïve notion of the American dream as the national embodiment of qualities such as hope, faith, love, and forgiveness. My classmates and I studied the history of American Christianity, seeking wisdom from kindred spirits in earlier times. We read the theology of Reinhold Niebuhr, who wrote prolifically about politics (it was his nephew Richard who would later write about pilgrims). Reinhold Niebuhr corrected the shallow confidence of his predecessors in the goodness of human nature; from him we learned to take seriously the nature and reality of sin and to understand its role in society as well as in individual human beings.

My years in Washington have acquainted me well with the ways in which politics is governed by more than the character of candidates for office and by more than an appreciation among the electorate for transparency and authenticity. I am under no illusion that the pursuit of security based on military strength—however illusory it may be—along with market forces, the power of ever-more-sophisticated advertising, and the appeals of economic affluence can readily be replaced as dominant political forces in American society. I am also acutely aware of "our addiction to division," in the words of Peter Storey.[11] It is much easier for candidates and campaign consultants to manipulate fears and resentments than to call forth from us the qualities that Lincoln called "the better angels of our nature."

And yet history can and does unfold in ways unforeseeable but through eyes of faith.

Reinhold Niebuhr's theology was shaped in full knowledge of both human frailty and the power of social structures, and his deep awareness of sin is born out in many of the ways of Washington and other capital cities.

Even so, Niebuhr's ultimate wisdom may be contained in words that reflect his understanding of redemption in this fallen world:

> Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime; therefore, we are saved by hope. Nothing true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore, we are saved by

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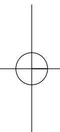
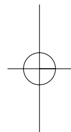
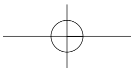
faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore, we are saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as from our own; therefore, we are saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness.[12]







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Notes

1 Mike Cross, "Rock 'n' Rye," from the album *Rock 'n' Rye,* © 1980, Vic-Ray Publishing (ASCAP), used with permission.

2 Barbara Cawthorne Crafton, "Living Lent," from *Meditations for These Forty Days,* © 1998, reprinted with permission of Morehouse Publishing in *Bread and Wine: Readings for Lent and Easter* (Plough Publishing House, 2003), pp. 15–18.

3 Sen. Mark Hatfield, conversation with the author, October 1979.

4 Carl Schurz (1829–1906), born in Germany, became a U.S. Army general and a highly respected politician, reformer, and educator.

5 Herman Melville, *Moby Dick, or The Whale* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), p. 3; originally published in 1851.

6 Richard R. Niebuhr, "Pilgrims and Pioneers," *Parabola,* Fall 1984, p. 7.

7 Ellis Cose, *Bone to Pick: Of Forgiveness, Reconciliation, Reparation, and Revenge* (New York: Atria Books, 2004), p. 4.

8 Desmond Tutu, in an interview by Anne Simpkinson following September 11, 2001, quoted in *From the Ashes: A Spiritual Response to the Attack on America* (Emmaus, Pa.: Rodale, 2001), pp. 8–9.

9 Information on South Africa's truth and reconciliation process is available from reliable sources on the Internet or at reputable bookstores. Archbishop Tutu's *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1997) is among several fine accounts, and Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela's extraordinary work, *A Human Being Died That Night* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), captures the profound depth of the experience.

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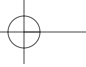
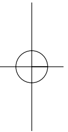
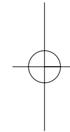


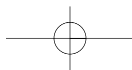
10 "Reconciliation" (editorial), *Richmond Times-Dispatch,* May 4, 2006.

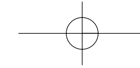
11 Ibid.

12 Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (New York: Scribner, 1952), p. 63.







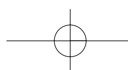


The Author

THE REVEREND W. DOUGLAS TANNER JR. is a minister, teacher, and writer who has spent much of his life at the intersection of religious faith, spirituality, and politics. In 1991, he cofounded The Faith & Politics Institute, a nonpartisan interfaith organization in Washington, D.C., that serves members of Congress, congressional staff, and others professionally related to Capitol Hill. Drawing universal wisdom from a range of religious traditions, the institute provides opportunities for spiritual community and moral reflection, encourages civility and respect as values essential to democracy, and seeks to strengthen leadership that can contribute to healing the wounds that divide both the nation and the world. After serving as the institute's chief executive for fifteen years, Tanner became its senior adviser in 1996.

Douglas Tanner came of age in his native North Carolina during the civil rights movement. The spirit of active nonviolent resistance to injustice and the vision of "the beloved community" marked his life and vocation indelibly. He served as a campus chaplain, a parish minister, a congressional aide, and a political campaign consultant before helping found The Faith & Politics Institute. Early in his career, he also served on the General Board of Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church and developed an enduring connection with southern Africa.

Tanner holds two degrees from Duke University, where he studied psychology as an undergraduate and theology and social ethics in divinity school. He is married to Kathleen Gille, a former senior congressional leadership aide and a consultant. They live with their golden retriever on the Eastern Shore of the Chesapeake Bay in Onancock, Virginia, where Tanner serves as minister of Market Street United Methodist Church.



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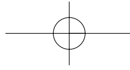
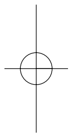
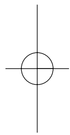
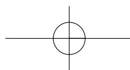

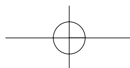

Fetzer Institute

FETZER INSTITUTE is a private operating foundation whose mission is to foster awareness of the power of love and forgiveness in the emerging global community. This mission rests on the conviction that efforts to address the critical issues facing the world must go beyond political, social, and economic strategies to the psychological and spiritual roots of these issues.

Inspired by the vision of John E. Fetzer, the Institute's guiding purpose is to awaken into and serve Spirit for the transformation of self and society, based on the principles of wholeness of reality, freedom of spirit, and unconditional love. The Institute believes that the critical issues in the world can best be served by integrating the inner life of mind and spirit with the outer life of action and service in the world. This is the "common work" of the Fetzer Institute community and the emerging global culture. Please visit our Web site at www.fetzer.org.

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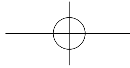
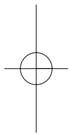
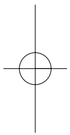
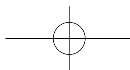

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Other Publications Sponsored by the Fetzer Institute in Partnership with Jossey-Bass

ANTHOLOGY ON
DEEPENING THE AMERICAN DREAM

Deepening the American Dream: Reflections on the Inner Life and Spirit of Democracy

Edited by Mark Nepo

A collection of reflections on the spiritual meaning of being American in today's world from some of our most respected thinkers: Gerald May, Jacob Needleman, Elaine Pagels, Robert Inchausti, Parker Palmer, and others. The book explores the inner life of democracy, the way citizens are formed, and considers the spiritual aspects of the American dream—life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

> This thought-provoking volume of essays challenges us to ponder the American Dream and discuss the spiritual values that can help transform the country. The interplay between history, spirituality, and current events is what makes this volume such a soul-stirring experience. It is indeed hopeful and salutary that this cultural document puts so much emphasis on spiritual values as being crucial to the health and enduring value of democracy in the twenty-first century.
>
> —*Spirituality & Health Magazine*

> *Deepening the American Dream* communicates a determined and magnanimous solidarity to a fragmented age of confusion and escalating resentments. The collection is . . . a gesture of peace and goodwill that summons us to come together. It's a powerfully uplifting book that shines light in the direction of incarnate hope. That rare happening of people actually talking to each other. I highly recommend it.
>
> —*The Christian Century*

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Essay #1, Winter 2003

Two Dreams of America

Jacob Needleman

As the inaugural essay in the series, the question is put: "Then, what of the American dream? Is it a vision or an illusion? Do we need to deepen this dream or awaken from it? Can anyone doubt the importance of this question? In one form or another, it is a question that has been gathering strength for decades, and it now stands squarely in the path not only of every American, but, such is the planetary influence of America, of every man and woman in the world. What really *is* America? What does America *mean*?"

Essay #2, Spring 2003

From Cruelty to Compassion: The Crucible of Personal Transformation

Gerald G. May

This essay is a compelling journey to the perennial bottom of who we are, at our best and our worst, and how to use that knowledge to live together from a place of spirit and compassion.

Essay #3, Fall 2003

Footprints of the Soul: Uniting Spirit with Action in the World

Carolyn T. Brown

This essay speaks deeply about the gifts and frictions that exist between our authentic self and the society we live in and grow in, and how returning to the well of spirit keeps forming who we are in the world.

Essay #4, Winter 2004

Created Equal: Exclusion and Inclusion in the American Dream

Elaine H. Pagels

In this essay the renowned religious historian Elaine Pagels provides a convincing exploration of the ways we have interpreted equality as expressed in the Declaration of Independence. More than ever, she says, we need to ask, who is included in the American dream? What do we make of this

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dream in a waking reality? How shall we take this vision to shape our sense of who we are—as a people, a nation, a community? She calls us to deepen our understanding of the American dream and commit ourselves to extending it to all people worldwide who would share in its promises, blessings, and responsibilities.

Essay #5, Spring 2004
Breaking the Cultural Trance: Insight and Vision in America
Robert Inchausti

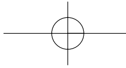
This essay is a convincing look at how we see and, just as important, how living in America has impaired our deepest seeing, and how education is the sacred medicine entrusted in each generation with restoring that deeper sight that lets us know that we are each other.

Essay #6, Fall 2004
The Grace and Power of Civility: Commitment and Tolerance in the American Experience
David M. Abshire

In a time when our country is more polarized than ever, the former ambassador to NATO, a historian himself, traces the history of commitment and tolerance in an effort to revitalize the respect, listening, and dialogue that constitute civility. "Which, then, is the true America?" he asks, "The America of division or the America of unity? The America of endless public and partisan warfare or the America of cooperation, civility, and common purpose? The America of many or the America of one?"

Essay #7, Winter 2005
Opening the Dream: Beyond the Limits of Otherness
Charles Gibbs

This essay explores America's relationship with the rest of the world. As executive director of the United Religions Initiative, Rev. Gibbs proposes that "The future of America cannot be separated from the future of the rest of the world. There are no longer chasms deep enough or walls high enough to protect us or to protect others from us. So what do we do? We might begin by seeing ourselves as citizens of Earth and children of the abiding Mystery at the heart of all that is."



Essay #8, Spring 2005

The Politics of the Brokenhearted: On Holding the Tensions of Democracy

Parker J. Palmer

With his usual penetrating insight, Parker Palmer speaks to the conflicts and contradictions of twenty-first-century life that are breaking the American heart and threatening to compromise our democratic values.

Essay #9, Winter 2006

The Almost Chosen People

Huston and Kendra Smith

In this far-reaching essay, renowned historian of religion, Huston Smith, and his wife, the scholar Kendra Smith, trace the American sense of liberty as a spiritual concept that has both inspired us and eluded us through a checkered history in which we have trampled many in the name of the very equality and freedom we hold so sacred. They trace the erosion of the American Dream in the twentieth century and look toward our inevitable membership in the global family of nations that is forming in the world today.

Essay #10, Spring 2006

Prophetic Religion in a Democratic Society

Robert N. Bellah

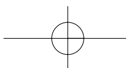
Steering between what distinguished sociologist of religion Robert Bellah calls "Enlightenment fundamentalists" on the one hand and religious fundamentalists on the other, this essay argues against both the common secularist view that religion should be excluded from public life and the dogmatic view that would exclude all secular and religious views except one. Instead it proposes a more moderate, nuanced, and robust role for faith and religion in the common life of America and Americans.

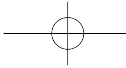
Essay #11, Fall 2006

The Common Cradle of Concern

Howard Zinn

In the winter of 2004, the legendary historian Howard Zinn explored the nature of being an American today with Mark Nepo through several conversations. This essay gathers the siftings of those conversations put together and edited by both Zinn and Nepo into a meditation on America, moral progress, and the myths of freedom called "The Common Cradle of Concern."





Essay #12, Spring 2007

The American Dream and the Economic Myth

Betty Sue Flowers

This provocative essay examines the limitations and deeper opportunities of the economic myth that governs our society today. It asks how we might articulate a common good through which we might treat each other as citizens and not just consumers. We are challenged to imagine ourselves anew, "We can't hold up a myth of community and wait for it to take hold. We have to work within our own myth, however impoverished it seems to us. To deepen the American Dream is to engage the imagination" to create better stories of who we are and who we might become.

Essay #13, Fall 2007

The Truth Can Set Us Free: Toward a Politics of Grace and Healing

Rev. W. Douglas Tanner Jr.

The founder of the Faith and Politics Institute traces his own journey; from growing up in the South to his own formation as a spiritual leader to his commitment to supporting the inner life of those called to govern our country.

Essay #14, Fall 2007

Is America Possible? A Letter to My Young Companions on the Journey of Hope

Vincent Harding

This elder of the Civil Rights Movement suggests that the dream is never finished but endlessly unfolding. He suggests that America's most important possibility for the world is not to dominate, threaten, or compete with, but to help each other in a search for common ground. He suggests that when we simply attempt to replicate our free-market materialism, we miss our most vital connections. From this, he opens the possibility that a new conversation may begin—one that might initiate a deeper journey concerning the possibilities of human community across all geographical lines.

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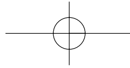

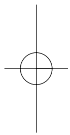

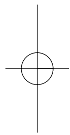

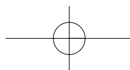

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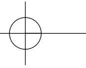
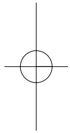


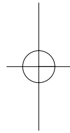
Essay #1, Spring 2006

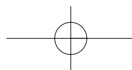
Bridges, Not Barriers:
The American Dream and the Global Community

Abdul Aziz Said

As the inaugural essay in the global series, this leading peace studies educator and scholar examines both the American Dream and the emerging global community with insight into the complex state of international relations, while envisioning a shift in world values that might birth a common world based on the spiritual conception of love and cooperation.







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