

SOME KIND OF DREAM

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
October 14, 2018

By almost any measure, it's been quite a week. If one indicator of global warming is increased volatility in the environment, especially at the extremes, then this week demonstrated increased volatility in lots of places.

We began the week with the formal swearing-in of Brett Kavanaugh as an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court, capping off one of the most viciously partisan confirmation processes in our nation's history.

The UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reported that we have only 12 years to reduce net carbon dioxide emissions by 45% in order to avoid what one IPCC board member called "unthinkable damage to the climate system that supports life as we know it."

As if to punctuate the point, the third-strongest hurricane ever to strike the US mainland slammed into the Florida Panhandle, surprising meteorologists and disaster planners alike by rapidly strengthening from a business-as-usual storm predicted to make landfall as a category two to a nearly category five monster.

The stock market caught the volatility fever through the week as well, raising serious questions as to whether higher interest rates and trade frictions with China, among other factors, would turn history's longest-running bull market into a bear.

These events mostly pushed off the front pages the abrupt busing under cover of darkness 1,600 detained migrant children, out of 13,000 who have been detained nationwide, to a hastily-erected tent city in the middle of the West Texas desert, where they are mostly out of sight of both the news media and adequate legal representation.

The American singer Josh Ritter, who is one of our nation's most talented songwriters and most popular performers, posted a new song this week on his YouTube channel. He has been singing the song, he says, and people have been asking about it, because it has a more overtly political tone than his previous songs. He explains the shift by saying, "Recently, I've been so enraged I didn't know what else to do."

In case you don't know Josh Ritter's music, I recommend you begin with his hugely popular and compulsively listenable song titled "[Getting Ready to Get Down](#)." It's from his 2015 album titled "Sermon on the Rocks." The song begins:

Mama got a look at you and got a little worried
Papa got a look at you and got a little worried
Pastor got a look and said, ya'll had better hurry
Send her off to a little bible college in Missouri

And now you come back sayin' you know a little bit about
Every little thing they ever hoped you'd never figure out...

And so on. The song goes on to arbitrage, deftly and humorously, the religious and cultural divide between tradition-bound adults and their freedom-seeking children.

In [Ritter's new song](#), he arbitrages a different divide in a similar way — the divide between the dream of what America was intended to be and the reality of what it has become. He writes:

I saw my country in the hungry eyes
Of a million refugees
Between the rocks and the rising tide
As they were tossed across the sea
There was a time when we were them
Just as now they all are we
Was there an hour when we took them in?
Or was it all some kind of dream?

I saw the children in the holding pens
I saw the families ripped apart
And though I try I cannot begin
To know what it did inside their hearts
There was a time when we held them close
And weren't so cruel, low, and mean
And we did good unto the least of those
Or was it all some kind of dream?

Ritter poses the question that many of us have struggled with in recent days and weeks. Is the brutal reality we see around us — the callous disregard and even gleeful laughter at women's suffering, the self-serving indifference toward the fate of the natural world that sustains us, the careless unleashing of capitalism's most divisive forces, the heartless denial of our duty toward those among us and around us who are suffering, the casting aside of even cursory concern for nation's self-proclaimed standards of dignity and liberty — is this what we really are as a nation? Has the idea that America could be a different kind of nation, one devoted not to the basest of human cravings but rather to the highest of human callings — has this all been some kind of dream? Is it time to judge the American experiment a failure?

In an [Atlantic article](#) this week, Peter Beinart, a professor of journalism at the City University of New York, observes that “when it comes to Brett Kavanaugh, there are three camps. The first believes it's a travesty that he was confirmed. The second believes it's a travesty that he was smeared. The third believes it's a travesty that the process was

so divisive.” The people in the third camp, Beinart says, think America has hit rock bottom because our national debates have become raucous, intemperate, and viciously tribal.

This is a misinterpretation of the situation, Beinart goes on to say. It’s not a sign that America has hit rock bottom, but rather the opposite. He says, “The struggle over Kavanaugh was, at its core, a struggle between people who want gender relations to change and people who want them to remain the same. And throughout American history, whenever oppressed groups and their supporters have agitated for change, respectable moderates have warned that they were fomenting incivility and division.”

Beinart reminds us of a letter written by seven white Alabama ministers and one rabbi to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in April 1963. The letter put Blacks who wanted race relations to change and whites who wanted them to remain the same on the same moral footing. Both sides held honest convictions in racial matters, the letter said. And both sides should observe “the principles of law and order and common sense.” The danger, the letter concluded, was “friction and unrest.” Averting it would require both sides to exercise forbearance and restraint.

For his part, King wanted friction and unrest. He called his Birmingham campaign of marches, sit-ins, and boycotts “Project C,” for confrontation. His written response to the white clergy said that they were mistaking the symptom for the disease. The problem wasn’t friction and unrest between the Blacks who wanted race relations to change and the whites who didn’t. The problem was that whites had been oppressing Blacks for centuries, and this problem couldn’t be overcome without friction and unrest.

King wrote his response from prison. He said, “I am not afraid of the word ‘tension.’ We must see the need of having nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men to rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood.”

Beinart applies King’s insight to our present circumstances by saying that our problem today is not tribalism; rather, it’s that “women who allege abuse by men still often face male-dominated institutions that do not thoroughly and honestly investigate their claims.” This is a very old problem, Beinart says. “What is new is that this injustice now sparks bitter partisan conflicts and upends long-standing courtesies. Rape survivors yell at politicians in the Senate halls. The varnish — the attractive, glossy coating that protected male oppression of women — is coming off.”

In the third verse of his song, Josh Ritter sings:

I saw justice with a tattered hem
I saw compassion on the run
But I saw dignity in spite of them
I prayed its day would finally come
There was a time when we chose our sides
We rose to fight for what we knew was right

Or was it all some kind of dream?

When justice gets tattered and compassion gets trampled, someone needs to be able to look unflinchingly into what Dr. King called “the dark depths of prejudice” and see dignity in spite of the darkness. Dr. King rightly understood that the ability to look beyond all the troubles past and all the troubles present and see all that yet remains possible — this ability lies at the heart of what we as a religious community call faith.

Dr. King referred to the arc of the possible in biblical terms. He called it the Promised Land. By any name, it’s a vision of what our nation could be, and should be, and ultimately will be — if we maintain our faith in each other and in the strength of our calling.

Josh Ritter concludes his song with this final verse:

Last night I lay in my true love's bed
And she lay there close beside
And we lay thinking about what lay ahead
And wondering if the sun would rise
For it seems that these are darker days
Than any others that we've seen
Oh, how we wished that we weren't wide awake
And this was all some kind of dream

What I want to say to Josh Ritter this morning, and to all of us as well, is that we are indeed wide-awake, and this is indeed some kind of dream. It’s called the American dream.

Ever since its founding, our nation has never fully embodied the principles for which we stand, but neither have we ever abandoned them. From the very beginning, there have been prophetic voices among us who have called us to rise to the better angels of our national nature. They have persistently provoked the tension, maintained the friction, and at times even demonstrated the conflict, between our nation’s words and our deeds, between our lofty aspirations and our sometimes lamentable actions. In these voices, the American dream has lived on. It still does today – in your voice and mine. It’s our duty to help our nation find a way from what’s present to what’s possible.

I leave you this morning with a song penned by Katherine Lee Bates, an early champion of our nation’s high aspirations. She also served as a scathing prophet against our penchant for self-serving misadventure. Born in Falmouth, Massachusetts in 1859, Bates was educated at Wellesley College and at Oxford. At the age of thirty-two, she was appointed Chair of the English literature department at Wellesley, a post she would hold for 29 years.

About the same time as her appointment, Bates met Katharine Coman, who served on the Wellesley faculty as the Chair of the economics department and Dean of

the College. Bates and Coman lived as a couple for 25 years in what was then referred to as a “Boston marriage.” Together, they were energetic activists for a wide variety of causes: women’s rights, workers’ rights, the environment, and international law.

In the summer of 1893, Bates traveled to Colorado Springs to serve as a summer lecturer at Colorado College. She described one of her outings in the following note: “One day some of the other teachers and I decided to go on a trip to 14,000-foot Pikes Peak. We hired a prairie wagon. Near the top we had to leave the wagon and go the rest of the way on mules. I was very tired. But when I saw the view, I felt great joy. All the wonder of America seemed displayed there, with the sea-like expanse.”

Once down the mountain, Bates dashed off the first version of what would become, in a revised version, her most celebrated poem, which is printed in your order of service as our closing hymn. The poem celebrates the beauty of our nation’s founding aspirations, but also criticizes the reality of our nation’s failure to embody those aspirations.

Bates begins by voicing hope that the souls of our nation’s citizens will eventually become as beautiful as our nation’s environment.

America! America!
May God shed grace on thee,
Till souls wax fair as earth and air
And music-hearted seas.

Later in the poem, in a stanza that recognizes the importance of what Bates calls “liberating strife,” she sounds this plea:

America! America!
May God shed grace on thee,
Till selfish gain no longer stain
The banner of the free!

Let’s sing together.

AMERICA THE BEAUTIFUL
(1893 version)

O beautiful for halcyon skies,
For amber waves of grain,
For purple mountain majesties
Above the enameled plain!
America! America!
May God shed grace on thee,
Till souls wax fair as earth and air
And music-hearted seas.

O beautiful for pilgrim feet,
Whose stern, impassioned stress
A thoroughfare for freedom beat
Across the wilderness!
America! America!
May God shed grace on thee,
Till paths be wrought through wilds of thought
By pilgrim foot and knee!

O beautiful for glory tale
Of liberating strife,
When once and twice, for our avail,
We lavished precious life!
America! America!
May God shed grace on thee,
Till selfish gain no longer stain
The banner of the free!

O beautiful for patriot dream
That sees beyond the years
Thine alabaster cities gleam
Undimmed by human tears!
America! America!
May God shed grace on thee,
Till nobler souls keep once again
Thy shining jubilee!