

## Reflection & Prayertime: After Election Day...

November 9, 2020

### **Nehemiah 5:10-13 The “Great Protest”**

A great protest was mounted by the people, including the wives, against their fellow Jews. Some said, “We have big families, and we need food just to survive.” Others said, “We’re having to mortgage our fields and vineyards and homes to get enough grain to keep from starving.” And others said, “We’re having to borrow money to pay the royal tax on our fields and vineyards. Look, We’re the same flesh and blood as our brothers here; our children are just as good as theirs. Yet here we are having to sell our children off as slaves—some of our daughters have already been sold—and we can’t do anything about it because our fields and vineyards are owned by somebody else.” I got really angry when I heard their protest and complaints. After thinking it over, I called the nobles and officials on the carpet. I said, “Each one of you is gouging his brother.” Then I called a big meeting to deal with them. I told them, “We did everything we could to buy back our Jewish brothers who had to sell themselves as slaves to foreigners. And now you’re selling these same brothers back into debt slavery! Does that mean that we have to buy them back again?”

They said nothing. What could they say? “What you’re doing is wrong. Is there no fear of God left in you? Don’t you care what the nations around here, our enemies, think of you? “I and my brothers and the people working for me have also loaned them money. But this gouging them with interest has to stop. Give them back their foreclosed fields, vineyards, olive groves, and homes right now. And forgive your claims on their money, grain, new wine, and olive oil.” They said, “We’ll give it all back. We won’t make any more demands on them. We’ll do everything you say.” Then I called the priests together and made them promise to keep their word. Then I emptied my pockets, turning them inside out, and said, “So may God empty the pockets and

house of everyone who doesn't keep this promise—turned inside out and emptied.” Everyone gave a wholehearted “Yes, we'll do it!” and praised GOD. And the people did what they promised.

### **Americans Don't Need Reconciliation—They Need to Get Better at Arguing**

*A rush to reunion can entrench injustice. Instead of papering over differences, Americans need to be smarter about engaging them* [Eric Liu](#) November 1, 2016, previous election

Whatever the outcome on Election Day, more than 40 percent of American voters will feel despondent, disgusted, and betrayed. Which is why all across the country there are citizen-led efforts underway to heal the divides created by the presidential election, to repair the social fabric, to restore trust and civility.

I'm all for this work—in principle. Civility is better than incivility. Love is better than hate. Done wrong, however, this work could compound our political problems. So before Americans embark on a lot of bridge-building it behooves us to ask just where we're trying to go.

Let's start with some historical context.

If there is one lesson to draw from the aftermath of the Civil War—the last time the United States was this polarized—it is that a rush to reunion can entrench injustice. Even at the peak of Reconstruction, as Northern Republicans tried to remake the polity of the South, rhetoric of reunion was used to unify whites across sectional lines against blacks (as well as Native Americans, Chinese immigrants, and other nonwhites).

Reunion meant paying homage to the nobility of the Confederate cause. It meant skipping past moral judgment and moving on to the common endeavor of Gilded Age moneymaking. It meant overlooking “slavery by another name” in the Jim Crow South and “wage slavery” in the industrializing North. It meant enshrining white supremacy.

Reconstruction failed for many reasons. But it might have succeeded in delivering on the idea of equal citizenship had it had *more* conflict and *less* consensus. What that means for today is that Americans should be clear-eyed about who wants reunion and why.

For people of widely divergent political stances right now—Trump supporters who feel left behind by a changing economy and culture; Black Lives Matter activists who fundamentally mistrust establishment politics and institutions; passionate Sanders supporters wary of elite neoliberal conspiracy—for all these people, there is good reason not to sign on too soon to reunion and reconciliation. All of them want to disrupt the status quo. None of them is going to pledge civility or bipartisanship if doing so might mean forfeiting the necessary exercise of civic power. And that's proper.

But maybe you're not one of those citizens. Maybe you are more of a concerned bystander, someone who has watched in horror as the coarse incivility of Internet comments sections came to life during this campaign. Maybe you just want peace and respect and a civic culture you don't have to shield your kids from.

If that's the case, it's all the more important to understand the difference between reckoning

and reconciliation.

Reckoning—“facing history and ourselves,” to use the name of a well-regarded educational nonprofit—means naming the inherited power inequities that have brought us our contemporary conflicts. This is the “truth” part of “truth and reconciliation,” the phrase made famous by the process South Africa undertook after apartheid to reckon with its past. Truth is the hard part because it’s about accepting responsibility.

In South Africa, the truth-telling, though painful and courageous, was in one sense simple. The system of apartheid was fresh in the memory, it had been created by the state, and it was dismantled by the state. Its victims and its perpetrators alike could unburden themselves of the moral and psychic costs of their roles.

In the United States, reckoning is by orders of magnitude more complex. There are no clean breaks in recent American history between good and evil, no single line of culpability that leads to a single large group of living Americans being called perpetrators. This is true of the legacy of African American enslavement. It is also true of all the power imbalances now creating tectonic pressures in our politics: the squeezing of local labor by global capital, the formation of a meritocratic elite detached from everyday Americans, the rigging of public policy to benefit that elite, the depopulation of the middle class, the relative decline of whites and the rise of the rest.

You can’t easily get to reconciliation without truth. But in America you can’t easily get to truth. A South African-style process here would only amplify our divisions. That’s why I propose a different way forward. It involves three steps: more listening, more serving, and—perhaps counterintuitively—more arguing.

When I say listening, I don’t mean “debater’s listening,” in which you pay only enough attention to get the gist of the other person’s point so you can prepare your rebuttal. I mean radically compassionate listening: without judgment, without response.

Imagine forming citizen “talking circles” all across the country, where people of differing world views agree simply to listen to one another. The point would not be persuasion or conversion. The point would be presence. And the method would not be to discuss ideology explicitly. It would be to address a simple universal question—something like “Who influenced you, and how do you pass it on?”

Years ago, after I wrote a book about life-changing mentors, I led many such circles using that question as a prompt. My aim wasn’t to bridge political divides but to reveal a weave of relationship and obligation. It worked. Without fail, chords of connection would emerge among dissimilar people who found they’d been shaped by similar experiences.

These talking circles humanized strangers. And now, they could rehumanize enemies. Rehumanization doesn’t require that we try to like each other. It requires only that we try to see and hear each other: that we feel the pain and pride and hope and fear of our putative antagonists.

This brings us to the second step: doing stuff together. This is the genius of national service. It gets you and me together not to work on you or me but on a third thing. That thing can be cleaning an abandoned lot, tutoring immigrants, helping disabled seniors, preventing youth suicide—whatever it is, if it brings people together across lines of race, class, and politics, it will bring to the fore our common humanity.

Eventually, yes, service and volunteerism run up against the hard facts of structural inequity

and injustice: Serving people regularly at a food bank begs the question why we need food banks at all. But in the meantime, the work of service—if it's done alongside people not of your set—rehumanizes everyone involved. And literally repairs America.

If we listen more and serve more we'll be ready for the third step: arguing more. *More?* Most people would say we have such dysfunction today because we already argue too much about too many things. But that's a misdiagnosis of what ails American politics. We don't need fewer arguments today; we need less stupid ones.

The arguments in American politics today are stupid in many ways: They're stuck in a decaying two-party institutional framework; they fail to challenge foundational assumptions about capitalism or government; they center on symbolic proxy skirmishes instead of naming the underlying change; they focus excessively on style and surface.

Americans can do better. Remember: America doesn't just have arguments; America *is* an argument—between Federalist and Anti-Federalist world views, strong national government and local control, liberty and equality, individual rights and collective responsibility, color-blindness and color-consciousness, *Pluribus* and *Unum*.

The point of civic life in this country is not to avoid such tensions. Nor is it for one side to achieve “final” victory. It is for us all to wrestle perpetually with these differences, to fashion hybrid solutions that work for the times until they don't, and then to start again.

In this light, the 2016 election truly has been a colossal failure. But imagine if in public libraries civic clubs and other such spaces we taught ourselves how to argue better, how to identify and name our foundational fights over principle, how to argue all sides and not just one's own, how to change one's own mind as well as another's, and how to put together solutions that draw from each pole of principle—as if we had responsibility for solutions, not just posturing.

This is reconciliation for grown-ups. It doesn't pretend that all will be peaceful—or that it should be. It acknowledges the never-endingness of our fights. But it acknowledges too that to be a citizen means fighting to make our fights more useful: more honest, more open to change, more human. That's the job of every American starting November 9.

### Heal Our Way Forward – A Prayer

God of red and blue states, God of purple people, hear our prayers

After the election, some will rejoice. Let them not gloat.

After the election, some will grieve. Let them not despair.

Heal our way forward. Soften our hardened hearts. Inspire us to be just, kind, and humble.

May we have eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts to hope.

Amen.