

*Sermon*

Dear America,

How ya been America?

I think it has been a while since I wrote you

Was it 2016? Oh man.

It's been two whole years since I last wrote?

America, I feel kinda bad you know?

I mean I wrote you that letter in October 2016 America

Hoping that maybe you would think about some things

When I suggested maybe you quit hanging out with so many

Old white guys and play the field a little

I am not sure you understood what I meant America.

At least, the choices you've made since

Imply that my suggestion wasn't all that clear...

Ahhh

I really need to work harder at staying in touch, don't I?

When I wrote you before

I talked about the dream that was America to me

A dream about potential and promises

The way that the dream of ancient Rome

Was a promise of civilization

I see a dream of you America

That promises a more diverse, welcoming  
World that demonstrates we the people  
Can treat our differences like a blessing  
The way the diversity of flowers  
Makes a meadow beautiful

I have to say America,  
I am NOT feeling the dream today  
Sure, yes, we have a lot more diversity  
After this last election  
Quite a bit actually  
I am particularly fond of the fact  
That there are two Native American elected officials now  
Sharise Davids from Kansas and Deb Haaland from New Mexico  
I admit, you didn't take the route I expected America  
But you did seem to find a bit more color...eventually...

Still I am reminded of a phrase that I learned in medical rehabilitation  
"Pleased but not satisfied"  
I definitely feel pleased, but not satisfied today America

What's that America?  
You kinda wish we wouldn't talk about politics?  
There's a lot of other things we could talk about?  
You've got natural beauty and other events?

Gee America, how are we supposed to work things out if we don't talk about it?  
I don't understand how that makes any sense.

Look America I want to tell you about this  
I was thinking about you when  
I was talking with that new Rabbi the other day over at Kol Ami  
That I like so much.

After hearing him at the vigil the other night  
I ran into Rabbi Spector again at a service of gratitude  
At the University Hospital Chapel  
And we stopped to talk together

You know America that I have always had a thing for the Jewish tradition  
I admit that I am fascinated and enchanted by a tradition  
Handed down for thousands of years  
Sustained by a people who have struggled to find their place  
That whole time.

You know that I always feel like I don't quite fit in America  
It's just a thing with me  
I had trouble fitting in with other kids  
It was often a thing for me in my childhood  
As a result, today as an adult

It just often seems like I am a little  
Out of place  
And maybe that's why I have such  
A soft spot for a tradition of faith  
That deals so soulfully with questions of place and placelessness

Then again America  
When I stop and think about it  
Maybe that's part of the dream that I have for you America  
That you would become a place  
That welcomes people who have lost their place.

I wonder  
Doesn't inviting people who have trouble  
Feeling like they fit in  
Seem like a good fit for you America?  
If it does then why does it seem to be something  
That just seems so painful for you America?

Anway, where was I? Oh yeah, Rabbi Specter  
We were talking after the service, walking out of the hospital  
We were talking about...let's see  
Preaching

Rabbi Specter said that he had said some things

From his pulpit that were critical of our leadership today  
Especially around immigration  
And that after preaching someone had come up to him  
Who said “You should be careful what you say  
From the pulpit because we do have some supporters in our community...”

You know what Rabbi Spector told me he said in reply America?

“Why?”

He said “Why? Why should I be careful? ”

He said why should I be careful when I speak out  
In criticism of leadership, decisions or policy  
That does not sustain our values?

I thought it was a great question  
That Rabbi Spector asked America

He said that from his pulpit he would never  
Defame character, condemn another being  
That he would never engage in name -calling  
But he also said that core Jewish values  
Around immigration are pretty clear

I mean Leviticus 19:3 says it pretty clearly

“The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native -born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the LORD your God.”

And you know America that I share the story of Abraham and Sarah  
Every month in hospital orientation.

Do you remember that story?

<Tell Story>

I share that story at every hospital orientation America  
Because it is the origin story of all 3 Abrahamic faiths  
Judaism, Christianity AND Islam

And it is pretty much an iconic example  
Of biblical or spiritual hospitality.

And let's not forget that the tradition  
Of calling for spiritual hospitality carries forward in Christianity and Islam as well

Matthew 25:42 -46

42 For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43 I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.' 44 “They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’ 4 5 “He will reply, ‘Truly I tell you,

whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.' 46 "Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

And the Quran, aside from remembering that same story of Abraham says  
"When you are greeted with a greeting, return the greeting or improve upon it. Allah takes account of everything." [Surah 4, An -Nisa'- 86]

Certainly hospitality for strangers or foreigners is called for in the Jewish tradition, and in its sister traditions of Christianity and Islam...

And Rabbi Spector was telling me that he felt  
A responsibility to hold political leadership  
Accountable to the values of his faith tradition  
From his pul pit

It struck me that our conversation  
About hospitality was taking place  
In the hallways of a hospital.

There in the hospital,  
Rabbi Spector shared more wisdom with me...

He said that it was like when people were talking  
About forming a Jewish state  
And the people were divided in their thinking

Some felt that the Jewish people should invest  
Their time, energy, passion and tenacity  
Into the land that had welcomed them

...that was you America...

...you were the land that had welcomed the Jewish people...

...remember?...

Anyway...Rabbi Spector said that some folks  
Thought the Jewish people  
Should invest into the land that offered them sanctuary  
While others had a different thought  
They felt that a Jewish state was necessary  
Do you know what Rabbi Spector told me America?

He said that the conversation that brought the people together  
Was when people started talking about leadership  
They could hold accountable to Jewish values.

The conversation that brought people together  
Around the forming of Israel  
Was a conversation about needing a Jewish state  
So that the Jewish people could hold Jewish leaders  
Accountable to Jewish values.  
So that they could both set an example for the world

And show the world who the Jewish people are supposed to be.

We stood there in silence for a moment America

And then I said to Rabbi Spector...

“Wow, I think you just gave me my sermon for December 2nd.”

Because America there was something in what Rabbi Spector said

That moved something deep inside of me

Although I didn't really know what moved or why

I kept thinking about that conversation for the next week.

Rabbi Spector did mention that he feels some of Israel's current policies

Do not align with values around welcoming the stranger

And he also said that he felt responsible

To use his pulpit to hold his leaders

Accountable for those things as well.

He said to me

“We have to hold our leadership accountable”

I think what has been shifting around inside of me America

Is the question

“How do we do that? How do we hold our leaders accountable?”

When I wrote you last America

I wrote about the dream that I fell in love with

I remember looking at the Statue of Liberty America

Thinking about my grandfather coming in

Through Roosevelt Island

He came here alone, I think at 9 years old

His brothers and father already working here

My own grandfather

And as I think about accountability America

I cannot help but wonder how many of our leaders

Who want to turn away those foreigners in need today

Started like me as refugees themselves

Only a few short generations ago

I mean really America

That IS after all who we all are, isn't it?

We are a nation of refugees and conquerors

Trying to figure out how to live together

“The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native -born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the LORD your God.”

I walked away from my conversation with Rabbi Spector

Wondering how we hold our leaders accountable

And I found that I was thinking about all those times  
That I walked away from political conversation  
Because of the conflict and discomfort that seems to arise

There are things that are simply hard for us to talk about  
And I found myself wondering  
How do we hold our leaders accountable to our values  
In a way that invites conversation  
Across different opinions and perspectives?

I wonder what would have happened  
To the state of Israel and the Jewish state  
If people who were arguing about its formation  
Decided it was more polite to leave the topic alone...  
Sometimes I think perhaps  
The very things we do not want to talk about  
Are the things that we need to talk about

You ever feel like that America?  
I know most of what you seem to talk about  
Is the kind of he-said-she-said conversations  
That rarely seem to go anywhere.  
Do you ever feel like maybe we are all missing out  
On the real conversation?

I know that I do America

I feel that way with you sometimes.

A few days ago

I had the fortune of attending a webinar

On existential pain

Ok, America, maybe that seems off -topic

But stay with me for a minute here

Because there was something in that webinar

That made me think about the pain we feel

Around immigration America

So just stay with me for a moment here.

Rev. Dr. Fred Grewe, who gave the webinar

Was talking about his research into

Visiting with dying hospice patients

And exploring their existential pain

He talked about one patient

Who said to staff

When I start active ly dying

I don't want you to tell my daughter ok?

As you can probably imagine

The hospice staff was pretty upset by that

So they paged Chaplain Fred

And asked him to fix this guy

So that he would want to tell his daughter when he was dying.

Fred told the staff

“Well, that’s your problem, go work on that...”

Because chaplain’s don’t really fix patients

But he went to see the patient to see what was going on

And the patient would say “I don’t want my daughter to know!”

And Fred would reply, “I don’t care.”

So the patient would get more upset and argue

“I don’t want my daughter to know”

And Fred would say back at him

“I don’t care, ok?”

As the story goes the conversation went on like that

The patient arguing, working to convince Fred

That he didn’t want to tell his daughter

And Fred reflecting back to him “Hey that’s your choice”

Talking about how he didn’t want anyone to tell her

Until suddenly the patient shouted out at Fred

“Look, I’m afraid that she won’t want to come ok!?”

And Fred said “Oh yeah, do you wanna tell me about that...”

The chaplain and the patient looked at each other in silence for a few moments

Then they started to really talk about the patient's fear

That throughout his whole life

He hadn't really been a good enough father

You know America that kind of fear

The maybe I wasn't a good enough father

Kind of fear is not a fear one can readily resolve

If I am afraid that maybe I am not good enough

Who can prove to me that I am?

And how would they possibly prove that?

Beyond a shadow of a doubt

Deeply enough that my fear is simply banished?

No America, that kind of fear is an existential pain

It's a pain related to who I am in the world

And what meaning I find

That kind of pain is not resolved America

But you know, a few weeks later

After multiple conversations about the worth of his life

And the importance of his daughter, Fred came to visit

While the daughter and patient were watching a movie together

And Fred said that he watched...now this may get me America

Fred said that he watched as the patient

Turned to his daughter and said

“Hey, uh, when I uh, start to actively die, um, would you wanna come?”

The daughter looked at him and said with a big hug

“Of course I do dad. I de finitely want to come.”

America...I think that maybe existential pain is like that

In our story the patient didn't want to talk about his lifelong fear

Maybe he did not even consciously know the fear was there

And it was not until someone showed up and li stened

To the patient's argument without trying to prove a point

That the actual underlying fear emerged

Those kinds of existential pains

They live behind, underneath, beyond the topics we debate

The topics we try to avoid

Influencing them, influencing our perspectives

Even though we are not consciously aware of them

But there too is something special about

Exposing that kind of existential pain and talking about it.

Something mysterious

Even though there isn't resolution for a pain like that America

Somehow when we talk about it

There is some kind of relief.

And in the space created by that relief

## Dear America: How Ya Been? | John D. Cooper

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Sometimes we find something new

When I talk to the exceptional clinical staff where I work

I remind them America that in the practice of welcoming the stranger

As paraphrased from Richard Rohr

Sometimes it is much more important to listen than to talk.

People long to be heard, be received, be understood.

A redemptive thing one do for another is listen to understand while being fully present with the person.

When we feel heard, understood and cared -for, it's surprising how our problems, seem to fade.

If we feel that someone is sharing our burden with us, walking with us, for some remarkable reason, our suffering is diminished...

Or as Matthew 11:28 says

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."

Or

Perhaps America

"Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free."

(Emma Lazarus, The New Collussus, <https://www.howtallisthestatueofliberty.org/what-is-the-quote-on-the-statue-of-liberty/> )

I think America

The immigration thing that keeps coming up

Throughout your history America

Our history America because let's be honest

Immigration is all our history

Maybe we do need to talk more about immigration America

But not the kind of conversation where I try to convince you

Not to let them in, or that you have to let them in

Maybe the kind of conversation we need to have America

Is more like the conversation Chaplain Fred had with that patient

Where there is space to look over and over again

At what we are doing and space to wonder

What makes it important for us to do it that way?

Space for questions like who do we let in? Who don't we?

How do we know if they are people who are good for our society America?

Can we just let everyone in?

Or will that overwhelm us?

Without having to find the right answers to those questions

Because America maybe they are not the kinds of questions

That have singular correct answers

Maybe they are the kinds of questions

We are just meant to agonize over and wonder about

To see what we can learn about who we are.

Maybe that is what holding our leaders accountable

Looks like today America?

I don't really know.

What I do know America is that what I see today

Like what that patient was arguing about with his hospice staff

Only kinda makes sense

And to me

It feels like there's something else going on

I watch different news media today America

Talking about the asylum seekers

And it is like I am watching stories about two entirely different situations

We have grown so far apart in our thinking.

For such an existencia I distress America

I am not sure we get to find a solution, a resolution

But maybe if we can learn to pick up the conversation

In a new way

We can find some relief.

And maybe in that relief America

We can find something new and transformational

I think may be we need it.

Well, I guess that's all I have time to write America

I'll try to write sooner next time.

I still love you America

I guess our relationship just isn't going to come easy

Hopefully working on it helps both of us grow.

Until Next Time

### Closing Words

Letter writing Campaign?

Asylum Seekers.

Write to your values

### Resources and Reflections

Exactly which people do not deserve civil rights?

NYT <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/21/us/politics/transgender-administration-sex-definition.html> -trump -

“Cultivate the habit of being grateful for everything that comes to you, and to give thanks continuously. And because all things have contributed to your advancement, you should include all things in your gratitude.”

— Ralph Waldo Emerson