



“On Gratitude and Pluralism”

Thanksgiving Sermon at Memorial Church, Harvard University By Eboo Patel, November 2006

I am grateful for America not because I am under the illusion that it is perfect, but because it allows me – the child of Muslim immigrants from India - to participate in its progress, to carve a place in its promise, to play a role in its possibility.

John Winthrop, one of the earliest European settlers in America, gave voice to this sense of possibility. He told his compatriots that their society would be like a city upon a hill, a beacon for the world. It was a hope rooted in Winthrop's Christian faith, and no doubt he imagined his city on a hill with a steeple in the center. Throughout the centuries, America has remained a deeply religious country while at the same time becoming a remarkably diverse one. Indeed, we are the most religiously devout nation in the West and the most religiously diverse country in the world. The steeple at the center of the city on a hill is now surrounded by the minarets of Muslim mosques, the Hebrew script of Jewish synagogues, the chanting of Buddhist sangas, and the statues of Hindu temples. In fact, there are now more Muslims in America than Episcopalians, the church attended by some of America's Founding Fathers.

One hundred years ago, the great African-American scholar W.E.B. DuBois warned that the problem of the century would be the problem of the color line. The 21st century might well be dominated by a different line – the faith line. From Northern Ireland to South Asia, the Middle East to Middle America, people are killing each other in the name of God. But the faith line does not divide Christians and Muslims or Hindus and Jews. It separates totalitarians and pluralists. On one side of the faith line are those who believe that only one interpretation of one religion is a legitimate way of being, believing and belonging on Earth. Everyone else needs to be cowed, or converted, or condemned, or killed. On the other side of the faith line are the religious pluralists who hold that people believing in different creeds and belonging to different communities need to learn to live together in some sort of mutual trust and loyalty. Religious pluralism is neither mere coexistence nor forced consensus. It is a form of proactive cooperation that affirms the identity of the constituent communities while emphasizing that the well-being of each and all depends on the health of the whole. It is the belief that the common good is best served when each community has a chance to make its unique contribution.

It is not for ourselves in America alone that we manifest this potential. In our soil is a spirit meant for the world. That spirit is carried on the wings of the American song.

Walt Whitman, who said:

*My spirit has passed in compassion and determination around the whole earth,
I have looked for equals and lovers and found them ready for me in all lands,
I think some divine rapport has equalized me with them.*

Bob Dylan once said that if you want to know something about American hope, go visit Woody Guthrie. Perhaps there was no American more human than Woody Guthrie, and no human more American. When a group of Mexican migrant workers died in a plane crash, the news reports referred to them only as deportees. But Woody Guthrie refused to let them go nameless. He sang:

*Goodbye my Juan, goodbye Rosalita
Adios mis Amigos, Jesus and Maria*

The night Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger met, they played a charity concert for migrant workers. They sang American songs so the world would feel welcome.

America is a grand gathering of souls, the vast majority from elsewhere. The American genius lies in allowing these souls to contribute their texture to the American tradition, to add new notes to the American song.

I am an American with a Muslim soul. My soul carries a long history of heroes, movements, and civilizations that sought to submit to the will of God. My soul watched while Ishmael and Prophet Abraham built Islam's holiest shrine, the kaaba. My soul listened as the Prophet Muhammad preached the central messages of Islam, tazaarqa and tawhid, compassionate justice and the oneness of God. In the Middle Ages, my soul spread to the East and West, praying in the mosques and studying in the libraries of the great medieval Muslim cities of Cairo, Baghdad, and Cordoba. My soul whirled with Rumi, read Aristotle with Averroes, traveled through Central Asia with Nasir Khusrow. In the colonial era, my Muslim soul was stirred to justice. It marched with Abdul Ghaffar Khan and Gandhi in their satyagraha to free India. It stood with Farid Esack, Ebrahim Moosa, Rashied Omar, and the Muslim Youth Movement in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa.

The stories of my Muslim soul add new notes to the American song.

I bring the Muslim story of creation. God created humanity with His breath and made us His abd and khalifa - His servant and representative - upon the earth. When the angels protested the exalted role that God had set before humanity, God vouched for our goodness by saying to the Angels, "I know what you do not know."

I bring the cosmic poetry of Rumi:

*I am not from the East
or the West, not out of the ocean or up
from the ground
My place is placeless, a trace
of the traceless.*

*I belong to the beloved, have seen the two
worlds as one and that one call to and know*

I bring the Qur'an's guidance on brotherhood: "O humankind, God has created you from male and female that you may come to know each other: Verily, the most honored of you in the sight of God is he who is the most righteous."

For me, this is where Islam and America meet. In one eye I carry this ancient Muslim vision on pluralism, in the other eye I carry the best of the American spirit. And in my heart, I pray that we make real this possibility: a city on a hill where different religious communities

respectfully share space and collectively serve the common good; a world where diverse nations and peoples come to know one another in a spirit of brotherhood and righteousness; a century in which we achieve a common life together.

I saw this vision come to life at the Art Institute of Chicago. Continuing past the grand entranceway on the lower level, you find yourself in a dimly lit corridor displaying the various instruments that the human family has used to shed its own blood across the centuries. It is a dark walk through the rifles and pistols, the swords and spears, the medieval armor and ancient slingshots. But moving forward, a different color begins to emerge: the azure possibility of the human future celebrated in Marc Chagall's *America Windows*. Mounted on those panels are symbols of freedom and welcome, song and study, work and worship - the possibility of America and what the world could be. Standing before Chagall's piece, I found myself remembering James Baldwin's great line: "If we (in America) ... do not falter in our duty now, we may be able to ... achieve our country, and change the history of the world."