

COMMENTARY

Palaima: 'Make an effort . . . to understand with compassion and love'

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This Thanksgiving, let us be thankful that we live in a democracy. Let us work at reviving and nurturing the principles of free and open exchange of ideas. Let us work at respecting the rights and beliefs of our fellow citizens and immigrants to our country, legal or illegal.

This Thanksgiving, I am thankful for my good friend at the University of Texas at Austin, Paul Woodruff. Paul is a kind of Longhorn Socrates, a tireless champion of public examination of ideas. He has written two Socratic books, "Reverence" and "First Democracy." They ask us to think about what democracy is. Democracy is messy, often frustrating, but worth the effort. In fact democracy is the only form of government worth the effort of all citizens, rich and poor, powerful and powerless, educated and uneducated.

We need to remember this constantly and with vigilance. How easily we can lose our way.

Take, for example, the recent selection of a new house majority leader in Congress. Speaker of the House-elect Nancy Pelosi backed John Murtha. She believed his strong views on the Iraqi war needed to be in the forefront of national consideration. There was open debate. As you know, the other candidate, Rep. Steny Hoyer, won the vote 149-86. Analysts said that Pelosi "lost, she lost publicly . . . she lost big." They said her public support for Murtha was "politically stupid."

This mentality is stupid. Solid bloc political decision-making, not standing publicly for what you believe, using a narrow majority as a mandate to push forward an extreme political agenda, all those things are stupid and detrimental to our nation.

Fortunately, we have clear examples of how democracy should work and how big must be our sense of humanity, our sense of humility, our sense of true sympathy for those who are different from us. Two shining examples have been in the public eye recently.

I am thankful this Thanksgiving that Martin Luther King and Robert F. Kennedy cared enough about our country to give their lives for it. Ground was broken recently in Washington, D.C., for a memorial to King. A movie about Kennedy just opened.

Take time this Thanksgiving weekend to gather your families and loved ones. Read or listen together to the speech that King gave on April 3, 1968, the eve of his assassination, and the speech that Kennedy gave the next day, telling the people of Indianapolis that King had been fatally shot.

Kennedy reminded his audience that he felt in his heart what they felt about the murder of King. His own brother had been killed by a white man. He spoke honestly about the anger, the righteous desire for vengeance, the hatred and bitterness black people could feel about King's

assassination. He spoke of the polarization that giving way to these justifiable emotions would cause. He then called for blacks and whites to "make an effort, as Martin Luther King did . . . an effort to understand with compassion and love."

King had spoken the night before at a church in Memphis.

His speech is glorious. He begins by talking about what he would do if God Almighty gave him the chance to live at any time in human history. He surveys the great moments of the past, Egypt, the Israelites in the Promised Land, the philosophers and playwrights of ancient Athens, the Roman Empire, the Renaissance, Lincoln signing the Emancipation Proclamation, the American people during the Great Depression believing their president that "we have nothing to fear but fear itself."

King then speaks words that empowered all his listeners. He would, he declares, "turn to the Almighty and say, 'If you allow me to live just a few years in the second half of the twentieth century, I will be happy.'"

He acknowledged, "[T]hat's a strange statement to make because the world is all messed up. The nation is sick, trouble is in the land, confusion all around." But he stressed to his audience that courageous, nonviolent expression of their beliefs about freedom and justice, while not without tremendous human cost, would eventually prevail. Their actions would persuade all Americans to think and feel democratically.

With two such great examples of direct and honest speech about life-and-death issues of human justice readily available to us, we should believe, too, that no problem is insurmountable. As King told the people of Memphis, "Only when it is dark enough can you see stars." We can talk about our problems and settle our differences even by starlight.

Palaima is the Dickson Centennial Professor of Classics at the University of Texas.

King's speech (audio) is at

<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkivebeentothemountaintop.htm>

King's speech (text) is at

<http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/publications/speeches/contents.htm>

Kennedy's speech (text) is at

http://www.gilderlehrman.org/teachers/seminar_docs/civilrights_doc1.html