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OTHER VIEWS

MORE LETTERS ONLINE "The clients of Karl Rove are in the grip of a terrible fear. They fear the loss of their unprecedented one-party grip on all branches of the government," writes John P. Gratz of Chesterfield. Read his letter and more letters online at STLOUIDJ.com/letters.

QUOTE OF THE DAY Our nation is a rainbow — red, yellow, brown, black, and white — and we're all precious in God's sight. Jesse Jackson, 1984

Monday • David Broder, Jonah Goldberg Tuesday • David Brooks, Maureen Dowd Wednesday • Paul Krugman, Kathleen Parker Thursday • Michael Bloomberg Friday • Bill Kristol Saturday • Ellen Goodman Sunday • Charles Krauthammer, Leonard Pitts

LIVING

What if...?

Finding our way through the 21st century

By Terrence Freeman

It is not unusual to experience the best of times and the worst of times at the same time.

Most people have a tremendous capacity to do good, even as they wrestle with serious flaws. The tendency toward divisions and occasional hypocrisy is not new. We have accomplished great things under the leadership of complex men and women who wrestled with personal demons. We have been found wanting, and we have excelled.

The strength of this country was forged and tempered in conflict, struggle and reconciliation. Explorers and settlers in search of freedom and opportunity planted the seeds of a great nation. That great nation rose on the backs of a brutal slave trade, the ethnic cleansing of indigenous people.

We emerged from the revolutionary war and debated our way into a great representative democracy that failed to represent large segments of our population. A civil war decimated families and cost more lives than any war in U.S. history while we were embarking on an industrial revolution. The country gradually reconciled and continued to grow and prosper, even as millions were excluded from opportunity.

We endured a great depression and two world wars. The Vietnam war and Watergate divided the country and ignited modern political cynicism, while the middle class grew, and we traveled to the moon. And we continue to struggle toward the best way to clean the toxic residue of decades of Jim Crow laws, segregation, racism and sexism.

Through all of these trials we have had to struggle with reconciliation. Reconciliation is not forgetting or ignoring what has happened. It requires careful reflection and commitment. Perhaps we can start the process by posing some "what if's."

• What if the people with whom we disagree are intelligent, moral, experienced, thoughtful and informed — rather than amoral, ignorant, self-hypocrites and zealots? What if the people with whom we disagree care about our country, our children and our future as much as we do? • What if we sometimes are wrong on important issues? What if truth actually is somewhere between what we believe and what our adversaries believe? What if our inability or reluctance to empathize or compromise with others



Dean Rohrer / Newsnet

Terrence L. Freeman, 55, is a professor of mechanical, engineering and coordinator of engineering science at St. Louis Community College at Florissant Valley. He holds an undergraduate degree with honors from Kenyon and Polytchnic Institute, a masters degree from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a Ph.D. in educational leadership and policy studies from the University of Missouri at St. Louis. Terrence was born in St. Louis and has a large extended family here, but he grew up and attended public schools in Cleveland before moving

on to college. His varied work experiences include managing an urban roller skating rink, conducting diversity workshops for a variety of organizations from elementary schools to the FBI, coordinating youth programs and teaching subjects as varied as mathematics and sociology, in addition to his specialty of engineering.

Terrence, who lives in Spanish Lake, is a poet, a black belt in taekwon do, a national program director for two Black Men of America and a proud member of St. Philip's Evangelical Lutheran Church on St. Louis' Near North Side.



is the obstacle to progress? What if we really could understand a point of view with which we passionately disagree? • What if we took the first step toward reconciliation?

I don't believe that adversarial political or legal processes inevitably lead to permanent adversarial camps. It only happens when we fail to monitor our rhetoric. When we replace honest discussion with harangues and hyperbole, we exacerbate our differences. We can listen and learn from each other. We can search for and respect that line between the struggle for righteousness and the arrogance of self-righteousness.

Do we really want to know all of the personal failings of every parent, relative, teacher, religious leader, role model or public servant who took the time to encourage and direct us? In an age of 24-hour-a-day electronic media, we can limit our inclination toward non-stop investigation and exposure. We can stop indulging curiosity with the right or need to know.

We rise to greatness when we believe that the best is yet to come. What we choose to learn from these circumstances can help us create an extraordinary vision for the 21st century. What we choose to do can make that vision a reality.

THE MIDDLE EAST

Keep pressuring Hezbollah

"We did not think, even 1 percent, that the capture would lead to a war at this time and of this magnitude. You ask me, if I had known on July 11... that the operation would lead to such a war, would I do it? I say no, absolutely not."

—Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah leader, Aug. 17

WASHINGTON So much for the "strategic and historic victory" Nasrallah had claimed less than two weeks earlier. Nasrallah's admission, surely underplayed in the West, makes clear what the Lebanese already knew: Hezbollah may have won the propaganda war, but on the ground it lost, badly.

True, under the inept and indecisive leadership of Ehad Omeir, Israel missed the opportunity to destroy Hezbollah militarily and make it a non-factor in Israel's security, Lebanon's politics and Iran's foreign policy. Nonetheless, Hezbollah lost hundreds of its best fighters. A deeply entrenched infrastructure on Israel's border is in ruins. The great hero has had to go so deep into hiding that Nasrallah has been called "the underground mullah."

Most importantly, Hezbollah's political gains within Lebanon during the war have proved illusory. As the dust settles, the Lebanese are furious at Hezbollah for provoking a war that brought them nothing but devastation and then crowing about victory amid the ruins.

The Western press once again was taken in by the mystique of the "Arab street." Now that the cheering mob has gone home, Hezbollah is under renewed attack in newspapers in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Egypt, as well as by many

Lebanese, including influential Shiite academics and clan leaders. The Arab hero has had to go so deep into hiding that Nasrallah has been called "the underground mullah."

Even before the devastation, Hezbollah in the last election garnered only about 10 percent of the vote, hardly a mandate. Hezbollah's guns are the source of its power, and now even that is threatened.

Hence Nasrallah's admission. He knows that Lebanon, however weak its army, has a deep desire to disarm him and that the arrival of Europeans in force, however weak their mandate, will make impossible the rebuilding of the vast Maginot Line he spent six years constructing.

Which is why the expected Round Two will not happen. Hezbollah is in no position for another round. Nasrallah's admission that the war was a mistake is an implicit pledge not to repeat it, lest he be completely finished as a Lebanese political figure.

The Lebanese knew that Israel bombed easy-to-repair airport runways when it could have destroyed the new airport terminal and set Lebanon back 10 years. The Lebanese knew that Israel attacked the Hezbollah TV towers when it could have pulverized Beirut's power grid, a billion-dollar reconstruction. The Lebanese knew that next time Israel's leadership will not be as hesitant and restrained.

Even more important is the shift in the internal Lebanese balance of power. With Nasrallah weakened, the other major factions are closing in around him. Even his major Christian ally Michel Aoun, has called for Hezbollah's disarmament. The March 14 democratic movement, which has regained the upper hand and, with outside help, could marginalize Hezbollah.

In a country this weak, outsiders can be decisive. A strong European presence in the south, serious U.S. training and equipment for the Lebanese army and relentless pressure at the U.N. can tip the balance.

It was just a year and a half ago that the democrats of the March 14 movement expelled Syria from Lebanon and rose to power, marking the apogee of the American democratization project in the region. Nasrallah's temporary rise during the post-flooded war marked that project's nadir. Nasrallah's crowing added to the general despair in Washington about a rising "Shiite crescent" stretching from Tehran to Beirut.

In the Middle East, promising moments pass quickly. This one needs to be seized. We must pretend that Security Council Resolution 1559 was meant to be implemented and exert unrelenting pressure on behalf of the large majority of Lebanese who want to do the implementing.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Readers respond to our call for guest commentaries

Several weeks ago, we asked to hear from readers who thought they had a knack for turning their thoughts and opinions into those peculiar, compact forms of written expression called newspaper commentaries. We were not disappointed.

Nearly 200 of you responded with heartfelt and sometimes funny pitches for being guest contributors with detailed biographical sketches and with writing samples that ranged from potential commentaries, previously published letters to the editor, academic papers, personal and family memories, musings about life and the human condition and much, much more.

Net surprisingly, most of the responses came from Missouri portions of the St. Louis metro area — including St. Charles, Jefferson and Warren counties — although Illinois was

well-represented. Submissions from men outnumbered those from women by about two to one. We got material from people as young as 25 and as old as 84, but most fell into what we broadly would define as middle age. A few people volunteered that they're gay.

What was a little surprising, given the traditional emphasis of newspaper op-ed pages on issues with political dimensions, was that less than half of the responses focused on politics. Of the ones that did, left-leaning centrist and liberal outnumbered right-leaning centrist and conservatives by not quite two to one.

We heard from many retirees, but we also heard from young mothers and fathers (some married, some single), teachers from the elementary to college levels, students, engineers, bankers, union organizers, lawyers, ministers,

artists, actors, marketing executives, a former American and one guy in jail awaiting trial. After a bit of reading, re-reading and necessarily subjective judgments, we identified about a dozen people we will ask to write guest commentaries with some regularity.

The first one, by Terrence L. Freeman, a professor of engineering at St. Louis Community College at Florissant Valley, appears today. We'll have more in the weeks and months to come.

We thank all of you who took the time and trouble to respond to our request, and we encourage you to keep writing and reading.

ERIC MINN COMMENTARY EDITOR

AFTER KATRINA

A city digs for, and finds, its humanity

HERE is how this city commemorates one of the most wrenching tragedies in history: It dances. It does other things, too, on the first anniversary of Hurricane Katrina. It preps. It dedicates memorials. It says thank you. At 9 p.m. on the morning of the hour when the first levee broke and the city began to drown, it rings bells of mourning.

But it dances, too, and that is what makes you know you are not in Columbus, Ohio, or Jacksonville, Fla., but New Orleans, by God, Louisiana. Because where else is death a dance and suffering a song?

They round the corner coming from the Superdome, a brass band playing "Just a Closer Walk With Thee," swinging it slow, stretching the notes like taffy "if they might in directions, extravagance of grief. But this is a jazz

funeral, where grief is allowed to linger only so long. So after a moment, the drummer kicks it up a notch, the horns give out barely grooves and "Will the Circle Be Unbroken" comes on like thunder. Out in front, the parade's grand marshal, a man named Bahamuj Ahmed, dances with a solemn seriousness, his nose occasionally wet filled with grief.

Here and there among the crowd that follows the band, there are spontaneous outbreaks of happy feet. If you have feet, they're tapping. If you have a head, it's bobbing. If you have a soul, it rings.

Somewhere in cyber space, somewhere in the wilds of talk radio, they are damning this city right now. They've been at it for a year, calling it stupid, criminal, unworthy of saving. The way the city drowned the way thousands of people were left stranded in harm's

way begging for rescue fits nicely with an old right-wing narrative that says some of us are congenitally inferior to the rest of us. So Katrina gives them a cue, "white trash" and use the N-word without quite saying the one or using the other.

And somehow these three wretched masters of the universe, conveniently ignore that what happened last year — how many days did it take for help to arrive? — fits even more neatly with another narrative, the one that says the federal regime is so incompetent it could not pour water from a bucket if the instructions were printed on the bottom.

But you know what? All the narratives are white noise on this day. This day is about remembrance. And renewal. Katrina was a million lives lost in a million places. It was the hurricane of a job operator, helpless to send help, talking to a woman trapped in an attic, with water rising to her chest. It was the raising pines to the sky, the arms remaining not just victory over death, but defiance of death, death kicked in the back by happy feet.

When the song is done, Ahmed talks to the crowd. He speaks of the future of the lives of those stranded by the government. He does not lose the stolid dignity. Until he does. Until suddenly he is crying. People close in about him protectively, lead him to where he can grieve privately.

A million hurricanes. A million recoveries. Live through this. Live through this. Live through this. Live through this. LIVE THROUGH THIS. COPYRIGHT THE MARCH 14



LEONARD PITTS

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