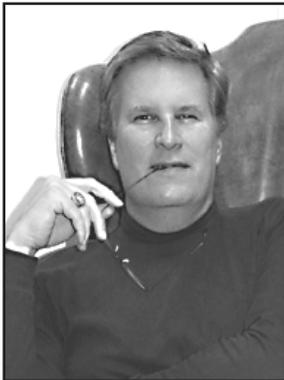


GRANDTOUR

Bully Pulpit

By Bruce W. Cook



AS WE STAND ON THE threshold of the New Year 2005, let us look back at yet another tumultuous year in a deeply divided nation at war in a foreign land and try to focus on the fact that despite our struggles, we do indeed have much to be grateful for and about. Even though many of our brothers and sisters still lack enough food to nourish their

bodies on a daily basis, be mindful of the fact that most of us are well fed. While there are certainly too many places on the planet where tyranny reigns over justice, and human rights are of no consequence, do not take for granted that most of us go to bed at night without fear. There have been too many nights, in too many centuries, and too many lands where this has not been so. We live in an era of unprecedented opportunity. Optimism is, or can be, at a premium of collective human point of view ...if one allows a positive view to overshadow the alternative.

The Old Testament proclaims that God owes man nothing. Whether or not you believe in God, or for that matter what God, or what belief you hold, if any, there is an important message in this postulate. If God, or if you prefer, the universe, owes us nothing, not even the rising of the sun on the new day, mankind would be wise to appreciate the bounty of life in every detail and in every moment. We should be grateful for every bite of food, every breathe of air, every beam of light warming our face. The scent of the ocean breeze, the snap of a crackling fire, the relationship of man to animal, is all to be relished and never taken for granted.

The greater message is that within this glorious bounty, this life on earth, man should find a path to peace. It is our own greed, our own stupidity, our own failing that prompts war, that fosters injustice of every imaginable variety. How *do* we find that path to peace?

At this time of year we are in the midst of religious holidays. The Muslim month of Ramadan is ending. The Festival of Lights dawns for Jews. The celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ is a sacred connection for Christians. Ask yourself if you would feel comfortable sitting in the congregation of a religion other than your own? For that matter, ask yourself if you would feel welcome and connected at a service of another faction within your own frame of religious belief. A liberal reformed Jew sitting in a segregated Orthodox synagogue where the men and women can not be in the same section. A Roman Catholic attending a "born-again" evangelical Protestant service where the pastor's main message is essentially "my way or the highway." Or consider the recent divisions within the American Episcopal community over changing values, traditions and interpretations of Biblical teaching.

While we are a humankind of radical diversity when it comes

to belief and faith or a lack thereof, I propose that any man, woman or child should feel welcome if not interested or even possibility inspired by inclusion, rather than exclusion, in any church, synagogue, mosque, temple, prayer meeting or assemblage created to pay homage to God, regardless of definition, design, faith or faction. Therein lies the challenge.

We have not come to the point of universal tolerance. Not acceptance, mind you, simply tolerance alone. Not even close. And we just don't get it. Sometimes I wonder if God made us dumb so that man will never get the message. Or just maybe the message is ultimately what the Bible declares: might does not always make right, that the majority does not necessarily mean that the ultimate truth prevails. In other words, the only universal human truth is that peace can prevail over war, justice can reign, if we allow ourselves to be accepting of the diversity that has always been a part of the human make-up. Caution. Tolerance and acceptance do not mean acquiescence to evil. There is no such thing as peace at any price. There is a clear difference between justice and wrong-doing. Nevertheless, peace is the just path, the righteous pursuit of all men in all times. Religion must not be an excuse for war. Enough is enough.

At this religious time of year, my message is this. If you are a Jew, the next time a disparaging remark is made about "the goy," reject it as bigotry. If you are a Christian, as much as you may believe that the only path to glory is through Jesus Christ, do not condemn your neighbor to hell for believing otherwise. God, if you believe, will be the judge of a man's worth, not your particular church. Muslims of the world, speak out against the extremists who are presently turning our planet on its ear. If Allah is love, spread the love. Make a Jew welcome in a Palestinian Mosque in old Jerusalem. And Jews, open your doors to the Palestinians. Show them the path to peace. Let them abandon their suicide bombs and work toward building a society that nourishes people and cherishes life.

Peace is in our palms ... possible and realistic if we make it so. As the holidays descend and the coming year brings new hope, make an effort to change your own narrow, possibly bigoted, unjust thoughts and actions toward your neighbor. Open your heart and mind toward distant citizens of the world that you do not relate to, let alone understand. Mankind needs visionaries, leaders on all levels of society to stand for righteousness. Peace is just an empty word if we remain hateful, even silently hateful, in our hearts. **GT**

Bruce Cook is the creator of Grand Tour Magazine. He is a twice-weekly columnist for the Los Angeles Times/Daily Pilot, and serves as Editor of the prestigious Bay Window Magazine. Cook has been heard on San Diego radio for the past five years, and is an Emmy nominated television writer and producer responsible for such programs as Entertainment Tonight.