

*“Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door.”
The Statue of Liberty, dedicated 10/28/1886*

Terrorism is a stark and frightening example of what others can do to us. Paris. San Bernardino. The Pulse nightclub. A vehicle attack in NYC, killing eight. Too much, too often. And in the face of such an onslaught, leadership is what we choose to do about it, and how we go about doing it.

Attacks on our country and our way of life are not new (remember: Pearl Harbor, the Cuban Missile Crisis, 9/11), and while such events spawn anger and paranoia, they also summon both our resolve and our better angels. Which is one more reason we would rather live here than anywhere else, our flaws notwithstanding.

Yet I now wonder if our renewed fears, plus the demonizing of others, might dim the unique, shining beacon of opportunity and freedom which has made us who we are. And I question whether my good luck to have been born here, to have lived here, and to have experienced this grand thing called America, would have happened had similar fears and paranoia outlasted the earlier days of our history.

Is that a bit too dramatic? Go back little more than a century, and we Irish were potato-heads, lazy scum. Italians were looked on as not much better. Jews? Forget it. African Americans, which was not what they were called? Slaves, or barely freed but not equal. And that does not count Japanese-Americans or German-Americans in WWII. Pretty lucky for we shoddy Irish (and for me) that we got past much of that.

Yes, we each have a right to feel and to fear, and to be safe. But before we pounce on anyone who does not mirror us, look around. Soak it in. The ethnic, religious and nationalistic stew we behold is what has combined to make us great.

It is our grand experiment, a palate on which each color and belief and ancestry is a part. It is us. But will it continued to be us? I will not likely be here to see it, but I do wonder what will we have become in ten, or twenty, or fifty years from now?

Make no mistake, we are once again in a process of deciding who we are. Our culture, our democracy and our soul are being tested. In every household, business, classroom, sanctuary, gathering and discussion. And to pass this test, courageous leadership will matter, from parents, coaches, elders, teachers, and business executives.

So, what will we do? And how will we go about doing it? Which parts of what made this country great will we keep, and which might we discard? Will we reflect, or will we reject, what those who threaten us espouse? And once we decide, once we move on, will we have found our way to relative safety while continuing to lift our lamp beside the golden door? This is a big deal. And we are right in the middle of it. All of us!