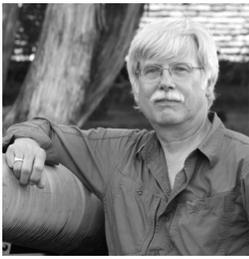


Are we better than this?

COMMENTARY — David Skidmore



With incidents of intolerance, disparagement and outright hatred mounting weekly, if not daily, along the fault lines of American culture and politics, a common catch phrase punctuating many commentaries is “America is better than this,” or simply, “We are

better than this.” Maybe not.

A year ago August, many thought the nation had reached a watershed moment with the Charlottesville Unite the Right rally which featured white supremacists, neo-Nazis and their sympathizers marching on the University of Virginia campus brandishing torches and chanting racist and anti-Semitic slogans, including one echoing the Brown Shirts in 1930s Germany: “The Jews will not replace us.” The backlash to the white nationalist assault on counter protesters swept across the country, pooling around the Oval Office where President Trump defied all logic, arguing that there “were some very fine people on both sides.”

In the year that has followed, the heat and reach of nativist extremism has only intensified. The Anti-Defamation League recorded a 57 percent rise in anti-Semitic attacks in 2017, and the tally in 2018 is on the same trajectory, including the horror at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, where a white supremacist killed 12 worshippers, and wounded six, the deadliest attack on Jews in U.S. history. On the wider front of hate crime, The Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism at California State University found hate crime incidents in the nation’s ten largest cities increased by 12.5 percent in 2017.

For 2018, the anecdotal evidence is not encouraging: a black woman in Clio, Mich. wakes up to find the family’s pickup truck spray-painted with racist slurs; a grocery aisle argument between a white woman and a black woman ends with the white woman asserting “We are going to build this wall,” leaving little doubt who the “we” is; and at a post-prom gathering last spring in Baraboo, Wis. a group of male high school students posed with Nazi salutes for a Twitter photo, adding the comment “We even got the black kid to throw it up.”

Throw in the week of pipe bombs mailed to prominent critics of President Trump, and it seems the tidal wave of violent bigotry is ever rising, and the news feed litany ever exhausting.

Normally, the nation’s chief executive acts as a damper on these flames, but President Trump has been more of a blowtorch: scorching the press with labels such as “fake news” and “enemy of the people,” mocking Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh’s accuser Christine Blasey Ford; and in the lead-up to the mid-term elections, nurturing xenophobia by describing a procession of Central American asylum seekers as an invading force of terrorists while members of his own party have been content to remain mute.

Trump may be an enabler of this cascading hate, but he did not create it. This disregard, distrust and disdain for the other has simmered and boiled over in American society since the

Mayflower disgorged its religious refugees in Plymouth, Mass. in 1620. Three decades after that landing, in one of history’s great ironies, the Puritans subjected Quakers to various punishments for the very reason that the Puritans left England: freedom to practice religion.

The index of hate crimes is a long one: over 240 years of enslaving African people and their descendants; over 400 years of displacing indigenous Americans from their tribal lands and attempting to exterminate them; over 150 years of depriving African Americans of their rights under the Constitution; and from the nation’s very beginning the periodic persecutions of immigrants.

Neither our history as a developing democracy, nor the principles enshrined and heralded in our Constitution and Declaration, ensure our immunity from the fever of xenophobia that has engulfed and laid waste to other nations.

The embrace of violence over tolerance, reception and understanding has been a common theme in our history. Depredations have piled up on depredations. In Missouri in 1838 Governor Lilburn Boggs issued an executive order calling for the eviction and/or extermination of Mormons, inspiring a militia attack on the Mormon settlement of Hauns Mill, resulting in 18 dead Mormons. In Utah in 1857 a Mormon militia massacred 130 emigrants headed to California.

Too few Americans have shown an appetite for the moral forensics of acknowledging and learning from our failures. In Oklahoma, it took the city of Tulsa 75 years to acknowledge the complicity of its government in the race riot of 1921 in which white mobs killed at least 36 African Americans. and burned and looted black neighborhoods, rendering 10,000 people homeless.

How do we part ways with this pathology? How do we remedy this rage against the “other”? Writing in *Time* magazine recently, author Phil Klay, a veteran of Afghanistan, noted the seductive pull of “performance rage,” and the ease of reducing those with whom you disagree to “the least charitable caricature possible.” Civil discourse, though devalued and dismissed by politicians and much of the public, needs resurrection, he argued: “. . . a civil argument is a plea to all fellow citizens to respond, even if in opposition. . . to fill in the gaps in my knowledge, to correct the flaws in my argument and to continue to deliberate in a rapidly changing world.”

Civil discourse is one area our church’s historical societies can model for the nation. The recent NEHA conference tackled some uncomfortable topics, including how the Episcopal Church was complicit in enabling and maintaining slavery, a topic that has found expression in church forums and workshops, inspired in part by the documentary *Traces of the Trade*, in which film maker Katrina Browne uncovers the leading role her New England ancestors played in the slave trade.

As we learned from South Africa, the road to reconciliation passes through the portal of truth. Through town halls, block parties and even in some corners on social media, we are inching toward that portal.

We may not yet be as good or as exceptional as we imagine, but perhaps we are on the road to getting better. We just need to start talking with and listening to our fellow travelers.