

SELECTED READINGS

INTRODUCTION

The growth of America, as the experience of a country, has many parallels to the growth of an individual soul. First, there was the experience of going into the wilderness, of stepping out of the known and voyaging into the unknown; then, the exhilaration of creating a totally new state, a new awareness of man's place in the universe. After the exhilaration of independence came the crushing struggle of civil war. Rather than flying into many parts and many factions, the unity held firm. Finally, in both American poetry and politics, there is a continuing theme of the search for concrete ways of manifesting America's inner spiritual vision.

In our selected readings, we have discovered that in each of the different stages of American growth, there have been men

and women who have realized that prayer is an effective means of gaining the awareness that there *is* a larger and more sublime power which manifests itself in and through all of our actions.

— *Anthony Hixon*

MY PRAYER

My prayer can smile only twice: once when I silence my outer senses, once when I open the portal of my soul.

My prayer lies in loving God for His own sake. My prayer is the destroyer of errors, born and unborn.

Prayer is best expressed in my day-to-day life when it has become a spontaneous, self-giving surrender to the Will of God.

Seeking is the plane fare in the realm of spirituality. Striving is the ticket. When seeking and striving have played their respective roles, "surrendering" leads me to my seat in the plane.

Eldorado can no longer hide from me when my genuine prayer enables me to see my soul in life and my life in the soul.

Audible prayer is often a self-satisfying solemnity. Silent prayer in lone self-poise is the fulfillment of Eternity.

Prayer is struggle when I want to be an all-knowing mind. Prayer is nectar when I want to be an all-dedicating life.

They say that prayer is the daughter of suffering. But I say that prayer is the mother of delight.

— *Sri Chinmoy*

Recitation by Jonathan Roberts:

This selection is from a sermon, given on-board the *Arbella* on route to the New World in 1630, by John Winthrop, who later became the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

The only way to provide for our posterity,
is to follow the counsel of the prophet
Micah,
to do justly, to love mercy,
to walk humbly with our God ...
Beloved, there is now set before us
life and good, death and evil,
in that we are commanded this day
to love the Lord our God, to love one
another,
to walk in His ways and to keep His
commandments
and His ordinance and His laws,
and the articles of our covenant with
Him;
that we may live and be multiplied

and that the Lord our God may bless us
in the land we go to possess.
But if our hearts shall turn away
so that we will not obey
but shall be seduced and worship other
gods,
our pleasures and profits, and serve
them,
it is propounded unto us this day,
we shall surely perish out of the good
land
we pass over this vast sea to possess.

*Therefore let us choose life
that we and our seed may live
by obeying His voice and cleaving
to Him
for He is our life and our
prosperity.*

Recitation by Stanton Frankle:

Once, during the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, when a breakdown in the debates seemed imminent, Benjamin Franklin cooled the passions and restored the perspective of the delegates by stating:

“Our different sentiments on almost every question is, methinks, a melancholy proof of the imperfection of human understanding. We indeed seem to feel our own want of political wisdom, since we have been running about in search of it ... I have lived, Sir, a long time, and the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth—that God governs in the affairs of men. And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without His notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without His aid?

“I therefore beg leave to move that henceforth prayers imploring the assistance of Heaven and its blessings on our deliberations be held in this Assembly every morning before we proceed to business.”

* * *

“Here is my creed. I believe in one God, Creator of the universe; that He governs it by His providence; that He ought to be worshipped; that the most acceptable service we render Him is doing good to His other children; that the soul of man is immortal and will be treated with justice in another life, respecting its conduct in this. These I take to be the principal principles of sound religion.”

Recitation by Steven Hein:

Shortly after the end of the Revolutionary War, George Washington wrote to the governors of some of the states.

From *Letter to the Governors*, June 8, 1783

I now make it my earnest prayer
that God would have you,
and the state over which you preside, in His
holy protection;
that He would incline the hearts of the
citizens
to cultivate a spirit of subordination and
obedience to the government;
to entertain a brotherly affection and love
for one another,
for their fellow citizens of the United States
at large
and particularly for their brethren who
have served in the field;
and finally
that He would graciously be pleased to
dispose us all to do justice,

to love mercy,
and to demean ourselves with charity and
humility,
and a pacific temper of mind,
which were characteristics of the Divine
Author of our blessed religion,
and without a humble imitation of whose
example in these things,
we can never hope to be a happy nation.

Recitation by Kevin Keefe:

This is a section from the Declaration of Independence. It says, in part:

“ ... We hold these truths to be self-evident,
that all men are created equal,
that they are endowed by their
Creator
with certain unalienable Rights,
that among these are Life,
Liberty,
and the pursuit of Happiness.”

Recitation by John Addison:

Not much more than a half-century passed and America was called upon to stand up and fight for the ideals upon which she was founded. In 1861, when the country was on the brink of civil war, Abraham Lincoln became President of the United States. Lincoln was fully conscious of his role as a chosen instrument of God. There are many tributes to Lincoln's high faith in God and His Workings within the affairs of men. The following sketch comes from a friend of Lincoln's, John W. Williams—

"Lincoln for a time was greatly depressed. After a period of abstraction, he turned away from the window, and his face took a brighter look as he said: 'Friend, do you believe in prayer?' and after an instant he continued: 'If the Lord did not answer prayer, I could not stand it. And if I did not believe in a God who works His Will with all nations, I should despair of the Republic.'"

On August 12, 1861, Abraham Lincoln offered to the United States a Proclamation of a National Fast Day:

"I, Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States, do appoint the last Thursday in September next, as a day of humility, prayer and fasting for all people of the nation. I do earnestly recommend to all ministers and teachers of religions of all denominations, and to all heads of families, to observe and keep their several creeds and modes of worship in all humility, to the end that the united prayer of the nation may bring down plentiful blessings upon our country."

Recitation by Hugh Browne:

From Lincoln's own words, as formulated
by Carl Sandburg, we have *The Faith of
Abraham Lincoln*:

I believe the will of God prevails;
Without Him all human reliance is vain;
Without the assistance of that Divine Being
I cannot succeed;
With that assistance I cannot fail.

I believe I am a humble instrument
in the hands
of our Heavenly Father;
I desire that all my works and acts be
according to His will;
And that it may be so I give thanks to the
Almighty
and seek His aid.

Recitation by Terry Frankle :

Singer, thinker, visionary, citizen extraordinary: this was Walt Whitman. Thoreau called Whitman, "probably the greatest democrat that ever lived." Emerson judged *Leaves of Grass* as the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom America had yet contributed. This is a short poem from *Leaves of Grass*.

DAREST THOU NOW O SOUL

Darest thou now O soul,
Walk out with me toward the unknown
region,
Where neither ground is for the feet nor
any path to follow?

No map there, nor guide,
Nor voice sounding, nor touch of human
hand,
Nor face with blooming flesh, nor lips, nor
eyes, are in that land.

I know it not O soul,
Nor dost thou, all is a blank before us,
All waits undream'd in that region, that
inaccessible land.

Till when the ties loosen,
All but the ties eternal, Time and Space,
Nor darkness, gravitation, sense, nor any
bounds bounding us.

Then we burst forth, we float,
In Time and Space O soul, prepared for
them,
Equal, equipt at last, (O joy, O fruit of all)
them to fulfill
O soul.

Recitation by Cate Claxton:

A portion of this poem by Emma Lazarus, called *The New Colossus*, has been used as an inscription on the Statue of Liberty—

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to
land;

Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall
stand

A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes
command

The air-bridged harbor that twin cities
frame.

"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!"
cries she

With silent lips. "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-tost to
me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door."

Recitation by Vivian Fredner:

In January 1961, Robert Frost became the first poet honored to participate in a Presidential Inauguration. Standing beside President John F. Kennedy, the sun in his eyes and the winter wind tearing his papers from his hand, Frost could not read the poem he had written for the occasion. So he recited this poem, *The Gift Outright*:

THE GIFT OUTRIGHT

The land was ours before we were the
land's.
She was our land more than a hundred
years
Before we were her people. She was ours
In Massachusetts, in Virginia,
But we were England's, still colonials,
Possessing what we still were unpossessed
by,
Possessed by what we now no more
possessed.

Something we were withholding made us
weak
Until we found out that it was ourselves
We were withholding from our land of
living,
And forthwith found salvation in
surrender.
Such as we were we gave ourselves outright
(The deed of gift was many deeds of war)
To the land vaguely realizing westward,
But still unstoried, artless, unenhanced,
Such as she was, such as she would become.

Recitation by Hugh Browne:

This excerpt is from a speech given by Martin Luther King, Jr. on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in 1963. I'm sure you're all familiar with it.

From every mountainside, let freedom ring,
And when this happens—when we let
 freedom ring,
 when we let it ring from every village
 and every hamlet,
 from every state and every city,
We will be able to speed up that day when
 all of God's children,
 black men and white men,
 Jews and Gentiles,
 Protestants and Catholics,
 will be able to join hands and sing in
 the words of the old Negro spiritual—
“Free at last! free at last!
 Thank God Almighty, we are free
 at last!”

Recitation by John Addison:

In 1961, exactly one hundred years after Abraham Lincoln became president, President John F. Kennedy was elected to the office of the Presidency. With the coming of John Kennedy, a new lamp was lit in the aspiration of America. In his Inaugural Address he said:

“. . . The world is very different now. For man holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish all forms of human poverty and all forms of human life. And yet the same revolutionary belief for which our forebears fought is still at issue around the globe, the belief that the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state, but from the Hand of God.

“We dare not forget today that we are the heirs of that first revolution. Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans,

born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage, and unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing of those human rights to which we are committed today, at home and around the world.

“Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, to assure the survival and the success of liberty.”

Recitation by Kevin Keefe:

It was the Proclamation of President Gerald Ford that inspired us to join together today in prayer. I would like to read some selections from that Proclamation: —

“Two hundred years ago, Americans were asked to address their prayers to the “Great Governor of the World” to preserve their new Union and secure civil and religious liberties.

“Let us now pray for the wisdom to continue the American pilgrimage, striving toward a nobler existence for all humanity. Let us ask for the strength to meet the challenges that face our nation. Let us give thanks to God for the many blessings granted to America throughout these two centuries.

“And let us express the hope that our lives may continue to be enriched by the grace of our Maker.

“I call upon all Americans to pray, each after his or her own manner or convictions, for unity and the blessings of freedom throughout our land and for peace on earth.”

Closing Statements by Anthony Hixon:

Thank you very much.

To conclude our celebration today, we wish that you would join us in singing the song *America the Beautiful*, as a salute, not to America as a political institution, but as a salute to America as a spiritual entity—as a soul in itself, whose greatest contribution to human liberty and spiritual liberty perhaps has yet to be made.

AMERICA THE BEAUTIFUL

O beautiful for spacious skies,
For amber waves of grain,
For purple mountains' majesty
Above the fruited plains.

America! America!
God shed His grace on thee,
And crown thy good with brotherhood,
From sea to shining sea!

* * *

O beautiful for pilgrim feet,
Whose stern, impassioned stress
A thoroughfare for freedom beat
Across the wilderness!

America! America!
God mend thine every flaw,
Confirm thy soul in self-control,
Thy liberty in law!

* * *

O beautiful for heroes proved
In liberating strife,
Who more than self their country loved,
And mercy more than life!

America! America!
May God thy gold refine,
Till all success be nobleness,
And every gain divine!

* * *

O beautiful for patriot dream
That sees beyond the years;
Thine alabaster cities gleam,
Undimmed by human tears!

America! America!
God shed His grace on thee,
And crown thy good with brotherhood,
From sea to shining sea!

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