

Moving Forward

“Don’t pay no mind to the demons/ they fill you with fear...just know you’re not alone.”

Phillip Phillips *The World from the Side of the Moon*. At the end of the year, a Marist College Center for Public Opinion poll found 58% of Americans had no confidence in the ways “the political parties can work together.”¹ Half a year later, nearly a third reported disliking both parties.² During the pandemic, political polarization—its threat to democracy and lack of regard for civility in our institutions—was cited as more distressing and exhausting to the American people—even more than the chaotic spread of the pandemic itself, the disruption to schools and work habits, the mass shootings that seem to have become “normal,” fears of economic recession, the looming threat of the war overseas, and one weather disaster after another, all interrupting our resolve to move forward. Josh Bivens, research director of the Economic Policy Institute, explains that our political polarization is directly related to “the staggering rise in inequality in recent decades. It is the single most important economic trend in the United States, and it has been essentially zero sum. This means that the rise in top incomes is related directly to decelerating growth for everybody else. “It is the rise of inequality itself that has been poisonously divisive. We can’t have a better economy or less polarized politics until we face up to this.”³ Bivens wrote this in 2020, *before* the pandemic was really underway. It provides a convincing explanation for the economic polarization that has contributed to undermining democracy. Since the pandemic began, billionaires worldwide increased 30% (2,755),⁴ whereas the poverty rate doubled from 2020-2021.⁵ Related to the economic inequality virtual imperialism (ic.) brought about are other technological changes.

Far from making “life” easier, technology has interrupted our communications, caused mental needs to multiply and go uncared for, changed our work habits from what had been determined by owner-worker agreements to “rulers” behind the scenes of giant tech programs who have little insight into local needs, added additional administrative work to the loads of teachers, nurses, and other professionals, and created one-way streets for voicing frustrations while tech titans take all the time they want to “manage” all these things. Congress has been seemingly “out to lunch” at regulating the technology it helped to unleash. Nor is the impatience with which technology prods us necessarily advantageous. We now wait in self-service lines that were supposedly “faster” than grocery lines with service help. We volunteer biometric information at airports to avoid having to wait in security lines. We finish work more quickly on computers—except there is now always more work so that our brains operate as hyperactive all the time, and we send texts to avoid taking time or bothering to actually talk with someone. But...perhaps human beings are not meant to operate like machines, or even in conjunction with them. Some might wish to preserve a more human-centric society, such as one of, for, and by people. The New Year brought yet another bomb cyclone forming off the Pacific, hitting California with category 4 winds of 132 mph, 12 inches of rain, flooding, and mudslides. A “storm” bomb cyclone followed with “waves as high as 30 feet expected ...up and down the California coast.”⁶ A week later, another steep devastated the state with 4-5 feet of snow and another foot of rain. Falling trees crushed homes and blocked highways while residents of Montecito and Ventura were forced to evacuate due to the danger of flooding.⁷ Across California “winter storms buried Yosemite National Park and other areas in “record-breaking snowfall.”⁸ Seven feet of snow fell on the San Bernardino mountains on the west coast; reporters called it “another once in a generation storm.”⁹ Throughout these disasters, President Biden remained determined to work for bipartisan compromise in ways that few now seem able or willing to do. Biden remained hopeful and optimistic that his legislative agenda would stand the test of time, and he seems focused on looking forward: “We’re going to make decisions now that are going to determine what we’re going to look like the next ten years from now.”¹⁰ But taking a long-term outlook, even if it is better for the country, is not a popularity-winning strategy. In addition to weather disasters, the death of Tyre Nichols at the hands of five Black officers reignited issues of police violence.

His death was determined to be a result of being beaten to death, police force instead of de-escalation, and failure of others to intervene. Memphis Police Chief Cerelyn Davis called the incident “heinous, reckless, and inhumane.”¹¹ The officers were members of a police squad’s unit fighting violent crime: The Scorpion, known for a mentality of “over-aggressive authority, that allowed police to dehumanize” their victims.”¹² A day after release of the body cam video, the Memphis Police Department disbanded the unit. Ben Crump, the family’s attorney, said the obvious: “Policing in the U.S. needs a great deal of reform.”¹³ The president called for “new ways to unite the community,” including a civic guardian model of policing and more training in restraint when situations are unclear. Biden stated, “When police officers or departments violate the public trust, they must be held accountable,” and he renewed his call for passage of the George Floyd Police Reform Act.¹⁴ Then he urged legislators to “work together and get something done.”¹⁵ The House passed the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act in 2020. Why has the Senate still not gotten “something done”? Later in the year, and in recognition of a better side of many first responders, the president awarded medals of valor, three to firefighters, three to police departments, and a sheriff in Ohio who jumped into freezing water to save a woman—which all speaks to the courage of most first responders and law enforcers that, with respect and gratitude, we hope to preserve.¹⁶ At the State of the Union address, President Biden had declared emphatically, “The State of the Union is strong!”¹⁷ The U.S. economy remained resilient with the lowest jobless rate (3.4%) in over 50 years. Shelter costs and rent were seen as the biggest drivers of inflation.¹⁸ Legislators discussed a Wall Street business model of cutting costs, not profits. Although rarely reported, global profiteering (and raising profit margins)...even “more than wage cost pressures, [is] one of the largest drivers of inflation.”¹⁹ Bidenomics is a way to rebuild the American Dream while also paying down the national debt—to build America from the middle out and close the huge tax loopholes on stock holdings of the ultra-rich.²⁰ But Congress has done little to support these steps and much to block them.

By the middle of the year, Covid-19 was no longer a global health emergency,²¹ and the federal government had suspended funding of the Wuhan Lab in China. Also in the spring, a state of emergency was declared in Arkansas as more than 50 catastrophic tornadoes raged across the midwest and south, leaving utter destruction.²⁴ “By May, it was estimated the storms had swamped 150,000 acres in California’s Central Valley,” and according to Kings County officials, also destroyed crops in the region “responsible for producing a quarter of the nation’s food,”²³ thus driving up food prices. On August 8, wildfires broke out on Maui, Hawaii, killing at least 97 lives, with many still missing or unaccounted for. This was the deadliest wildfire in the U.S. in more than a century. It literally demolished a people’s cherished heritage and homeland in the city of Lahaina—the original capital of the Hawaiian kingdom.²⁶ Embers had festered in brush and foliage around Hawaiian Electric’s “right-of-way”—areas of high risk for wildfires, but that had been left untrimmed and unkempt for years. An offshore hurricane swept through fields of tall grass with 90mph winds, sparking downed power lines and reigniting fires. The fires burned so fast while moving through Lahaina’s downtown area that people were jumping into the water to escape the flames.²⁷ Papa’aina, the restaurant at the oldest hotel in Hawaii and a local landmark, was among the more than two thousand businesses and homes destroyed in the fires that engulfed the city.²⁸ Leanne Wong, Top Chef at Papa’aina, closed the restaurant hours ahead of the quickly spreading fires. Now, she volunteers with Chef Andréas World Central Kitchen team to provide thousands of meals to people on the devastated island of Maui.²⁹ “We do our part.’ Serving others is healing. Everybody on this island is family,” she says, exemplifying the islands’ *‘aloha* spirit: “wrapping arms around each other” and taking care of “our other neighbors and family.”³⁰ Following this tragedy, the US Surgeon General’s advisory on the nation’s mental health proved both timely and appropriate to understand the surge of strikes that occurred in summer, 2023. In particular, workers’ employment concerns came to a head as 11,000 Los Angeles traffic officers, lifeguards, airport shuttle service operators, and other city workers walked out on strike for the first time in 40 years.³¹ Due to gridlock over multiple issues in Congress, it seemed more and more workers were taking matters into their own hands.

Culinary workers went on strike in Nevada, and hotel workers demanded their work receive more respect and large profit margins be shared with the workers who help make those profits possible. The writers’ and actors’ strike in LA followed suit. The use of AI in media productions was at issue, and apparently successfully negotiated. Now to help all in society, what was decided in terms of use of image, voice, etc. should be applied to all public figures. In September, word came that “the United Auto Workers (UW) may soon strike,” to which Sen. Bernie Sanders led the call that “every American should support them.”³² The UAW union says workers were not fully compensated after the 2008-09 financial crisis. Workers had agreed to several cuts in order to save the industry, but “carmakers received huge bailouts and soon returned to record profits.”^{32a} On September 26, President Biden went to meet auto workers in their picket lines in a show of support for their rights. From my perspective, the carmakers should not have received “huge bailouts” to save the industry unless those government bailouts were tied to sharing profits with workers once the carmakers “returned to record profits.” The following month saw the largest health care strike in history when 75,000 Kaiser health care workers walked off the job for three days.³⁴ Frontline workers, exhausted from pandemic levels of care-giving, wanted to address wages, long-term staffing solutions, and training for future needs rather than Kaiser’s reported interest in outsourcing for more help. Sometimes patients calling in have to wait 2-3 months before getting appointments for care, and staffing differentials—working night shifts and weekends—that are harder to fill, needed to be negotiated.³⁵ In an interview with Judy Woodruff, of public television, Surgeon General Murthy emphasized the timing of events as well as the opportunity in front of us: “As people are rethinking their relationship with work,” he said, “This is our chance to remake the workplace into an engine of mental health and well-being. And, if we do so, we will help workers, we will help organizations, and we will all be better off.”³⁶ Murthy says “helping workers feel like they matter and that they are valued” supports a critical reason for his advisory on mental health, i.e., that mental health and well-being should be available to everyone: “I issued this framework not just for some businesses, not just for nonprofit organizations, but for all organizations big and small, for workers who are in the factories, for retail workers, and for those who are behind computers.”³⁷ As more people seek to balance work/life issues, I came across a pertinent insight from Rajiv Shah, president of the Rockefeller Foundation and author of *Big Bets*.

Shah knows governments and big corporations are aware that “human opportunity and human dignity are ultimately the baseline for stability and peace.”³⁸ He believes getting CEOs and their corporate partners to commit to a larger goal helps employees find a sense of meaning in doing what is otherwise what is just a job. Work becomes more valuable when, beyond making income to support one’s self and family, it contributes to something larger than ourselves, such as saving lives from hunger and destitution—which in turn makes the world better for all of us. Entertainers have long acknowledged their work is more meaningful when it has a wider purpose. Pavarotti used to tour: as does Andreas Bocelli, with multiple other artists to bring music and aid to children in different areas of the world. U2, Bon Jovi, Cold Play, Alicia Keys, and many others have played concerts to help in support of causes for others. Think also of unions seeking social justice via non-violence, which is common to many folk movements. Joan Baez said, “I’ve always been the happiest when I was doing activism and music at the same time.”³⁹ Cheech and Chong spoke of getting “a noble feeling” when working for Cesar Chavez’s United Farm Workers cause—that is, working to help people, but said they didn’t get this kind of feeling from other performances.⁴⁰ Compassion and the spiritual conviction to sacrifice for a cause greater than oneself multiplies in the communal experience of music linked to a purpose. We find such movements of people across categories of identity across groups, intersegmental and inter-generational, in fights for civil rights movements, women’s rights, against child labor, boycotting apartheid in South Africa, upholding Native American rights, the United Farm Workers, anti-Vietnam war movements, and more recently, in March for Our Lives, Interfaith movements, a reignited women’s movement, and Climate Change rallies. Nevertheless, American citizens face a divided country. So perhaps we are at a crossroads? Political polarization makes coming together more difficult, but might we still work with each other to solve problems? Or do we now simply “live and let live”? The recent diversity of House Republicans even to elect a speaker—despite pressing needs of the nation that require timely action—illustrates the opposite of working together. We should not elect individuals who demand only their way of thinking or those “loyal” to following dictatorial commands. As an independent, I was not fond of Kevin McCarthy, but—and to the detriment of the functioning of our government—I do not think he was given anything close to a fair chance as Speaker of the House of Representatives.

A few Democrats might have voted for him—in a show of bipartisanship—to prevent the personal vindictiveness of some now derailing the functioning of the House of Representatives. On October 26, 2023, after 22 days of chaos in the House chamber, a seemingly mild-mannered but reportedly far right election denier was elected Speaker of the House. Mike Johnson (R-La) was certainly correct when he acknowledged the American people’s faith in Congress “is at an all-time low.”⁴¹ In “Listening to a Divided America,” Judy Woodruff finds today the policy differences between our political parties are much wider and therefore, less tolerable. Jocelyn Kiley of the Pew Research Center says, “People have internalized [their] partisan identity.”⁴² People strongly aligned with their particular parties feel anger and distrust towards other party members, and according to political scientist Lilliana Mason, “These types of feelings are not the kind of thing we can compromise with.”⁴³ Mason believes those who have been marginalized, including women, associate the two parties with “different sides of progress” with regard to civil rights—either assimilating every new kind of minority or going back to the largely white, male patriarchy of the past.⁴ That explanation reminds me of a recent newscast in which a woman discovered her ancestors had been enslaved by lawmakers’ families. She did not, however, seek to lay blame for the past on people in the present. Rather, she wondered how having that information will affect people’s decisions now and in the future.⁴⁵ This way of thinking *forward* is valuable because it allows change to occur without replaying past conflicts. I recall reading about the childhood of Angela Merkel, chancellor of Germany from 2005-2021, when she walked past the wall separating East Germany from West. Later, when she became chancellor, she made a conscious decision not to return to the thinking of the past, but rather to use experiences of the past to move the country forward in admirable and more diplomatic ways. And there is another possible approach to what Mason calls the traditional “stacking of identities on top of one another into ... a mega-identity [that] has reinforced our basic human instinct for inclusion and exclusion.”⁴⁶ Diverse thinking *across intersegmental* groups of people (see 2c.) occurs when power ripples out horizontally rather than stacks vertically.

Individuals with unique experiences acting in solidarity with each other speaks to possibilities of renewed trust in human bonds and renewed hope in rebuilding the human infrastructure of a democratic society. This approach may become more likely if we consider that the largest group of voters in America is now comprised of unaffiliated or independent voters—31% of the 2022 midterm vote.⁴⁷ Already “in 2022, Gen X (4 in 10) and half of all millennials identified as independents and will likely do so as they age.”⁴⁸ Independents—favoring neither every cultural anomaly nor Trump’s carbon copy voters—might reorganize splintered factions into different coalitions, not necessarily agreeing, but rather agreeing to disagree and making good faith efforts to cooperate in solving problems. Although the majority of these voters are now unaffiliated with a party, most continue to care about democracy, our nation, the earth, and our Constitution. The promise of more bi-partisan thinking in Congress and the growing number of young, independent voters provide hope for the future. Tulsı Gabbard (Ind-Hawaii) deplores today’s “power elites” who are eroding individual rights” and thereby “undermine our freedoms.”⁴⁹ In a column for the *Arizona Republic*, she writes, “In catering to the fringes, neither party has demonstrated much tolerance for diversity of thought. Bipartisan compromise is seen as a rarely acceptable last resort, rather than the best way to achieve lasting progress.”⁵⁰ Krysten Sinema (Ind.AZ) perceives a threat posed to democracy by the “false choice” that voters “must subscribe wholesale to policy views the Parties hold, views that have pulled further and further toward extremism.”⁵¹ Layla Zaidane, president of the Millennial Action Project, says millennials and Gen Z voters want to see problems solved with more long term vision. Perhaps due to the amount of time spent on social media, their B-5 meters are sharper and they recognize when that B-5 is “nanced and attuned to political spin.”⁵² Rep. Nancy Mace (R-SC) suggests something akin to forward-looking change when she sees a need to acknowledge more independent voices within her party: “We have a number of people in this country that have left the Democrat Party, they have left the Republican Party.

They don’t feel like they have a home. And we need leadership that will embrace those independent voices.”⁵³ Meanwhile, a category 5 Hurricane Otis hit Mexico with 155 mph winds, and every power line went down.⁵⁴ The Russia-Ukraine war reached stalemate, with Ukraine pleading always for more ammunition and weapons. The increasing number of independents, as well as politicians representing swing districts, have led some in the two parties to rethink worn-out talking points in favor of beginning to discuss critical issues from a range of new and diverse perspectives. From these different viewpoints we can learn first to “listen with our mouths closed”—as NBC anchor Lester Holt so succinctly put it; second, to seek evidence rather than listening to speculation and hypotheticals before making decisions, and third, to think better; and then collaborate on finding new and creative responses to what are genuine and urgent concerns drawn from both sides of the aisle.⁵⁵ It is particularly important that we cancel the brutally cruel language of bullies that is used in political speech to divide people into “us” and “bad people” before even attempting to understand thinking that differs from our own. The program *Ear to the Common Ground* is a great example of eclectic groups of people sharing meals with a musician they like and also coming together to discuss difference on current ideas. Presumably, the shared meal and singer/music provide common ground for conversations that go where they will.⁵⁶ David Crabtree hosts *The North Carolina Listening Project* with eight people who examine and respectfully discuss different and highly controversial subjects. We might agree now, at neighborhood levels, to re-pair the human connections that comprise the fabric of our democracy. We do not have to *agree* with everyone in order to speak civilly and be willing to work with others to salvage democracy. Eboo Patel, whose interfaith groups work with college students, explains what he finds is “the great lesson of Lincoln and Jane Addams and King and Mandela: for every stitch of hate or distrust that you put into the fabric now, you’re going to have to unstitch at a later point.”⁵⁷ In a similar way, Pope Francis directs attention to replacing death, despair, and hatred with being neighbor to each other when he says the Eucharist heals us from an idolatry of the self. We might choose to believe in upholding the Golden Rule which so often is clearly and remarkably seen in people and communities after disasters.

If we apply Shah’s thinking here, we might begin to work together for a purpose larger than even our own political stances—important as those might be—but to imagine a better, more compassionate future. The good of the nation and the common good of all might take precedence over partisan demands. Rajiv Shah says “all big bets start in small steps.... you never know when your community activity will change the way people think to imagine their future.”⁵⁸ During the pandemic’s reign, we repeatedly witnessed such acts, which may have been small steps, but those small steps helped to buoy the hopes with which we now reimagine our futures. People show good will to those who have lost loved ones, homes, and/or otherwise been damaged. Often families of victims of mass shootings or opioid/fentanyl deaths are left behind grieving, but in acts of greater love, turn to activism rather than revenge in order to honor the memories of their loved ones. Outpourings of shared grief have so often become a reason for young people, in particular, coming together—after mass shootings and other disasters. They mark space with memorials to insist on remembering those lost, to acknowledge an accumulated presence of each other’s pain. It is often young people who reach out to crowd-source and help with the needs of those left behind. A vivid example is the memorial left when Tom Karnatz and his wife, Sue, went for a run in opposite directions on the Neuse River Greenway in North Carolina. Sue Karnatz became one of the five victims killed by a gunman on a shooting spree. Her husband was left to tell their three sons their mom was dead.⁵⁹ Tom Karnatz had always used running as a “kind of mental health check” to deal with stress. A year after the mass shooting, he now says that he runs a couple times a week by “a makeshift memorial [that] still stands along the greenway where Sue was killed.”⁶⁰ Karnatz is not interested in following the criminal case in the courts.... He remembers Sue as someone “very kind and considerate and compassionate, the best wife and best friend that I could imagine.”⁶¹ That memory of Sue has led him to decide “if I can be kinder to other people it’s not going to change the world but it might make somebody’s life a little better.” He adds, “I’d like to see more people do that.”^{61a} Karnatz’s tribute to his wife is an incredible way to keep alive the family’s love for Sue and to make a difference in the lives of his sons and in the lives of all with whom they interact.

Transforming his grief into kindness makes a marked difference because the small steps of that kindness disrupt tragedy by spreading a greater love. Families of children killed at school shootings across the nation as well as from drug overdoses have likewise refused to let their grief have the last word by turning it into social action to help others. Diane Foley’s son, James Foley, was killed by Isis in 2014. The James V. Foley Legacy Foundation, Inc. has been set up to help others in similar combination more aware of Foley involved when they are covering dangerous situations for newspapers and/or Voice of America.⁶² Similar compassion and activism is found across communities. William Brangham reports on the wild fires that forced more than 7,000 Maui residents into temporary housing, such as a hotel provided by the Red Cross. Richard Bissen, Mayor of Maui County, Hawaii, said, “No one was spared. Everyone has some loss.”⁶³ Bissen continues: “Amazingly, this event has brought us closer – closer together. And that’s because this community is a resilient community. No one was prepared for something like this to happen. But we’re learning and we’re sticking together.”⁶⁴ Donations have poured into Maui—free groceries, clothes, and household supplies—from all over the country and all over the world.”⁶⁵ Kaipo Kekona who helps run one receiving center of donations says, “We tried to develop our site to be a reflection of our island values. And we just try to orientate all our operations to keep families involved, so that it just keeps our community really tight and in good mind-set, so that we can stick together moving forward.”⁶⁶ People in Hawaii say “the spirit of *aloha* sets Hawaii apart—the spirit of helping one another all the time, not just when disasters strike.”⁶⁶ That determination to see all as family, to “stick together, moving forward” from fellow citizens in Hawaii offers Americans reason for hope. The seasoned reporter William to Brangham remembers what impressed him as something “very, very beautiful and powerful”: “Local people stepping up to help each other, Hawaiians helping Hawaiians. And several people...said that that process of people who are themselves going through a traumatic experience, reaching out, stepping up to help others, has, in and of itself, been therapeutic for them.”⁶⁹ Responding to the increasing number of disasters somehow brings out the best in people. We were right there helping each other fight the elements and getting back on our feet when fires, floods, tornadoes, sand storms, mudslides, and other forms of extreme weather lashed almost every part of the nation.

In our responses to disaster, then, political divides somehow are set aside and once again we are simply neighbor to each other. It felt as it should, despite a heavy price paid in terms of lives, property, and other damages. Grieving at burials and memorials were set up at public deaths. Go Fund Me accounts contributed to families of victims and helped with burials. Throughout the pandemic and moving forward, ordinary people have seemed determined—and succeeded—in introducing all kinds of small acts of kindness into our lives. People brought meals and homemade goods to hospital staff working around the clock. Families offered food, clothes, and sometimes space to those fleeing wars and desperate for a chance to stay alive. Musicians of all kinds soothed hearts and the air, suffused with suffering, that had a weight all its own. Murals give colorful notice to drab concrete of a people living, laughing, and working. The unlimited imaginations of children found ways for them to play and also laugh, even if only with their imagined superheroes. I believe that if we simply came together under an *ethical leader*, everyone in the nation would donate 2% of the national debt to pay off the national debt. At times, small acts of kindness were all a person had to cling to. It seemed more people held doors open for others, asked store clerks how their days were going, offered rides, said “excuse me” for bumping into someone, and smiled, wishing others a nice day. Seeing smiles caused others to smile, if only for a moment. Daily life went on, as people invented new ways to help each other. We have still been questioning “normal.” Will parents have more time to nurture the young and play more active roles in their education? Will we reject questioning that you see something different than I do, and both ways of seeing have some measure of value. The constant “investigations” of what the other party did wrong while they were in office is tiresome and unproductive—likely contributing to low approval ratings of the Congress. If something is wrong—such as taking bribes, insider trading of stocks, and/or conflicts of interest, then Congress needs to adjust laws so that the “wrong” is now illegal and then follow up with the so-called Ethics Department. We cannot elect to Congress—at either state or national levels—Republicans or Democrats determined to block all legislative proposals from the other party—as McConnell did and as Republican legislators in North Carolina do—because all we will get is more stalemate, more gridlock. That is simply not a way to move beyond talk and actually solve problems to make progress.

I do not expect the Union to be dissolved—I do not expect the house to fall—but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing or all the other.⁷⁰ Today, we hear people say that our two party system of government is in danger because we cannot agree on facts that are the basis for discussions with others—regarding election counts, budgets, or even the science of climate change. It may be that these are some of the very real feelings of “anger and distrust” Mason says thwart our abilities to compromise.⁷¹ Many blame the news media for political polarization because the 24/7 news cycle is geared to dramatic conflict. The media should be required to cover news fairly and with balance to different sides as once happened under the Fairness Doctrine that disappeared under the Reagan Era. All of the media is owned by only a handful of monopolies, as depicted in Bill Moyers’ 1999 PBS documentary *Free Speech For Sale*. These problems are of our own making. The FCC could set new standards for today’s social media to cover news events in an unbiased manner, without commentators spinning the narrative one way or another. There are endless opinion shows if people care to hear them, but a news program should simply provide the bare bones information on actual occurrences. For me, *NBC News with Lester Holt* comes closest to this. Surely truth is another such basis—if not the foundational one—for what we call “facts” and that Mason suggests cannot be compromised. To the extent that people put a “greater purpose” ahead of partisan interests, we might reflect silently, as each understands his/her higher power, and find guidance for putting a the good of others, *before* an intractable refusal to find common ground. Each effort can encourage another. We continue to hold clashing definitions of fairness and justice, and these can seem more difficult to tolerate than tornadoes, floods—perhaps even pandemics. Despite definite differences, there is yet room in our nation to expand understanding and share in each other’s pain, which is the very definition of compassion. There is room for making a difference and for caring about each other in order to act as foils to the pandemic’s vast indifference to human life.

Then too, we might even try Abraham Lincoln’s approach of using *gratitude* to heal divisions because, as Surgeon General Murthy has outlined, each of us has a role to play in repairing our social infrastructure. We need relationships with each other. It may be that we can no longer forge a united society, but if we are open to accepting others as they are—though not necessarily in agreement with them—we may be able to create a measure of solidarity among different individuals, willing to tolerate others, to live and let live, to acknowledge that you see something different than I do, and both ways of seeing have some measure of value. The constant “investigations” of what the other party did wrong while they were in office is tiresome and unproductive—likely contributing to low approval ratings of the Congress. If something is wrong—such as taking bribes, insider trading of stocks, and/or conflicts of interest, then Congress needs to adjust laws so that the “wrong” is now illegal and then follow up with the so-called Ethics Department. We cannot elect to Congress—at either state or national levels—Republicans or Democrats determined to block all legislative proposals from the other party—as McConnell did and as Republican legislators in North Carolina do—because all we will get is more stalemate, more gridlock. That is simply not a way to move beyond talk and actually solve problems to make progress.