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Is America about Doors or Walls, Fear or Hope?

Newspaper Column by Evan Barrett

November 26, 2015

Here on Thanksgiving Day my thoughts go to my family, which is like the face of America. My Catholic father was mostly Irish with a little Scottish, Welsh and English thrown in. My mother was Jewish with ancestors from Germany, Russia, Poland, Austria and England. One of my six brothers is married to a wonderful lady from Mexico. Their daughter is married to a Moroccan. One of my daughters married an African American. One of my brothers is gay and his partner is from Mexico. Our family includes a Native American and several Asian-Americans. We include Jews, Christians and Muslims. Parents and siblings, children and grandchildren, nieces and nephews, we are certainly part of that great jumble of differentness that is humanity – that is America.

Does our differentness, our diversity, engender love and hope or fear? Our family was taught by both words and actions to embrace our differences. We were raised to believe that a big part of our nation's uniqueness was that it loved and welcomed all who came here looking for freedom and a better life. We believe diversity is the strength of our family and the strength of America. The words inscribed at the base of the Statue of Liberty -- that great gift from France that stands in New York harbor welcoming the world -- are worth pondering today.

“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!”

For over 129 years the Lady has welcomed people through a door to America. That is the America I was taught to believe in ... a beacon of light and hope for all humanity.

But today, many in our country, even some who aspire to leadership, are about building walls to hold people out, not doors to welcome people. Fear drives those who want to build walls. But the country I was raised in, the country in whose ideals I believe, is about hopes and aspirations, not fear.

The fifty years I have been active in public affairs have been driven by that belief. Sure, as a nation, we often do not live up to our ideals, but I remain committed to bringing us as close to those ideals as possible. That is what I tell to my children, grandchildren and students. We are a great, positive, optimistic nation and people. And each of us can and should be pushing ourselves and our nation toward those ideals.

Today, however, the push seems to be more of a pull -- a great tug-of-war between fear and hope. If fear wins that tug-of-war, our nation will not be living up to its ideals. The

times in the past when fear has won are written in our history books as moments of American shame. Every Japanese-American that we committed to internment camps in 1941 is a reminder of our failure as a nation. Every German-speaking American we imprisoned at the time of World War I, pursuant to the Alien & Sedition Act, marks a national moment of shame. The “blacklists” of McCarthyism that deprived people their livelihood because of what they thought or who they associated with are not something of which we are proud. The Jews on the St. Louis, turned away from our shores and sent back to the Holocaust, still haunt us. Every Native American who was driven from his homeland onto artificially contrived reservations is a mark of shame for all of us. Every African-American lynched or even denied the right to vote is a black mark on the Writ of our History. And so it goes.

Virtually all of those offenses against our democracy and our humanity were driven by fear. And the prevalence of fear in the body politic is seen as an element to be exploited by ambitious politicians - exploited for votes to gain political power. Be aware of that. Over the short haul, fear-driven politics and politicians may prevail. That is what Donald Trump, Ted Cruz, Mike Huckabee, Chris Christie and almost the entire GOP field is hoping for. But, to paraphrase Martin Luther King, Jr., over the long-haul, the arc of American history bends toward hope, not fear.

So on this Thanksgiving Day I am betting on hope not fear, on diversity not narrowness, on doors, not walls. I think of my family and believe that they represent the diverse and strong America to which we all aspire. I hope you do, too.

Evan Barrett of Butte, has spent the last 46 years at the top level of Montana economic development, government, politics and education. He is currently the Director of Business & Community Outreach and an instructor at Highlands College of Montana Tech. These are his personal views.