The Spirit of Liberty

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The Statue of Liberty still stands today in New York harbor as a beacon of light and hope. Emma Lazarus' sonnet, *The New Colossus*, engraved within the statue's pedestal, is Lady Liberty's famous message of freedom and compassion. When Emma wrote this sonnet in 1883, she saw this colossal goddess with her torch held high looking across the Atlantic toward ancient lands with their long histories of tyranny and oppression. She extends comfort to the downtrodden, who have been forced to live under oppressive rule. The goddess welcomes them to their new home. Her lamp is the piercing light that guides them to enter through the "golden door." Emma called Lady Liberty the Mother of Exiles, which personifies her own life and work as well. Born to an affluent family, she published her first book of poems while still a teenager. Poetry was said to be her natural language. She was also a leading crusader against the persecution of the Jews who were immigrating to New York in the 1880's. The year 1881 was a turning point in Emma's life. This sheltered girl's eyes were opened to humanity's suffering at a mass meeting in New York protesting the inhumane treatment of the Russian Jews. At that meeting, Secretary of State William Evarts said, "It is not that it is the oppression of Jews by Russia, it is the oppression of men and women by men and women, and we are all men and women."

These simple yet profound words held much wisdom. Yet more than 100 years later, we still battle the same issues of hatred, and racial and religious prejudice. The huddled masses that have come to our shores to escape oppression and persecution do not always breathe the air of freedom. Minorities are still being discriminated against. Anti-immigration hysteria has recently unleashed a wave of hate crimes against Hispanics across the nation. Man's inhumanity to man seems to constantly repeat itself. After all these years and centuries, why can't we resolve our differences in a peaceful way?

The French philosopher, René Descartes, said, "The chief cause of human errors is to be found in the prejudices picked up in childhood." Prejudice and discrimination are often rooted in the family structure and passed from generation to generation, largely sustained through habit and ignorance. What we don't understand, we fear—what we fear becomes a threat. These irrational hostilities produce unrealistic and cruel images of other people. The truth gets buried behind false concepts.

Psychiatrist Carl Jung taught that fear and hatred arise when people are unwilling to own up to their "shadow," which he describes as the dark side of our psyche that contains our inferior and undesirable qualities. Since these qualities are unacceptable to the ego's self-image, we disconnect from them in order to "jump over the shadow." Jung says the most direct way of doing this is by "looking for everything dark, inferior and culpable in others." Thus people project their shadow onto others, who become the scapegoat for their problems. But when we deny or block out the awareness of our shadow side, we cut ourselves off from the roots of our being.

In the end, we all suffer due to this human tendency, because prejudice and scapegoating is hatred, which enslaves both the hater and the hated. We certainly need immigration laws that will be fair and just to both the American citizens and the immigrants. Yet, legislation is not the solution to the core of the problem. The burden of responsibility rests with us. We can begin by choosing to withdraw our shadow projections and find the courage, honesty, and humility to confront and resolve our personal darkness. Jung calls this the task of "individuation," a process of integrating with, and transforming our shadow. This work, he says, is of immense political and social importance.

We cannot create a better world without, until we ourselves become psychologically aware within.

Secondarily, fear and ignorance can be banished by education. Schools and communities can offer programs that promote intercultural understanding and appreciation. Multiculturalism and tolerance should be taught beginning in early childhood and continuing through high school.

While it is easy to see the negative—what's wrong and what needs to be done—we need to balance the scales by acknowledging good progress and seeing what's right in people. Our steady evolution toward peace and freedom still progresses by the efforts, both great and small, of many. One example is 9/11. After the attacks, people rallied together to dispel the panic of terrorist propaganda. Throughout the US, communities, schools and churches educated people about Islam, often inviting Muslims to speak about the true tenets of their religion.

America has been described as a melting pot, but I see her as a blending of diverse cultures, where pride for one's heritage has an honored place. Nationalism strengthens and contributes to the larger American community. Patriotism is not blind praise where we close our eyes to our country's serious issues—even corruption in our government. Nor is it constructive to condemn and blame America first for the ills of the world. How can we project hate onto our country and expect her to grow and prosper? Would we get angry with our children because they are having problems? Or would we love them, hold them in high esteem, and help them through their struggles? By the same token, we cannot transform our personal shadow unless we love ourselves enough to face our unacceptable parts. For most of us, real growth happens when we allow ourselves to be vulnerable and to receive loving, non-judgmental support from others. The same principles apply to our country. We need to love America and envision the highest good for her, while squarely facing and resolving her difficulties.

As inscribed on Lady Liberty's pedestal, this nation is intended to be a land of freedom and a refuge. After all, except for Native Americans, we are all descended from immigrants. Emma Lazarus devoted her life to fostering freedom. She envisioned an America as a land where people from every race, religion, and culture could live together harmoniously—respecting the differences that make us all unique. Her inspiration is alive for us today. ■

The New Colossus

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
Glows 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-tossed to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

Emma Lazarus (1849–1887)

A plaque engraved with this poem was mounted in 1903 on the inner wall of the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty.