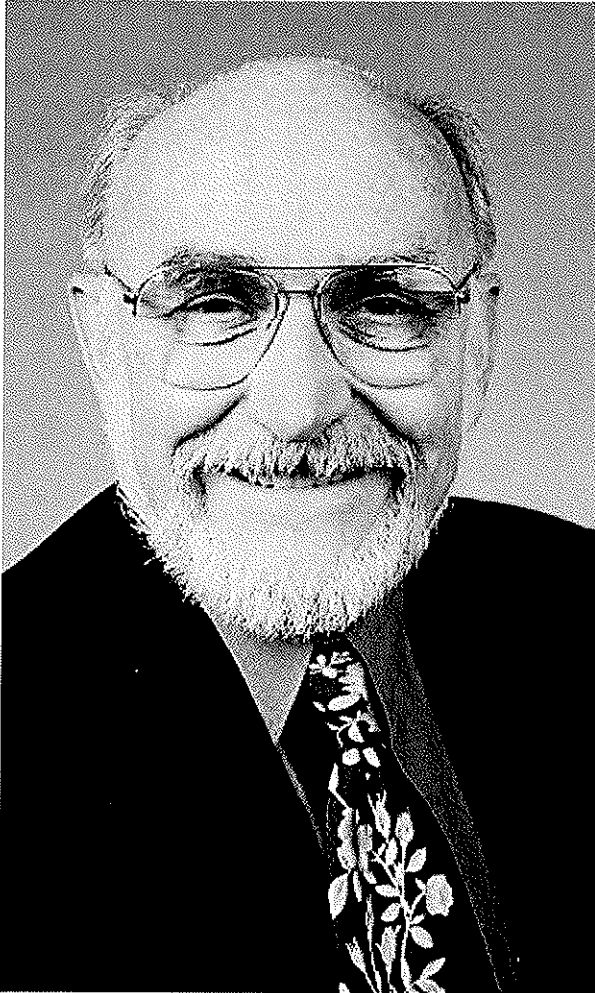


A glass more than half full

Commentary Bill Hall Bill Hall



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One of the most annoying things about elders my age is that we have lived long enough to see humanity rise high and fall low and we can't resist blurting out judgments on whether our unstable species is getting calmer or crazier.

When you look back across three or four generations, you see a changed world. Unfortunately, we in the geriatric portion of the population can't agree on whether

humankind is mellowing or barely clinging to its marginal sanity. Some see the glass half full. Some see it half empty.

Count me in neither column. I see the glass two-thirds full. Over recent decades, we have taken more steps forward than backward.

When the members of my generation were children, the world was lousy with dictators. Democracies were few and far between. Today, democracies are numerous - and beginning to spread.

Today's medicine is a light year ahead of mid-20th century health care.

Poverty persists in many places in the world but there is more international cooperation to minimize it.

Women and racial minorities are achieving a level of equality undreamed of 50 years ago. And most of us, including most white male fathers, brothers, husbands and sons, wouldn't change that for a million bucks.

I saw a dramatic example of our progress last weekend that brought tears to my eyes and to the eyes people all around me. We were attending the Seattle University graduation that included our grandson Kevin and his classmates. But others at the ceremony received even more heartwarming diplomas that Sunday morning.

Seattle U did its considerable best to salve a deep and painful 69-year-old wound. The story began with the Dec. 7, 1941, Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in Hawaii that eradicated most of the U.S. warships in the Pacific fleet, and people were scared.

A few weeks later, an American general called for the imprisonment of Americans of Japanese blood - American citizens. Some scoffed that their nation wouldn't do such a thing. And they assumed President Franklin Roosevelt wouldn't go along with such a zany idea.

But he did, and quickly. He sided with hysteria. A few months after Pearl Harbor, Japanese-Americans on or near the Pacific Coast found themselves removed from their homes and aboard buses taking them to prison camps.

In at least one of those camps in California, the Japanese-Americans, though stunned, responded to the insult with patriotism. They asked their embarrassed guards for permission to celebrate the Fourth of July. Those prisoners of their own country joined together inside the camp and sang The Star-Spangled Banner.

That same year, Seattle University, among other schools, was required by federal edict to eject Japanese-American students so that they might be sent to the camps.

Last week, 69 years later, Seattle University awarded honorary degrees to a dozen of those students, almost all of whom are gone now. But their children - people about my age - were brought forward, wiping their eyes along with most of us there that day, to receive honorary degrees for their parents.

SU President Stephen Sundborg explained: "These individuals, who were our students, were required by federal order to leave our community as a result of the fear, racial hatred and hostility that prevailed in the wake of Pearl Harbor. We honor these former students to recognize their courage and sacrifice, to address the injustice that occurred, and with hope that this recognition contributes to the healing process."

I sat there during that ceremony thinking of a glass two-thirds full - how much less bigotry followed 9/11, the attack by religious extremists on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Oh, there were cranks here and there who came unglued against all Arabs and Muslims, including American-born-and-raised Arabs and Muslims. But most of us knew better and behaved better.

And unlike Franklin Roosevelt, President George W. Bush was reminding the country within hours of the attack that we shouldn't blame Muslims in general.

Last weekend, for good measure, Seattle U gave one of its highest academic honors to a young Muslim woman among today's students.

The world is still a terrible place in many ways, and America still has its smattering of cranks. But if you have witnessed both Pearl Harbor and 9/11, you may see a glass more than half full in a country that has graduated from so many of its hurtful ways.

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