

From Steve Bonham. Derbyshire, England

Dear Joe,

Letter to America

This is kind of strange. Writing a letter to someone I have never met and who will, most probably, never see it. But you inadvertently set me on a journey, and it is now time to look back along the path and wonder where I travelled. I went to look for America...

And I found you are practical dreamers...

Americans came, few at first as optimistic pioneers, many under the long, dark shadow of slavery or servitude, and dreamed of something better. You sharpened your axes, saws and pens, and got to work on it. Free and individual, you bent your backs and tried to make something fine. Perhaps people in the old world find it hard to be practical dreamers. We have for so long been servants.

America's greatest triumph is that it forged such a practical dream from the disparate and distinctive peoples of the world, and this dream as a shared purpose; a sense of uniqueness and a commitment and love for something that transcended this diversity. Peoples did not come 'clean' to this new land. They came from Europe, Africa and Asia, with suitcases, carpetbags, trunks and holdalls of deep beliefs, prejudices, ethnic suspicions and hatreds - a strong sense of a malevolent other. Yet, at its best, America has managed to forge a deep belonging to something more transcendent - a powerful and deep sense of 'Americanness' - something I find profoundly moving.

For me, you are the great experiment in what ordinary folks can do to build a better world. A huge experiment in which a self-reliant, rebelliously-questioning, community-minded people who recognize human contradiction as true authenticity, try to fashion something fine amongst the dark forces within us and without us.

So, if you fail, we all fail.

And there is a dark parallel, not alternative, narrative to this experiment. The 'authentic' human being is capable of terrible things: the genocide

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inflicted upon the Native Americans, the Ku Klux Klan lynchings, the Jim Crow laws and the idea of a wall to keep people out. These all suggest that seeing 'others' as lesser than oneself - and a threat - flourishes in more than the shadows.

It always has been so, but it seems that the world has become absurd or perhaps it's just that the absurdity has risen like a bog gas to the surface. Lying is seen to serve, not destroy. The truth, now, it seems, is what a person wants it to be. This is true in America, but it is as true the world over. I wake each day to be lied to. I am held, as we all are held, in contempt by those in power.

The great act of involvement, which is democracy, based on reasoned argument and open-hearted listening, is no longer cherished and loved. If there is an American Dream, it is a broken one. Abused and angry people wonder why?

But this is our fight, not just yours. As it always was, for the little boy from Bromley Street, Derby, everything in America is the light and dark of all our futures. Do we ask too much of you? There was no golden age of America to be lost, ideals always intermingle in time with failures and flaws. The myth of America deceives in this respect. We have to believe in ourselves, and that fear and selfishness will win the battles but will lose the war.

One of the things I have learned is that opposites strengthen each other. Always. The worst in men brings out the best in men. You make lawmen out of your outlaws.

We are our most humane when we are mindful of the dark side of our own position and the positive of the other. Not to abandon one for the other, but to acknowledge the inherent paradoxes of our human existence, which are irresolvable, and to choose a path through them with as much wisdom as one can muster. It is this that I like to think I have learned from you. The willingness to accept the inevitability of failure and press on. To keep dreaming.

See you down the road.

Steve