

“Timshel”  
The Danville News  
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August 26, 2021  
“Believing in America”  
Word Count: 750

Which is the real America? I’ve never been quite sure. I want to believe it is what I saw the other Sunday coming down into Danville on Route 54. I don’t mean the car crash. I mean the helpers who ran to help the victims. Volunteer fire fighters. The young woman in the pink top along with others who helped navigate traffic into one lane. That’s the America I want to believe it.

I want to believe in the America serenaded by Kris Kristofferson’s song, called “Here’s Comes that Rainbow Again,” based upon an incident in Steinbeck’s The Grapes of Wrath: “The scene was a small roadside café. The waitress was sweepin’ the floor. Two truck drivers drinkin’ their coffee. And two okie kids by the door. How much are them candies, they asked her. How much have you got, she replied. We’ve only a penny between us. Them’s two for a penny, she lied. And the daylight grew heavy with thunder. And the smell of the rain on the wind. Ain’t it just like a human. Here comes that rainbow again. One truck driver called to the waitress. After the kids went outside. Them candies ain’t two for a penny. So what’s it to you, she replied. In silence they finished their coffee. Got up and nodded goodbye. She called, hey, you left too much money. So what’s it to you, they replied.”

Steinbeck loved the Hebrew word, timshel, “Thou Mayest,” a matter of choice.

Waitress and truckers represent the America I want to believe in. It’s the America Irving Berlin believed in when he wrote “God Bless America.” His original name was Israel Beilin. Suffering poverty and persecution in Russia, five year old Israel and family emigrated to America, entering via Ellis Island. From hawking newspapers in the Bowery, he became one of America’s favorite songwriters. Despite the prejudice he experienced growing up as a Jew in America, he felt blessed to be an American. He had a chance here he’d never have received in Czarist Russia or, later, Stalin’s Russia. Likely, he’d be dead. Guess which song was sung on the Capitol steps by harmonious House Representatives and Senators following the attacks of September 11, 2001?

I want to believe in the America where the passengers on Flight 93 fought back, who agreed to sacrifice themselves for unknown others. Sometimes I try to imagine what those seat-belted in their seats felt. Usually, it’s too heart-wrenching to go there.

I want to believe in the America that may not be able to eradicate all drug cartels from profiting on their poison, although we might prevent one friend from trying cocaine or heroin.

I want to believe in the America that may not be able to cure all forms of cancer, although we can support Camp Victory.

I want to believe in the America that may not be able to prevent 22,000 children dying daily from poverty, although we can help friends in Nicaragua invest in water purification projects.

I don’t want to believe in the America that has abandoned fostering the liberation of women in Afghanistan, subjecting them to the choices of the Taliban, although we can support them by treating

girls in our school district with respect and by reminding girls how they don't have to be to themselves un-true and live the lie others want them to live.

I want to believe in an America that takes to conscience Mark Twain's "War Prayer" and comprehends choosing war's consequences, where nobody's innocent.

There have been many moments in my life when America has made it difficult for me to believe in America.

A Bible scholar described the Bible as a friend. Friendship was his way of reconciling the weird and frustrating, the perplexing and ugly aspects of the Old Testament in particular. "As with any good friendship," he explained, "there are commitments that persist amid difficulties." What is a friend? You trust them, they make you better, you can be honest with them and them with you. They have faults. So do you. They can annoy you. So can you. But you stick together even if they let you down, even when you let them down. Saints and sinners. Eros love will have naked bodies, C.S. Lewis quipped, but Philia love, friendship, will have naked personalities, and guess what? They're still your friend, despite, where, avoiding nostalgia's sugar-coating illusions, the best adventures can be, might be still ahead. Timshel.

It's a fair way to describe your country.