Hope & Fear in America, Then & Now:
Lessons from 1919 for Today

The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg
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I would like to invite you on a brief journey to explore some of what it was like to be alive one hundred years ago this year. Why a hundred years? Well, for one thing, it is a nice round number. It is also a long time, while still within living memory for at least a few people. From the most recent update I've seen, **the world's current oldest person, Kane Tanaka from Japan, is 116 years old. She was born in 1903, and was sixteen years old in 1919.**

Now, I don't know that it would always be equally fruitful to look back precisely a century for insights into our current present moment, but the year 1919 was quite a landmark year, with powerful and haunting parallels to today. And if you are curious to learn more, the epic book that first made me aware of just how much happened a century ago is Ann Hagedorn's Savage Peace: Hope and Fear in America, 1919.

To help set the stage, I would like to share with you a quote adapted, edited, and updated from a Roman Catholic Bishop. These words have been regularly coming to mind as I have taken a dive into the world of one century ago, the world of 1919:

> **It helps, now and then,**
> **to lean back and take a long view.**
> We accomplish in our lifetime
> only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise
> that is the sacred work of so many laborers over time.

Nothing we do is complete.

No statement says all that could be said.

No confession brings perfection.

No single program accomplishes our mission.

It may be incomplete,

but it is a beginning,

a step along the way,

an opportunity for the others to pick up the baton

and carry the movement further.

We may never see the end results.

We are

workers, not master builders;

neighbors to one another, not messiahs.

We plant the seeds that one day will grow.

We water seeds already planted,

We lay foundations that will need further development.

We cannot do everything,

and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.

This enables us to do something,

and to do it very well. (National Catholic Reporter, *edited*)

In the great river of the universe and time, this quote about the value of pausing periodically to take the long view always helps to put my immediate struggles in a larger context and remind me to focus on what I can do to shape my piece of the puzzle within this mysterious existence in which we find ourselves.

So as we begin our brief journey through the year 1919, one of the striking resonances to our world today is that both then and now, we find a longing today in our country for more *normalcy* and *stability* in our everyday lives. Indeed, the word "normalcy" was beginning to grow in popularity a century ago. In 1919, strict adherents to "proper" grammar criticized the word normalcy "as a clumsy neologism, but that only made it more popular."

In early 1919, people were longing for normalcy because World War I had ended only recently, just a few months earlier, on November 11, Armistice Day—often poetically rendered as happening on the "eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month" of 1918. Although peace had officially arrived, the impact of the war continued to reverberate.

William Butler Years (1865-1939) encapsulated this longing for normalcy in the opening line of his poem titled Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen: **"Many ingenious lovely things are gone."** How powerfully that line still resonates today.

In that same year of 1919, Yeats also penned perhaps one of his most famous poems, "The Second Coming." Its opening stanza could also be describing 2019 equally as much as its intended description of the world a century ago:

> Turning and turning in the widening gyre
> The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
> Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
> The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
> **The ceremony of innocence is drowned;**
> **The best lack all conviction, while the worst**
> **Are full of passionate intensity.**

Here in the twenty-first century, there is some good news that over the past few years increasing numbers of people among us have been getting back in touch with our conviction and focus; but there remains much work to do.

For now, as we continue our visit to 1919, there is so much I'd like to tell you:

- I was surprised to learn, for example, that the most popular holiday gift that year was the Ouija Board (417-418)!
- In sports, it was the year that Babe Ruth was traded to the Yankees. In return, it is said, the Red Sox received the "Curse of the Bambino," causing them not win another World Series until 2004, eight-five years later.
- 1919 was also the year that the requisite number of states ratified the Eighteenth Amendment prohibiting the "manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors." Prohibition lasted for more than a decade until 1933, when it was repealed

by the Twenty-first Amendment. (The prohibition period is a fascinating reminder that massive social change can also be overturned.)

- Throughout most of 1919, there also continued to be significant numbers of deaths from the Spanish flu. In total during the course of the pandemic, "In the U.S., about 28% of the population became infected, and 500,000 to 675,000 died."

There is a lot to discuss even about these few points, but so much happened in 1919 that I haven't even gotten to any of the four angles I will briefly expand on.

The first angle I want to invite us to reflect on further is *transportation*. When I was first orienting myself to the world of 1919, I was reminded of a piece of history I had forgotten: the controversy when President Woodrow Wilson sailed to Europe for the post-World War I peace conference. Before that trip, **"no U.S. president had ever left the county while in office"** (9). Part of the reason why, of course, is that reaching Europe took two weeks each way by boat in 1919. While the Wright Brothers had already achieved takeoff sixteen years earlier in 1903, it would be another eight years before Charles Lindbergh would make "the first transatlantic flight between two major city hubs" in 1927. Worldwide travel has now become so routine that looking back only a hundred years can remind us of how much technology can change our lives and the world in a century. And similarly seismic changes are quite likely in store for the years ahead of us today. Looking backward reminds us that the way things are is not the way they will always be.

The second angle I want to invite us to focus on is women's equality. In 1919, both houses of Congress passed the Nineteenth Amendment: "The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex." I don't want to dive too deeply into this event today because we will revisit this period in August for the 100th anniversary of the official adoption of the Nineteenth Amendment after it was ratified by the states. I do, however, think it is worth regularly reminding ourselves that **women—in many cases only *white* women—have only had the right to vote in this country for less than a century.**

For now, I'll limit myself to sharing with you my favorite story from a century ago about smashing the patriarchy. In 1919, the American physician and research scientist

Alice Hamilton (1869-1970) became the first female faculty member at Harvard University. Harvard had not planned to hire a woman, but in their search for “the world’s leading expert on industrial toxicology,” it became clear that there was no one even close to being as qualified as Alice Hamilton.

The good news is that they hired her. The bad new is that her contract required her to “stay away from football games, the faculty club, and commencement.” When another person who did major fundraising for Harvard tried to also stop her from doing any public speaking, she responded: **“I’m afraid I cannot write you what I know you wish to hear from me.**” Her conscience would not allow her to stay silent, when she knew that sharing her work in industrial toxicology could save lives, especially the lives of children. She kept speaking out, and she remained a Harvard professor until her retirement in 1935 at the age of sixty-five. I should add that she lived many more decades—another thirty-five years!—until 1970. She too made it more than a century, dying at the age of 101.

The year 1919 was also a turning point in the struggle for racial justice in this country, planting many seeds that came to fruition decades later in the Civil Rights Movement. A century ago, many African-Americans soldiers in the U.S. Armed Forces were returning home from fighting overseas “to make the world safe for democracy,” and they found themselves rightly incensed at the lack of democracy and equality at home (103). In the words of W. E. B. Du Bois, **“We return from fighting. We return fighting. Make way for Democracy! We saved it in France, and…we will save it in the United States of America…**” (191).

Indeed, on Armistice Day itself, when the world was celebrating peace, a black man named William Byrd was lynched in northern Alabama. He was the “fifty-first black man on record to by lynched that year—in addition to three black women” (12-13). In our focal year of 1919, it got worse during a period known as the Red Summer, which included

> hundreds of deaths across the United States, as the result of white supremacist terrorist attacks that occurred in more than three dozen cities….. The highest number of fatalities occurred in the rural area

around Elaine, Arkansas, where an estimated 200 black people, and five white people, were killed.

Although the U.S. House of Representatives passed a bill to make lynching a federal crime three years later in 1922, none of the eventual sixteen anti-lynching bills that passed the House made it out of committee in the Senate. It was not until 2005 (a mere fourteen years ago) that the U.S. Senate finally got around to issuing a resolution "apologizing to the victims of lynchings for its decades of shameful inaction" (426 - 427).

As we explored last week in "How To Be an Antiracist," much work remains to be done to bring about greater racial equity in our country, but keep in mind how those vital seeds were planted in 1919—that if we can fight for and experience racial equality overseas, we must demand it here in our own country as well.

The fourth and final angle I would like to share with you is also about how important protest can be in the long run even if in the moment you feel like a voice crying in the wilderness. Toward the end of World War I, Congress passed the Sedition Act to **suppress dissent to the war with heavy fines and years of jail time for "discouragement of recruiting" or "utterances of 'disloyal or abusive language' about the government, the conduct of the war, the Constitution, even the flag or uniform"** (511). In March 1919, our Unitarian forbear, the Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. wrote an opinion in support of the Sedition Act. Holmes's words in *Schenck v. United States* include some of history's most famous words *against* free speech, and the eight other justices concurred, making the opinion unanimous. And a significant number of people were harmed as a result of the Sedition Act and the Supreme Court's refusal to support free speech. But that is not the end of the story.

Over the next few months in discussions with friends and colleagues, Holmes's mind was changed. (It also made a difference that we were no longer in the middle of the fevered pitch of war.) And in November 1919—approximately eight months after his previous decision—he wrote a dissent in *Abrams v. United States* in defense of free speech, and was joined by his fellow justice Louis Brandeis. A Supreme Court that only months earlier had been unanimously in defense of the Sedition Act suddenly had two dissenters. At the time, they were voices crying in the wilderness. But when we lean

back and take the long view, we know that **that dissenting opinion—a loser at the time—would come to "chart the legal course for free speech in America" and become one of the "most quoted justifications for freedom of expression in the English-speaking world"** (Hagedorn 397).

Today you may feel sometimes that you are a voice crying in the wilderness against the powers that be. You may have been on the losing end of some votes, but if you are on the side of the just, the true, and the right, registering your dissent can have powerful reverberations when you take the long view. Your small dissent—*our* small dissent— can sometimes snowball into an avalanche of change. As a Mexican proverb says, **"When they tried to bury us, they didn't know we were seeds!"** Or as Seamus Heaney wrote in The Cure at Troy, his poem in tribute to Nelson Mandela:

History says, Don't hope
On this side of the grave,
But then, once in a lifetime
The longed-for tidal wave
Of justice can rise up
And hope and history rhyme.

Here in the year 2019, we are divided in many ways as a nation, and there is much talk of building walls. But let us continue to look for the ways we can build *bridges* across differences. We may not be able to build those bridges today. But where are the places within your spheres of influence where you can register your *dissent* for the way things are, where you can plant a seed of change (of how things might be) that one day—in the long view—you may find unexpectedly that a bridge has been built, and that the longed for change has come.