

Great Expectations

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After a long year of divisive, partisan gridlock in Washington, conventional wisdom might steer us toward caution and skepticism in assessing the prospects for the new 114th Congress. And with difficult, contentious issues before us, it feels like a mighty steep uphill climb. The record low voter turnout in last November's midterm election certainly reflects the disillusionment and frustration of the American public with congressional inaction.

But perhaps we are the very ones contributing to the reality we see. What if we let go of our skepticism and replaced it with great expectation? What if, instead of the lowest common denominator, we held our elected officials to the highest level of cooperation and collaboration? What if we committed ourselves to restoring our capacity for moral imagination and a courageous hopefulness about our future? What if, instead of erring on the side of caution, we erred on the side of courage?

We can choose disillusionment and skepticism, or we can choose to recommit ourselves to finding our voices, engaging the hard conversations and listening to the voices of others in moving the public dialogue forward in every small, important way on the challenges that face our nation and our world.

In a recent Senate hearing before the Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights and Human Rights, Sen. Dick Durbin spoke of moving from "lamentation to legislation" in response to racial bias in the criminal justice system. It is possible to do both, with a vision that stretches through and with the losses to meaningful change.

That is not the idealist in me talking. It is the part of me that knows no single thing we do brings about change, and that's not a reason not to do it. It is

the part of me that knows that sometimes what we need to do is show up, whenever we can, in all the ways that we can.

The recently released motion picture *Selma*, depicting the struggle to establish the Voting Rights Act of 1965, reminds us that the work of justice doesn't come without disappointment, heartache, loss and setbacks. As we mark the 50th anniversary of the Voting Rights Act in 2015, we can lament the setbacks in voting rights in the form of restrictive voting laws and the 2013 Supreme Court decision eroding a key provision of the Voting Rights Act. And we can recommit ourselves to the vision and work to advance voting rights in 2015.

I recently came across a weblog written by Thomas Engelhardt on hope in difficult times, in which he refers to the work of writer and activist Rebecca Solnit:

“Activism,” Solnit writes, “is not a journey to the corner store; it is a plunge into the dark.” Exactly. And history, she adds, “is like weather, not like checkers. A game of checkers ends. The weather never does.” At the end of the game, she might have added, it's so simple. You tote up the score ... close up the board, and go to something else. At a pause in history, as at present, if you tote up the score, close up the board, and go home, you're making a disastrous mistake.

It's not “game over” for the arc of the universe that bends toward justice.

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