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All Hallows and the American spiritual journey

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Today is All Hallows, an observance largely obscured in American culture by Halloween. We have turned the eve into a playful celebration of ghosts and goblins, frightening creatures emerging from the darkness, and a little licensed mischief before morning comes.

But All Hallows invites almost the opposite image. Instead of imagining the troublesome dead rising among us, we remember the good dead — the people upon whose shoulders we stand. They, our saints, remind us of what human beings can become and of what one generation can leave to another.

That perspective seems especially useful at this moment in our national life. America is deeply divided, but disagreement itself is not new. We fought a civil war. We endured bitter struggles over immigration, labor, race, civil rights, war, and the proper role of government. What may be more troubling today is uncertainty about the qualities we should admire. What do we want from our leaders? What kind of people do we want them to encourage us to become? And, beneath all the arguments over policies and personalities, what do we believe makes a good society?

Some of our most revered leaders answered those questions by asking Americans to rise above themselves. After a terrible civil war. Abraham Lincoln did not call for humiliation of the defeated. He asked Americans to bind up the nation's wounds and move on "with malice toward none." Franklin Roosevelt, confronting depression and World War, envisioned freedoms that included freedom from want and freedom from fear. Dwight Eisenhower, a soldier and president, warned as he left office that America's greatness depended not merely on wealth and military strength but on how it used power for peace and human betterment. Martin Luther King Jr. challenged Americans to imagine something more demanding than defeating an adversary: a society in which former adversaries could ultimately live together.

These American leaders were very different people. They made mistakes, lived within the limitations of their times, and disagreed profoundly about many things. We need not turn them into saints. Their greatness lies in the direction they pointed. They called people beyond fear, resentment, and narrow self-interest toward a larger conception of the common good.

This gives us a standard for judging leadership today. Leaders do more than govern: they teach. Through what they praise, ridicule, reward, excuse, and condemn, they model what kind of people Americans may become.

Our society therefore has reason to be wary when dominance itself becomes a virtue; when opponents become enemies rather than fellow citizens; when outsiders are described as less worthy of sympathy; when loyalty to a person or faction becomes more important than competence or truth; when wealth becomes evidence of merit and vulnerability evidence of failure. The danger is larger than any particular policy. Whatever we accept, we teach ourselves and our children to admire.

Yet it is too easy to place all the responsibility on leaders. They cannot lead us very far in directions we are wholly unwilling to travel. Perhaps that is the challenge of America's present spiritual journey. When appeals to grievance, fear, superiority, wealth, or vengeance find a receptive audience, we must ask not only what has happened to our leaders but what has happened to us. What hunger are those appeals feeding? What have we come to fear? What have we stopped believing we owe to one another?

These ominous questions may be what the good dead can offer us on All Hallows. Our "saints" cannot tell us how to vote or settle the disputes of our time. Nor should we pretend that they lived in some more noble age. Their times were filled with injustice, prejudice, violence, and political rancor too.

Yet across the years, the best among them still speak. They remind us that leadership should call us to generosity instead of resentment, courage instead of fear, reconciliation instead of vengeance, and a common good greater than personal advantage. Each generation receives a country it did not create and leaves one it will not live to see. For a little while, its soul is ours to steward.

Perhaps the spiritual question of our time is simply this: What will we leave for those who come after us to stand upon?

Richmond Shreve is a regular contributor to From a Faith Perspective, a weekly column written by members of the Bucks County faith community.