

**A Letter to the Voters
in the American Election of 2020**



**From John Slade
and the Founding Fathers**

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in the American Election of 2020

John Slade

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When the Founding Fathers wrote
“We the People”,
they meant it.

The American Election of 2020

From the very beginning, we brought our sense of superiority with us. And from the very beginning, we brought our perceived right to use our muskets against anyone who stood in our way. We murdered our way from sea to shining sea. We slaughtered the buffalo as well, almost to extinction. We purchased our first slaves in 1619—Dutch traders sold their African cargo to the early settlers of Jamestown, Virginia—one year before the Pilgrims landed in 1620. Our unrelenting sense of superiority enabled us to see nothing wrong in our massive crimes against the peoples of two continents. Equally horrific, our sense of superiority enabled us to *continue* our brutality for the next four hundred years. From killing the “savages” in the forests of the New World, to killing the “gooks” in the jungles of Vietnam, and the “rag-heads” of Iraq—no longer with muskets but with the same self-righteous brutality—we have remained remarkably unchanged as we pursue “the American dream”.

And yet, in 1776, a group of well-educated Americans designed a new nation based on the principle that “All men are created equal”. An army of farmers and shopkeepers and carpenters and shoemakers, led by a wealthy general who genuinely believed in the equality of his soldiers, fought for eight and a half years against the most powerful army and navy in the world . . . and they prevailed. When General Washington met with the other Founding Fathers in 1787 to write the Constitution which would guide this new nation, he and his colleagues signed their names to the sacred document which began with the unprecedented words, “We the People”.

The African slaves, of course, were not included as the People. Nor were the remnants of the original people from whom we stole the land. Although white women were neither whipped nor shot, they could not vote, nor could they hold office, and thus their voices were severely muted.

A portion of the American population, primarily in the southern states, was so committed to an economy based on slavery that they were willing to fight a war to preserve that evil institution. In January of 1863, President Lincoln, seeking to correct the lingering flaw in the Constitution, signed the Emancipation Proclamation, granting freedom to the slaves. For his wisdom and his compassion, he was murdered. And the deep poison of racism remains with us today.

Thomas Jefferson once wrote, “Widespread poverty and concentrated wealth cannot long endure side by side in a democracy”. If we look at our America today, we

see a nation guided by high ideals, but also a nation hobbled, crippled and shackled by ancient evils. Our multitude of sins—the poverty, the plundering, the pollution, the racism, and the wars—cannot go on forever. As we are marching steadily toward the tipping points of climate catastrophe, so we are marching steadily toward the tipping points of economic catastrophe, social catastrophe, and moral catastrophe. We will never survive in a world devastated by climate chaos if we continue to fight our wars, large and small, with each other.

We have a choice. We can choose to live according to the spirit of those sacred American documents, or we can continue to fire our muskets in schools across America and in countries around the world. We can invite the sun and the wind into classrooms around the planet, so that *together* we can build a clean and prosperous future, or we can continue to release increasing amounts of carbon dioxide and methane into our already poisoned atmosphere . . . until global drought causes the abrupt collapse of agriculture.

The American election in November of 2020 will determine far more than whether the new president shall be Republican or Democrat. It will determine far more than which party dominates House of Representatives and which party dominates the Senate. It will determine far more than whether the oil industry will continue to receive massive subsidies so that the Oil Boys can drill for another decade, even in the Arctic.

The American election in November of 2020 *must* determine whether we move beyond our crippling racism and greed and violence . . . or whether we continue our march toward self-inflicted suicide on a global scale.

I hear the voices of determined women. I hear the voices of determined young people. I hear the voices of determined African Americans, of determined Native Americans, of determined immigrants who bring their deep belief in human equality, human talent, and human progress.

The American election in November of 2020 *must* be a transcendent moment in history—equal to 1776, equal to 1787, equal to 1863—when we outgrow our arrogance, when we mature beyond our fears, when we lay down our muskets, when we honor both the bountiful land and the planet herself . . . and truly become citizens worthy of the gifts that we were given 244 years ago.

Yes, at this critical point in our long human journey, we have a choice. We can add another billion dollars to our military budget, or we can muster the courage to turn

away from all the ancient grievances, as well as our crippling greed . . . and look instead toward a future in which we work together—all of the peoples and all of the cultures of our troubled world—to build a clean energy grid which brings the power of the sun and the power of the wind to every child on the planet—equally.

Benjamin Franklin was a newspaper publisher in Philadelphia, an ambassador representing the thirteen colonies in London, a statesman helping to draft the sacred documents in Philadelphia, and . . . a scientist fascinated by the nature and power of electricity. Were Franklin to return to our foundering nation today, and were he to learn that scientists are scorned, and that the ingenious machines which produce clean electricity are treated with contempt—while the coal and oil which poison the world receive massive federal subsidies—Franklin might well stand face to face with the Orange Powder-Puff and engage him in a public and vehement debate.

We might do well to go back to the tumultuous decade *before* that morning in April of 1775, when “the shot heard around the world” was fired on Lexington Green, so that we can understand *why* that shot was fired. We might do well to go back to the weeks in June of 1776, when Thomas Jefferson, a man of extensive learning as well as a man with a felicitous pen, labored in his rented room in Philadelphia to define and to proclaim the *spirit* of this new America. We might do well to go back to the weeks in July of 1776, when this radical Declaration of Independence was read to the troops in General Washington’s Army, mustered in a grassy park beside the Broad Way near the southern tip of Manhattan Island, so that the soldiers could understand with absolute clarity *why* they were fighting this war. We might do well to go back to the day in July when the Declaration was read in Boston to the citizens of this new nation—Abigail Adams and her son John Quincy were in the crowd—so that the citizens could understand with absolute clarity what sort of citizens they now were.

We might do well to go back to that winter of 1777 and 1778, when the troops were starving in Valley Forge . . . and when nine percent of the troops, one out of every eleven soldiers, were African American.

We might do well to go back to that winter of 1778 in Valley Forge, when Native Americans from the Oneida Tribe of central New York State arrived with wagons loaded with corn and squash and beans. The Oneida warriors joined the French Marquis de Lafayette, one of General Washington’s most trusted officers, in raids on the British who were comfortably sequestered in Philadelphia.

Yes, we might well go back to the eight and a half years of that endless war, when troops marched from Boston to New York, and ultimately all the way south to

Yorktown, Virginia . . . and when the women were marching with them, cooking, patching up ragged uniforms, and carrying buckets of water onto the battlefield so the soldiers could douse their cannons.

We might well go back to the final years of that long and brutal war, to the time when the French Army joined Washington's Army with their fresh soldiers and shiny artillery. And to the time when the French Navy—a fleet of warships which had sailed up from the Caribbean to Chesapeake Bay—blasted a fleet of British warships and sent them sailing back to New York, then blockaded the mouth of Chesapeake Bay so that the American troops and the French troops could fight and win the final battle against the British trapped in Yorktown, in October of 1781.

The American election of 2020—four hundred years after the landing of the pilgrims at Plymouth—must be a transcendent moment in history, because, otherwise, the tipping points—climate tipping points, economic tipping points, and moral tipping points—will alter the fundamental nature of our planet, and will condemn the frantic rabble struggling to survive . . . to centuries of chaos.

George and Martha, John and Abigail, Tom and Ben and James and Samuel, and the thousands of farmers and shopkeepers and carpenters and shoemakers who marched from Boston to Yorktown, are keeping a sharp eye on us.

Perhaps Ben said it best. He was asked by a newspaper reporter, in September of 1787, as the fifty-five delegates to the Constitutional Convention emerged from Independence Hall after four months of deliberations, “What have you wrought?”

Franklin replied, “A Republic, if you can keep it.”

* * * * *

California Girl

She played the cello. We were students together at a university in California, class of 1969, during the tumultuous years of the anti-war movement. She was never my girlfriend, because, though I proudly stood at six feet, she was taller than me. Tall and slender, with long blond hair, and with the most vibrant personality I had ever encountered in my life . . . she wasn't interested in settling down with a boyfriend.

Because she played the cello.

We were both pre-medical students, taking four years of endless classes in organic chemistry, vertebrate embryology, and statistical analysis (without ever once visiting a health facility, without ever once speaking with a doctor or a patient), and so we became good friends slogging our way from exam to exam. Sometimes we were lab partners, setting up our titration apparatus with glass beakers and a glass stop-cock, hoping that our potassium permanganate, a deep purple aqueous solution made from black crystals, KMnO_4 , would turn clear as we added, drop by drop, oxalic acid as the reduction agent.

Of course, a friendship in a chemistry lab can go only so far. But that was all right. I had grown up in the corn fields of Illinois, and Mary was from a town on the California coast near San Diego. Just to be her lab partner, sharing our drop by drop measurements, was enough to brighten my entire week.

We both had a second major, because—during that epoch of anti-war marches, the Civil Rights Movement, Women's Liberation, Black Power, the American Indian Movement, and Chicano Power—learning about the molecular structure of benzene rings just wasn't enough to prepare us for a lifetime of building a better world.

I majored in history, while I lived through an unprecedented era in American history. Mary majored in music. She played her cello in the university orchestra. I never missed a concert, always sat in the front row where the sound of her cello, especially when she went down into the deep registers, rumbled against my chest.

Sometimes, on a Saturday evening, a group of friends would gather in the big social room at the dormitory where Mary lived. Some of us brought six-packs of beer to pass around, and some brought a few neatly rolled joints to pass around. As a small-town boy from the farm country of Illinois, I stuck with a beer. One beer was usually enough. While we listened to Janis Joplin singing "Me and Bobby McGee"—the music boomed from big speakers at one end of the room—we grooved on the growing intensity in the singer's voice.

Then one evening, Mary brought her cello out from her dormitory room. She told us to form our chairs into a horseshoe, facing the chair where she sat tuning her four strings. I had just finished a bottle of beer and was wondering if maybe I might pop open a second . . . when Mary's roommate, Eileen, handed me a joint, already lit.

She told me, "Take a puff and pass it on."

And so I did. I didn't cough, I didn't choke, and I held my breath for a good long time. Mary was playing the notes up and down an octave; I watched her fingers working on the strings.

I looked to my left, ready to pass the joint, but Robert was talking with Eugene, so I hyperventilated, as I had watched people do—taking in several deep breaths to fill my blood with oxygen—then I took a second puff from the joint that glowed with a bright orange tip, and held my breath as if I were swimming underwater for as long as I could.

"Hey, Bogie, you gonna hog that joint all night?"

I looked at Robert and smiled as I handed him the joint.

He went back to talking with Eugene.

So I turned my attention to Mary, who was now, as the room grew quiet, playing the opening strains of "Me and Bobby McGee".

I knew the words. I had learned them in California. I would never have done such a thing back in Illinois.

"Busted flat in Baton Rouge, waitin' for a train,
And I's feelin' near as faded as my jeans,
Bobby thumbed a diesel down, just before it rained,
It rode us all the way to New Orleans."

Mary played the music very clearly, as if she were playing from the original score. But when she launched into the second verse, she began to improvise, stretching out some of the notes, playing with a certain subtle emphasis, so that the line, "Windshield wipers slappin' time, I was holdin' Bobby's hand in mine", was not just music, but a voice calling out from deep inside that cello.

That's when I discovered the difference between a cello playing Vivaldi, which I had heard during Mary's university orchestra concerts, and a cello which was now singing, speaking, wailing, as Mary's voice. She wore a blue denim blouse without sleeves, so that we could watch her arms as she ran one hand up and down the strings

while she swept the bow back and forth in a way that I had never before seen anyone play an instrument. She wore blue jeans and sneakers; her long legs hugged the reddish-brown cello while she leaned and swayed, now down in the deep lower registers as she told us, “Freedom’s just another word for nothin’ left to lose . . .” battering my heart for the first time—for the first time—with the word “Freedom.”

I wasn’t listening to the music. I was *in* the music. “From the Kentucky coal mine to the California sun” . . . Yes, I was in the California sun. I had fought with my father to get out of that stagnant shit hole back home where he filled the house with non-stop TV football and Gunsmoke and Have Gun, Will Travel, and all the rest of the unrelenting crap . . . and I had gotten myself out to California where I could sit among friends with tears running down my cheeks while I listened to Mary making me feel truly alive.

She must have played for a full twenty minutes, maybe half an hour, sweeping her bow so gently, playing so quietly, that her song became a prayer. She lifted us up into the highest registers, as if she were singing down to us from the stars. Then she descended through waves of rising and falling music, as if we stood beside the sea, to the lower registers, where her cello ached with longing, “One day up near Salinas, I let him slip away.”

Now she played more and more quietly, and we knew that her heart had told us all she wanted us to know. She drew out one long deep note with trembling vibrato. Then she lifted her bow from the strings and raised her face to look at us—her long blond hair covered one eye and her cheek—and she smiled as we gently, quietly, and so gratefully applauded.

In April of 1968, we learned—as if someone had cracked a whip in our souls—that Martin Luther King had been killed in Memphis, Tennessee. I had been a high school junior when we learned—I was sitting in chemistry class when our principal spoke to us from the speakers in the ceiling of the classroom—that President Kennedy had been shot. Now I was a junior in college when we learned—I was in the library that late afternoon when the news spread around the building—that Martin Luther King, who had taught us about non-violence, had been shot.

Although most classes were cancelled at the university the following day—a day of national mourning—our chemistry teacher insisted on holding class, during which he reviewed inorganic molecules in preparation for an exam which he refused to postpone. I attended class; Mary did not.

That evening in the university chapel, the Black students held a memorial service. They spoke, some with barely controlled anger, some with grief that strangled their words. A choir filled the packed church with the spirituals which had kept their people going through centuries of brutal repression.

They took turns—man, and woman, and man, and woman—reading the words of Martin Luther King, as he had spoken them from the pulpit of a church, as he had spoken them to a vast crowd in Washington, D.C. in August of 1963, when he told his nation, his *American* nation, that he had a dream.

And then . . . one white woman, the only white person invited to be a part of this memorial service, walked onto the stage at the front of the church with her cello. She wore a long black dress, and her blond hair was tied back with a black ribbon. She sat in a chair with a spotlight on her; everything else behind her was dark.

She played a hymn, an old Negro spiritual, to which I did not know the words. She played it through the first time as if she were playing from the score, with measured beats and a reverent tone. I could hear someone behind me in the church singing the hymn as Mary played.

And then . . . she played through the hymn again, stretching out the notes, playing with a vibrato that came from her trembling heart, rising up with a sudden crescendo like a cry to heaven . . . seeking comfort, seeking understanding, seeking justice.

She played through that old hymn five or six times—I didn't count—taking us down into the deep registers where she poured out our grief, our fierce, bewildered, unrelenting grief. She played, twice, two beats, two beats, and one prolonged note, so that we heard, unmistakably, the cello saying his name, Martin . . . Luther . . . King.

And then she brought us up into the middle register and gave us comfort, gave us courage, told us to be proud of the man who had walked with us on the ugly streets of America. She told us to be proud of the man who had taught us to reach inside and find the *best* of who we were. She told us to be proud of the man who had never lost his faith in America, and who had never lost his faith in *us*.

And then . . . I will never forget this moment . . . Mary played on her cello a deep, tender Amen. And then another Amen. She played through perhaps a dozen Amens, each one different, some of them more elaborate, some in a minor key, leading toward one final Amen that bestowed upon us . . . peace in our hearts.

The spotlight vanished. The stage was black.

When the lights came up in the church, Mary was gone.

* * * * *

I am seventy-one years old now. Mary attended her medical school in San Francisco, while I attended medical school in Boston. She became an obstetrician, bringing newborn life into the world. I became a dermatologist, specializing in conditions of the skin. She pursued her career and raised her family in California, while I, who fell in love with a medical student from Aberdeen, have pursued my career and raised our family in Scotland.

Mary and I have always sent Christmas cards to each other, with pictures of our growing families. One year, she sent to me a CD which she had made with a California orchestra, playing Dvořák's cello concerto. She wrote that she had taken a one-month leave of absence from her duties at the hospital to prepare for the concert. On the afternoon of that Christmas Day in Aberdeen, my wife and I, joined by our teenage son and daughter, sat together in our living room and watched on the television screen this woman who had been my friend at the university in California.

Both the filming and the recording on the CD were excellent, clearly done by a professional crew. When Mary came out on the stage and bowed to the audience, I saw that her hair was much shorter, and that her face had matured. But her blue dress was sleeveless, so that we could see her arms as she sat in a chair and cradled the cello . . . then held her bow, poised.

When she attacked that opening passage with such skill and passion, I realized what an extraordinary gift I had been given, way back when I was a green kid from the corn fields of Illinois.

At some point, when tears were running down my cheeks, my wife Heather touched my wet cheek with her fingertips and told me, "It's all right if you love her a little bit. I would too."

And then this morning, on Tuesday, November 20, 2018, I received an email from Mary's brother that she had died in one of the wildfires that had been raging across northern California. She had been at the hospital helping to evacuate patients, then instead of following the convoy, she had returned home to fetch her two dogs, and no doubt her cello. She spoke with both her brother and her husband on the phone, assuring them that she was fine, she was home, the fire was still some distance away, and that she would phone them again from wherever she would be spending the night.

Then she phoned her husband again—he was on a business trip in Chicago—during the last few frantic minutes when the fire had suddenly appeared, raging through the town, and she knew that she and the dogs were trapped.

Her brother wrote that I had always been “a special friend of Mary’s”, and so he wanted me to know.

I printed the email and showed it to Heather. I couldn’t talk.

Yes, I wondered why the authorities had not evacuated the town much sooner. But then I began to wonder why the authorities, why *all* of us, had not responded to this monster called climate change much sooner. No physician would ever let his patient—as sick as our Earth was sick—continue to deteriorate without emergency medical care. No ship captain would continue to sail his vessel toward a rocky coast, *knowing* that those rocks were there.

And yet we knowingly and willfully continued to live our lives as if this unprecedented monster was still some safe distance away.

Had her husband heard her screams over the telephone at the end? Had he heard the shrieking of the dogs?

I found myself wondering, as a skin doctor, whether she had died of suffocation from smoke, or whether she had burned alive, the most hideous of deaths.

Her cello, of course, would be nothing but ashes.

And I began to think, during the course of this long black day—I am still up now, with Heather, wearing our coats out in the yard on a cold but starry November night in Scotland—about the forty years during which a growing number of scientists had tried to warn us. About the well-funded lies from the oil industry. About the inexcusable public apathy. About a president who seemed utterly determined to lead us to our final destruction.

Yes, and I thought about the indigenous peoples in their rainforest in Brazil, trying somehow to reach, with their tiny voices, the seven billion people on the planet who steadily ignored them.

Who will play a requiem for Mary?

Who will play a requiem for those newborn infants which her skilled hands had brought into the world . . . as they struggle to survive on a dying Earth?

And whatever happened to the spirit of California? How did we evolve from that generation of high spirited visionaries . . . to a world filled with walking cadavers staring down at their tiny telephone screens?

We killed John and Martin and Bobby, voted into office a succession of war profiteers, then guaranteed our own demise by handing the reins of power to a man who would make General Washington spit.

Yes, I had watched it all from Scotland, glad, deeply glad, that my son and my daughter could grow up in a land that wanted no part of all that American violence and hatred. Scotland had become a world leader in the field of clean energy, with the first array of floating wind turbines off its northern coast. Both my daughter and my son now work in the clean energy industry, she as an electrical engineer, he as a marine architect. They are the fulfillment of my California dream for a better world.

But what sort of world will *their* children inherit? The wildfires of California will soon be raging around the entire fevered planet.

I look up at the stars and remember when Mary played so gently in the highest register of her cello, as if she were casting down upon us sprinkles of stardust.

Amen. Amen.

* * * * *