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'One Small Candle of Truth...Dispels a Lot of Darkness'

By Rick Brunson
UCF Forum columnist
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America the Beautiful.

The words punch the elevator button in our memory, and trolley up freighted meanings and classroom images from our innocent years in fourth grade.

For the spacious skies of Montana.

Amber waves of grain, swirling and roiling across an ocean of Kansas wheat fields.

Purple mountain majesties reigning over Colorado.

The fruited plain of Napa Valley, seeping into our consciousness like a sepia-toned National Geographic photograph.

From sea to shining sea – sunrises in Kennebunk, Maine, to sunsets in Monterey Bay, Calif.

But you really don't have to go that far to see America the Beautiful.

I saw it just a short walk from my campus office on the night of Sept. 3.

As daylight yielded to darkness, about 400 UCF students, faculty and staff gathered around the university's Reflecting Pond, lit candles and refused to let the darkness win.

We were there to pay our respects to Steven Sotloff – a fellow UCF Knight and an American journalist who only days before had been brutally and mercilessly beheaded by the hooded cowards of ISIS.

We were there to not only honor his life and his work, but also the central principle that his life and work stood for.

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

To me, the tumbler keyword that has always unlocked the First Amendment’s power and made it work in our favor as a nation is the word “respecting.” The respectful way we relate to religion and religious differences is what makes America truly beautiful. Yes, our history and present are tattered and checkered with moments in which we did not live up to our American creed. But by and large, we are predisposed – culturally and constitutionally – to respect the rights of minorities and those who worship differently. And that beauty was on full display that night at the Reflecting Pond.

God’s grace was shed on us as a Jew and a Muslim respectfully shared the same stage and the same microphone to pay their respects to Sotloff’s life.

Rabbi Chaim Lipskier read from the Torah, the Jewish holy scriptures, and urged his listeners to light their world. “The soul of man is the flame of God,” Lipskier said, quoting Proverbs 20:27. “Every single human being is a candle. Our job is to be that candle and to light our candle. One small candle of truth, of loving kindness, of integrity, of selflessness dispels a lot of darkness.”

As the rabbi’s words rolled across the Reflecting Pond into the night, carried by a gentle September breeze, Jaber Nyrabeah of the Syrian American Council in Orlando stood near him, listening intently and respectfully. He didn’t fidget. He didn’t scowl. He didn’t visibly bristle – even as a man from another faith read from a holy book different from his own.

When it was his turn, this proud and defiant Muslim lit his own candle and held it up to ISIS’ darkness.

“ISIS, which claims to be an Islamic state has nothing to do with Islam,” Nyrabeah said passionately. “In fact, they should be called the UnIslamic State of Iraq and Syria. They are trying with all their power to hijack my religion and my revolution, and they must be stopped.”

It is these moments that make America beautiful. A Muslim and a Jew and Christians and Hindus and agnostics and others of no faith can light a candle and share at the table of what Lincoln so aptly called “sweet reasonableness.” They can realize, as the Catholic priest and television producer James Keller once said, “A candle loses nothing of its light by lighting another candle.” That doesn’t happen everywhere – especially the Mideast, the birthplace of both Lipskier’s and Nyrabeah’s Abrahamic religions.

And it’s this “sweet reasonableness” – this respect – that is exactly the anathema of terrorists around the world, whether they wear the executioner’s hood for ISIS in Syria or they don the white sheets of the Ku Klux Klan in our country.

Indeed, when the *Central Florida Future’s* newspaper account of the candlelight vigil for Steven Sotloff was shared on Facebook, an ISIS sympathizer claiming to speak for “the righteous beings from Asia, South Asia and Middle East” chimed in to “rejoice” that Sotloff was killed because he was a Jew. The writer boldly prophesied that America would be decimated because of its tolerance of Jews, homosexuals and others deemed undesirable and fit only for “clinical trials on lethal diseases to safeguard humans and worthy life forms.”

Not in my America the Beautiful. And not as long as we crown our good with brotherhood.

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