

WITNESS FOR JUSTICE

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With Liberty and Justice for All

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On September 8, 1892, “The Youth’s Companion,” a Boston based youth magazine published what we in the United States now recognize as the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag. It was written in the time following the suffering of deep separation in this nation manifested by the Civil War just three decades earlier. It was written in the same year that half of million people migrated in search of opportunity and were welcomed with open arms. It was written on the eve of the turn of the century, when Americans looked forward to a new day in a nation that wanted to ensure that the principles of the U.S. Constitution were lived and practiced. It is believed to have been written by two educators, Francis Bellamy and James Upham and recited by more than 12 million school children as a reminder of the future.

Some say that we should forget about the past and look toward the future. But I believe that we cannot know where we are going unless we know where we’ve been. The actual Pledge has undergone changes through the years with a significant addition in 1954 of the words,

“Under God,” to the current version we now recite. President Dwight D. Eisenhower declared that the individual states are united as a single republic under the divine providence of God, “*our most powerful resource.*” Interestingly, the phrase that has remained constant for over 100 years is, “one nation indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.”

Through the years, many have tried to interpret the back story—the reasons for the specific words that are used. These interpreters emphasize that we are a sovereign people, a nation that is based on the principles of democracy where all its citizens have a voice and vote. They acknowledge the fragile nature of unity since our country has been through many times of deep division, much like the time in which we are living today. These words are meant to be a reminder that liberty means the pursuit of life and happiness and that each and every person is entitled to be treated fairly and equally. And the last word is **ALL**, meaning that regardless of race, ethnic background, language, religion, gender, sexual orientation, sexual identity, age, and other identities that unite or divide us, we are **ALL** entitled to liberty and justice.

When celebrating Independence Day each year on the 4th of July, in remembering our history we seem to concentrate primarily on the wars that we have fought against other nations to preserve our freedom. As we celebrate freedom each year, I suggest that we also remember to live into our responsibility to be a nation under God – the God of Justice – which requires that we join the struggle to end hunger, homelessness, poverty, violence, racism, and all forms of oppression each and every day. Then and only then will *Liberty and Justice for All* be realized.

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