

## Daily Meditation 12-11-23

### A Thank You to Norman Lear, a Bearer of Light

Good morning.

In today's and tomorrow's Daily Meditations, we're honoring Norman Lear, for the wonderful work he did on behalf of democracy in America.

In fact, the origins of his first and most successful program, "All In The Family," was his reaction to the televangelists in the 1970s, the religious right political movement.

He was horrified, as he said, by what he heard. He heard prayers for the death of a Supreme Court Justice, and that you can only be a good American if you're the right kind of Christian, not just any Christian, but a certain kind, one that embraced far-right political views.

It was in this context, that he started the organization People for the American Way, which was about liberty and justice and pluralism. And when he heard these right wing, Christian nationalists back then, he said, that's not the American Way. That's not what he was fighting for, when he fought against fascism in the Second World War.

So that's where he got the name for his nonprofit.

And back in 1971, January, when he started "All In The Family," what was happening on the news was Vietnam, and street protests, the Kent State killings, the shootings of students at Kent State who were protesting the war.

And other sitcoms were just doing goofy things. But he felt you could bring comedy and serious topics together. As one person wrote, "His format was theater-like, its dialogue rough and real, its comedy smart, but not highbrow."

And it moved into first place for five years, as far as television watching goes, so it was very successful. But it was a new kind of art, combining politics and humor. Now this was just the beginning of Norman Lear's series of bringing art and comedy to culture, and critiquing it.

After "All In The Family," which was, of course, to depict an ordinary blue-collar family and the tensions within it, the arguments between generations and so forth — he made a TV program about rich Black people called "The Jeffersons," and then two programs about working-class Black people, one called "Good Times," and one called "Sanford and Son."

And all of them, like "All in the Family," combined humor and political-social realities of the time, including, of course, racism.

And then he made a program about feminists, called "Maude," and a program about divorced women, "One Day at a Time." And another program about dissatisfied housewives called "Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman."

And later, he attempted a Latino sitcom about a divorced woman, called "AKA Pablo," which didn't do well. But then he did a reboot of "One Day at a Time," using a Cuban-American family as the as the basis of it. So there he did succeed in bringing in again, a Latino topic.

Lear said that he was inspired in part by his own minority experience as a Jew in America. And he remembered the anti-semitic radio program of the demagogue, Father Charles Coughlin, who was very strong in the 1930s and 1940s. He had 30 million listeners to his radio program, which was pro-fascist and very, very explicitly anti-semitic.

And as one commentator said, "Lear built a counter-weapon, a bigger and better soapbox."

So he used the art of television sitcom to speak to the moral issues of our time. And for this, of course, we honor him, and thank him.

Thank you. We'll see you next week.