

John I. Kolehmainen



Ode to Minnesota

This is a hymn of praise, not only to the state of Minnesota, but to Brimson's boulder-strewn "kivi-kontri", and to its lovely diminutive gem, Salo Lake.

I first came to the Head of the Lakes region in the late 1920s as a summertime sailor working on ore freighters, which docked in my home town of Conneaut, Ohio. I actually did not set foot on Minnesota's soil until the spring of 1938, when I first visited Astrid's backwoods home. My attachment to Minnesota became firmly fixed when in August 1939 Astrid accepted me as her husband. Since that time we have almost unfailingly headed north in the summer months to an idyllic home in Brimson.

In the early years our destination was the homestead farm which Astrid's parents had built in the early 1900s. It was a modest dwelling: its original log walls had been covered by wood siding. It had a typical country kitchen, with its customary pantry and storeroom for kindling and firewood; a dining and living room, two upstairs bedrooms, which one reached by climbing a narrow, winding, and steep stairway. In preparation for our son Jan's arrival in this world (he was born in Minnesota), Astrid's parents had constructed a neat-looking ground level attachment as a nursery. Originally the homestead en-

compassed 120 acres, but a considerable portion of it had been sold, and a part donated as a site for a community hall, the famed "Hirsi (log) Hall".

The family's arrival at the homestead marked the commencement of a furious round of chores. Doors had to be tested to see if they opened and closed properly; likewise the windows. The dwelling's foundations became progressively less secure and shifted ominously with the seasons. Leaks in the roof had to be located so that pails could be placed in line of the drip-drip until the time when the roof could be properly patched. The mess created by armies of mice during their nine months of run-of-the-house freedom had to be tidied up. Very importantly, the hand-operated water pump had to be checked, leathers replaced, to assure a constant supply of water. Among other concerns, the outdoor toilet had to be made ready for the inevitable traffic.

Naturally, the homestead had a sauna (no Finn could get along without it). It was a simple low log structure, with a dressing room and a heating chamber, with a large kiuas and a long platform for sitting. This replaced a more primitive sauna, which we continued to use for a time as an ice house. A helpful grandpa later disassembled it, cutting the weathered wood into kindling. Like all saunas, whether humble or pretentious, ours provided a real sense of satisfaction and contentment and a feeling of well-being. Often Finnish pioneers lived in

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saunas until a house (often, it began as a mere shack) was built.

The special object of my admiration and scheming was a huge gambrel roof barn. How it underwent an unusual metamorphosis is told in a story I wrote for the Heidelberg Alumni Magazine in the winter of 1968. It is reproduced here.

Odyssey of a barn

Tens of thousands of Finns settled in the cutover regions of northern United States. Shelter from the rain and snow was their first concern; in the ragged wastelands left by avaricious timber barons appeared,

*Hewn from the pine, a humble nest,
yet as warm as a maiden's breast.
Aspen yielded its friendly door,
the backwoods spruce graced the floor.*

Then followed a cow or two, and a barn. If fortune smiled, the herds multiplied, and new spacious barns became prized symbols of the pioneers' conquest of the wilderness.

I first saw the barn, the subject of this fond remembrance, in 1938. I must confess that I became far more interested in a young lady, whose parents had homesteaded this section of Minnesota, sixty miles north and east of Duluth, than in rustic architecture. Indeed within a year or so, I somehow succeeded in winning the heart and hand of this maiden, grown up among the boulders and strawberries; shortly thereafter we acquired, by generous gift, full title to eighty acres of largely uncleared land, a farmhouse, a sauna, and — the barn.

The homestead became our summer home, a refuge we eagerly returned to each spring. The barn, in particular, began to attract my attention. I marvelled at its construction: native tamarack logs, some

two feet or more in circumference, had been very skillfully fitted together; the beams, also of tamarack, were straight as arrows, nearly forty feet long. Unmistakably it was the work of a master woodsman; later I discovered that the barn was featured in a story appearing in a farming magazine shortly after the First World War. During the 1920s and 1930s farming in the marginal lands of northern Minnesota declined (there were easier ways of making a livelihood), and when we took over the homestead, it had not been farmed for many years. Lots of hay remained in the loft of the barn, and our three children, when they arrived and reached the age of exploration, loved to play there. I, too, often found myself in the barn. What labor and love, I reflected, had gone into its making. What words of endearment must have passed from farmwife to her cherished mute wards, providers of life's very sustenance. What would happen to this building, now standing idle? Could it be saved? How?



As the Petrell homestead barn looked after it fell into disuse. In its time, it was, judged by immigrant standards, an imposing structure.

We had also been given a small bit of land on a nearby lake, on which stood a small shanty. Could the barn, I thought one day, be transformed into a log cabin? Would it be possible to save for posterity at least a portion of a pioneer's handiwork? I discussed the idea with neighbors; they were not very encouraging. Too big a building to move, they said. The timbers no doubt are not all sound; it would be better, if you want a cabin, to start anew with dressed lumber. Paying heed to such advice, I desisted; but the idea would not die. Everytime I went into the barn, I was re-possessed with the conviction that it could be done.

Two developments pushed me into taking action. The farmhouse, which my wife's parents had built early in the 1900's, was showing the ravages of time: the foundation sills had rotted; the roof leaked in a half-dozen spots, and it seemed impossible to patch them. One morning, in an outburst of recklessness, I took a hammer and wrecking bar, and tore off a section of the barn's roof; the deed was done — there was no going back.

As might have been anticipated, the tearing-down stage was relatively easy. Down came the prized barn, first the roof, then the log walls, piece by piece. Naturally I had taken the precaution of marking every log carefully, and recording its position in a detailed chart. The results were almost frightening: the surroundings took on the appearance of a junkyard of boards, logs, window-frames, and doors. It looked as though a Kansas tornado had unloosened its fury on a single structure. Bystanders no doubt wondered: Can anyone, and specifically the individual responsible for this mess, ever put together the scrambled and scattered pieces?

Before the reassembling process could start, a number of backbreaking preliminaries had to be done. The dismantled

barn, notably the logs (which looked so much more formidable on the ground) had to be moved to the lakeshore, a distance of nearly five miles. A building site had to be prepared: trees cut down, boulders moved (our part of Minnesota is known as "kivikontri", boulder-country), concrete mixed by hand and shovel (we have no electricity) for the foundation. The lower tiers of logs went up surprisingly fast, but the higher we got, the heavier and more exhausting the labor. Tamarack logs, when aged, become as heavy, if as strong, as granite. We also discovered that the logs, once removed from their original position, could not be refitted like glove in hand. Crevices appeared, much to the consternation of the womenfolk, who foresaw a legion of forest mice scurrying through them. Log-raising was clearly man's work, and I was fortunate in getting the help of a neighbor as well as my brother, who seemed eager to prove that a lawyer's profession had not sapped his vigor and manhood (the professor, too, flexed his muscles).



All the timbers were carefully marked at each end, and the weathered tamarack logs were pulled into their respective places. Note the typical Finnish corner notches.

It took most of one summer to reassemble the log walls and ceiling beams, raise the rafters, and get a roof overhead. We decided to build a very steep-pitched roof, chiefly for two reasons: we wanted enough headroom in the second-story bedroom, and we were weary of leaky roofs; we had to have one over which the raindrops would literally fly from the ridge to the ground (it hasn't leaked yet!). There are some disadvantages, to be sure; it's tricky to stay on the roof long enough to get the roofing down (I hit upon the device of sending my dear wife up the ladder — if only for a photograph).

During the ensuing summers the cabin progressed from a mere shell to a comfortable home. Floors were laid, windows and doors set into place, interior walls paneled. As often happens, our plans were expanded: a dining room downstairs, an additional bedroom upstairs, a guesthouse and boathouse. It is very likely that our project will never be completely finished; but we have learned that happiness is in the doing.

My wife's parents were destined never to see our Haven in the Woods. What might they have thought about our goings-on? One of their proud possessions, a note-worthy structure, a barn, has been transformed into an inimitable cabin home. The magnificent tamarack logs, visible at least on the outside, will remain, hopefully through centuries, a monument to the pioneer generation of Finnish settlers.

In this peaceful place — thirty miles from the nearest town, hidden by deep forest and flanked by an azure-blue lake, where deer and bear and an occasional moose still roam freely, where the despoiling hand of man is not yet visible — we have found happiness beyond measure.

Hopefully our children, and in time their children's children, will know the

contentment and joy that God bestows through undefiled nature.



Our haven in the woods stands gracefully on the shores of Salo-Lake — a tribute to the construction skills of the pioneer generation.

As I read the foregoing account, I note that an essential element was not mentioned, namely, the building of a road, perhaps a quarter-mile long, from the end of the publicly maintained road to the lake site. We desperately needed better access to our Salo Lake site. Traversing the winding, boulder-strewn path, carrying food and other supplies, leading small children by the hand (they preferred to be carried), was burdensome, indeed risky. The return trip was even more onerous: toddlers were weary and irritable; often there was a heavy assortment of fish to manage; mosquitoes were malevolent, and a flashlight only dimly showed the dangers ahead; a sunny afternoon quickly turned into a damp and cold eventide.

I discussed the problem with our neighbor and close friend, Ed Sandstedt, who owned a small bulldozer. I asked him if he could make the road. "Let's look the terrain over", he replied. It was possible. In a relatively short time the passage, which wove around huge immovable boulders,

was completed; now all things became possible, especially the construction of our little bit of heaven on the peaceful shores of Salo Lake.

The one-time barn, now a lovely log cabin, is a two story structure. The ground level has two large rooms: a multi-purpose kitchen-living room, which is distinguished by an expansive picture window, providing a panoramic view of the lake, and an attractive, and eminently useful, free-standing fireplace in a corner; and a dining room, from which one can see the lake, the edge of the forestland, and a meandering driveway. There are two bedrooms upstairs, and a small but adequate study for the professor-outdoorsman (the two callings seem often to get in each other's way during the summer). There is an upper-level deck on the south side, from which it is possible to survey the entire lake.

During daytime hours, when south and west winds prevail, the area is remarkably free of flies and mosquitoes; in the evenings, it offers a spectacular view of the rising moon and its shimmering reflections on the water and the myriad of stars twinkling in the heavens. On cold clear nights one becomes conscious of the limitless expanse overhead, and is overcome by awe and wonder. As Edwin Teale said, "An hour thus spent under the stars, in the dark of the moon or before its rising, with the heavens alight from rim to rim with the gleam and glitter of planets and constellations and galaxies, is an ethereal experience, a calming prelude to a night of rest." A silent vow to acquire greater knowledge, to be able to locate more than the familiar Big Dipper, the North Star, and Cassiopeia, is taken and left unfulfilled.

Northern Lights, the aurora borealis, are fairly common sight, which to the first-time observer has a dramatic effect.

Florence Page Jacques' reactions (Snowshoe Country, p. 29) are perhaps typical: "Weird yellow spirals shot into the sky through whirlpool of twisting pink and dark purple. Great shimmers of pallor shook from horizon to zenith, and searchlight rays streamed up and then bent like broken grass stems. It was unearthly — it seemed just that".

Conversely, there are pitch-black nights, when neither stars nor moon illuminate the surroundings. A chilling wind howls in from the east, shaking the roof, casting sheets of rain across the windows. A foreboding feeling of isolation, of being alone in an unfriendly wilderness, becomes heavy.

In situations like these, the fireplace provides cheerful comfort and reassurance. The boughs and logs snap and crackle as they burn (each variety of wood has special sound effects), throwing forth inimitable fragrance, projecting dancing shadows on the floor, walls, and ceiling.

The sauna, which is directly on the shore, is not only a useful addition (to a Finn, it is a *sine qua non*) but contributes to our sense of pride. The steam room is tiny but well-illuminated by two windows; the kiuas was built by the area's master craftsman, Wayne Simola. The large dressing room is finished in native pine paneling from the Uuno Hyöppönen mill. Along one wall are two bunk beds, often used by guests. On the second wall are racks holding our store of fishing equipment. (By the way, this description may suggest a neater state of affairs than ordinarily prevails). As is customary in this region, there is a deck along the shoreline side of the sauna, and a dock-pier extending a short distance into the lake. Such structures are no longer permitted, but we have been able to keep ours since it antedates the statutory prohibition. Keeping a dock in good condition is a matter of great concern; once a year,

early in spring, everyone asks the same question: How did your dock come through the winter?

Let's turn now to the region's fauna — the beasts of the forests and fields, the birds of the air, the fish of the sea. Without question, it is the black bear that evokes the greatest surprise. They are not, however, uncommon; we encounter some every summer, occasionally at close range.

It was suppertime, a Saturday in August 1986, when we heard a noise at the kitchen door, as though someone — no doubt one of the neighbors, we thought — was attempting to come in (there are no doorbells to ring). I went quickly to the door, whose small window was curtained, and swung it open. There, standing upright, paws stretched high against the outer screen door, was a huge black bear. It is hard to say who was the more surprised, for a moment it was an eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation. Then my defensive instincts took over: I slammed the door shut, yelled to Astrid "My God, it's a bear!" She rushed to the window above the sink, as I did: there was a female bear with two cubs ambling up our road. After I calmed down, I observed to my wife, "Bears surely are becoming bold here; they even come to supper uninvited".

My chief summertime activity was not hunting nor birding nor fighting insects, but in following Izaak Walton's footsteps. It was a rare day that I didn't get into a boat to try my luck; Astrid joined me frequently or went by herself (no connection to marital discord).

Salo Lake, of course, was my favorite fishing spot, not only because of its manageable size (a mile and a half long, a half mile wide, and some twenty feet at the deepest point) but for other reasons which will not remain undisclosed.

To begin with, the lake is almost completely encircled by federal forest-

lands, which have no habitation. There are only five private-owned properties: the old Uksila homestead, now owned by a surviving daughter, Viena Nikula; the Salo homestead, presently occupied by Saima Salo, a daughter-in-law; the Helin cabin on a tiny bit of land, owned by Toik and Bill Helin; the one-time John Viita homestead, modernized and enlarged by Edwin and Elsie Whitney; and the Kolehmainen log cabin. Only one, the Salo place, is occupied year-around; thus, privacy, a rare thing these days, is ensured.

I began to fish Salo Lake as soon as we settled in the region. Astrid's parents had a small shed on the lake, the reader may recall, which was reached by walking a mile or so from the end of the township road. I often used John Viita's homemade boat; it frequently happened that my fishing ended at the very moment when Aunt Hulda's coffee and pulla (biscuit) were ready. Both these loving persons have passed on; I shall not forget their innate hospitality. Later on, fishing turned into a daily passion.

Salo Lake is home for many kinds of fishes. Bluegills, sunfish, and other panfish are numerous; when they are in a biting mood, they are fairly easy to catch (children have great fun fishing for them off the dock). They are boney, but tasty. We like them prepared in a Swedish flame-top smoker. The perch population has dwindled over the years, and walleyes have not been reproducing. A relatively few monsters survive and are occasionally caught.

Before we take leave of precious Salo Lake, we wish to emphasize one important matter: it is far more than a food source. How varied and meaningful have been its aesthetic contributions, its powerful impact upon our sight, our hearing, our emotions, our treasure-house of memories. How clearly they come to

mind: the wind-driven sprays riding the unruly waves, glistening in the sunshine; slender shore reeds bending before the brisk breezes; in calmer periods, the intricate patterns made by shifting air currents; August dog-days, when configurations are born and dissolve on the green-canopied surface; the agitated activity of whirligigs, striders, spiders, and dragonflies; tranquil sunsets when the burning orb fades in the west, painting pink, crimson, blue, and white reflections, which seem so real that it's difficult to say which is sky and which is water.

We often spent hours on Petrell Creek which becomes a wide channel, a kind of mini-Mississippi, with deep holes in which large northerns congregate (there are no other species). Then it enters the shallow, heavily-weeded Breda Lake, where there is some open water but relatively few fish. Then on the other side of the lake, Petrell Creek resumes its journey for a mile or so when massed boulders block further ingress; its waters continue out of human sight until they empty into Wolf Lake.

Traveling Petrell Creek by canoe, especially to a first-timer, can be a unique, enriching experience. The leaf-light conveyance and the silent paddler move effortlessly on the surface; they seem to be an integral part of the environs. It is easy to touch the lilies and rushes, to feel the moss-covered logs, and suck in the changing forest smells. As one paddles for hours at a stretch, he is totally immersed in a pristine realm, which seemingly has not changed through the centuries. The magic is complete.

We have fished many other regional lakes: Bassett, Cadotte (where brother Mike's cabin is located), Wolf, Indian, Greenwood, and McElhardy. In years gone by, this was an excellent lake for northerns; my prize catch, a 25-pounder,

came from it; the lake no longer has any angling value, serving primarily as a scenic backdrop for cabins and year-around residences.

No doubt the most exciting lake was Seven Beavers in a roadless area. It was reached by a long hike through the wilderness. Usually it was a single day's outing; however, on occasion we stayed overnight in an abandoned logger's shack, thus making possible late evening and early morning angling. Once Ed Sandstedt and I undertook a fascinating trip to Seven Beavers. Ed made arrangements with a local railroad employee, allowing us to use a handcar to transport boat and gear by rail to Skibo, which is on St. Louis River. We disembarked here and headed north for several miles at a good clip, propelled by a trustworthy Johnson outboard motor; on the way we caught some northerns trolling. We left the boat tied securely to the shore, and anchored our fish in mid-stream, dangling on a stringer. We proceeded through the woods, reaching a logger's cabin where we spent the night. It was not restful; hordes of mosquitoes buzzed incessantly, trying to penetrate our jungle hammocks. The next morning we hiked into Seven Beavers and fished several hours for walleyes. We then retraced our steps, back to St. Louis River to our boat and fish — which for the most part had been consumed by turtles. We pumped the handcar back to our starting point, fearful that we might meet an on-rushing ore train.

Experiences such as these live on forever, undimmed by the passage of time.

I shall not even try to write profoundly about any of Brimson's residents, for I lack the essential curiosity, empathy, and insight. I know little about them, although it undoubtedly is fair to assume that most were decent and hardworking, a few, out-

of-the-ordinary, and even less a number, authentically eccentric.

A favorite preoccupation in Brimsonites is reminiscing. Their talk — I listen to it patiently, at times, wearifully, as an outsider — often focusses on individuals both living and dead, and occasionally succeeds in endowing them with interesting attributes. I realize a human story lurks here, but I am not the kind of chronicler who is able to biographize miscellaneous facts, legends, rumors, anecdotes. In addition, I am by temperament a loner, as our relatively hermit-like summer life attests. I find it easier to describe a woodpecker than a fellow human being!

Thus I shall be content merely to identify a few persons who in one way or another we have come to know. Foremost among the immigrant forebears naturally were Astrid's mother Olga Kristina Bergstrom (1884–1941), and father Edwin August Petrell (1879–1966). By all accounts Olga was a remarkably resourceful individual, many-talented, and creative. Edwin was intellectually curious; life's hard blows had raised in him a high level of social consciousness and he became an ardent advocate of social and political change. I regret very deeply that I did not, when the opportunity was available, fix in mind more clearly their sterling qualities; Olga died too young at the age of 57, while Edwin settled in Florida. I hope sincerely that Astrid will someday soon write fully about them.

I have already spoken of Hulda (who was Olga's sister) and John Viita, whose bachelor brother Eino lived in the region; the last-named was a kind and thoughtful person, a good conversationalist. The Mäkeläs had a small unpretentious farm near our homestead, within walking distance; we bought raw milk and garden fresh vegetables from them and always found time for a little chat. Rosa Laak-

sonen, whose spouse had been active in amateur theatricals, also lived nearby; she was a charming lady, soft-spoken and unassuming, but delightful to converse with. Neighbor Jack Hill, slight of build but amazingly strong, was skilled in using the broadblade axe, a talent put to good use in completing our cabin.

The Laaksonen clan was interesting. Musically-inclined on the one hand, Irja also displayed managerial abilities, operating a grocery-tavern-gas station. She became much involved in researching family and local history, and her book, *Echoes from the Past* is full of fascinating bits on information. Ilma likewise was touched by music; her cherished hobby is playing the organ (she owns two). Ilmari and Urho radiated infectious humor and witty talk.

Neil Salo, the unofficial guardian of the lake's welfare, was also devoted to the larger interests of the community; he always came to the cabin as soon as we arrived to welcome us, and our departure, made a special point of bidding us goodbye.

During the years we lived at the homestead, our mail box was located at Sandstedt's Corner, a walk of nearly a mile across a clearing dominated by a magnificent spruce (must I confess that infrequently the evil thought crossed my mind: How many board feet in that tall tree?). Mail delivery was sometimes irregular; Ellen and Ed Sandstedt's home made a wonderful waiting-place, where coffee and fresh-baked pastries were offered. As I have mentioned earlier, Ed was a frequent fishing companion; I often marveled, not only at his angling know-how, but the flawless, instinctive way in which he fitted into the surrounding wilderness world.

There were other informed and principled sportsmen in the community: Sulo Beck, who knew every inch of Bassett

Lake's waters and roamed the distant, secluded, torturous, trout streams; and Alex Oman, eminently proficient in all the northwood's callings, fishing, hunting, trapping.

An isolated settlement like Brimson has need of a wide array of services, many of which by necessity fall to the care of a single man-of-all-trades. We have Wayne Simola, truly an expert in the repair of automobiles, trucks, mowers, chain saws, what-ever moves. After years of testing Wayne with all kinds of jobs, I am convinced there isn't anything that he can't fix, or if need be, invent or improvise. His saunas have become widely known.

Ed Sandstedt too was skilled in automotive matters, and in addition, knew how to use carpenter tools (he was a good builder) and navigate bulldozers; much of his life had been spent in logging camps.

Logging, by the way, has been and remains an important cog in the region's economy. Everyone locally knows the Hyöppönen Lumber Mill. I have been pleased with its products, notably, log siding and native cedar boards, which are ideal for making picture frames. Uuno, who owns and manages this two-man operation, is an unusual person; I have enjoyed my once-a-summer visits with him. If one asks him, "Uuno, how are you feeling today?" he will invariably answer, "Oh, about 30 per cent". Today this seems literally true; Uuno is ailing and his cherished mill probably will not survive long.

A rural settlement needs also the gentle touch of poetry, music, and art. Many names come to mind, among them the amateur poets-recitationists Hannah Miller and Elsie Hall. Martin Tommila, one of several local artists, is self-taught and gifted; his oil paintings mirror faithfully many highlights of the varied landscape. We, our children included, have acquired many of them; a favorite of ours is

a winter scene of our Salo Lake home. One of the region's most unusual craftsmen was Finland-born John Toivonen, who whittled, with dexterity and skill, spoons, ladles, keyholders, and other objects from native birch and distinctive diamond willow. His work won him wide acclaim.

In many ways, Olga Juslin, also of the immigrant generation, epitomized the presence of culture in a backwoods setting. Many artistic items graced the interior of her home; she was well-read and tasteful in social intercourse.

Community institutions are born to fill a recognized need, function their allotted years, then pass away. When I first came to Brimson, Public School 55, on Sandstedt's Corner, was an imposing landmark. Fire destroyed it on February 1, 1945. It probably would have been closed sooner or later, like many rural schools, because of falling enrollments. The local telephone cooperative (whose general calls provided welcome excitement) has given way to a giant (and expensive) national system. The Farmers Cooperative Store (which friend Art Kylen managed in its final years) was the hub of regional economic and social activity; it too was consumed by flames. Many people now shop in Two Harbors, 30 miles away. In the case of emergency shortages, one can try either Hellman's Store or the Kozy Corner. The local post office survives, although on a greatly reduced schedule. It, like those across rural America, has played an important role. A professor with a multitude of contacts in the USA as well as in Europe has special reason to recall with affection the caring services of its post-mistresses, Lilian Bodie, Mae Mäki, Pamela Thompson, and incumbent Jennie Laine.

Bassett Hall and Petrell Hall continue to serve varied social and governmental functions. Both structures have been recently modernized and are quite adequate.

But neither can hope to recapture the hustle and bustle of gone-by days when immigrant life was in full flower.

Inexorably the Grim Reaper has taken its toll. On the lips of those who remain, an inarticulated query: Who will be around next August?

Over the years we got to know many pioneer settlers, largely Finland-born. Their qualities became clear: a simple, frugal existence; an iron-willed, determination to transform the cutover wilderness into life-sustaining habitations. Of course, there were some warts. Sometimes penny-pinching was elevated to a cardinal virtue, driven by grim necessity. The wonders of

their environment were obscured by the demands of daily labor. Characteristically the Finnish immigrants crossed ethnic boundaries slowly, grudgingly; they did not always enter fully into the lives of their offspring, thus deepening an inevitable generation gap.

For our part, we made choices and tried to find happiness and meaning in them. Our children, in their time and in their wisdom, choose their values, establish their ways of living.

Perhaps all we can do is to hope that our heirs will view with empathy and understanding what we have done. I have faith that this will come to pass.