

Patriotism, Prejudice, Parochialism, and Pride

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“What we need are critical lovers of America — patriots who express their faith in their country by working to improve it.”
— Hubert H. Humphrey

Opening Words

Dot Everhart

Today is July, 4th; the birthday of our nation. This morning, we consider patriotism and pride. We also will discuss prejudice and parochialism—two words not often linked to patriotism and pride—especially not at July 4th celebrations!

I grew up in a **patriotic** family, as I expect many of you did. We were one of the first homes on Filbert Street in York, PA to have a flag pole attached to the post on our front porch. We flew a Pennsylvania flag and an American flag from the front of our camping trailer. My dad was a World War II Navy veteran, who served stateside as a machinist’s mate repairing ships.

My brother-in-law, Ron Gohn, served in the Army and in the National Guard, shipping



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almost all of the equipment for Desert Storm out of Newport News, VA and returning it back after. Ron can pack more things in a given space than anyone I know, and still fits into his dress Army uniform! His son, my nephew, Major Rusty Gohn, a graduate of the Air Force Academy, departs for a three-year deployment to London, England in August. My sister, Ron's wife and Rusty mother decorates a special tree at Christmas with red, white and blue patriotic figures and little American flags. Yes, we are proud to be Americans.

Well, some of us more proud than others. However patriotic my family is, I typically, am the one during family discussions to question military policies and expenditures. I took a strong pacifist position during the Vietnam War and continue to believe that armed conflict is rarely, if ever, the appropriate "solution" to a situation, a minority opinion around the table.

I also grew up in a **prejudiced** family. I was carefully taught the "ism's" of the 1950's: racism, sexism, classism, and, yes, even heterosexism (or homophobia). As I moved into the world beyond my family, I discovered that even while we said we loved everyone as children of God, some were more loved and welcomed than others, who were often feared and mistrusted. **Parochialism** teaches us to fear what is different. It seem inextricably intertwined with our patriotism and pride of national identity.

Our Unitarian Universalist principles challenge us to live as citizens of the world, respecting the dignity and worth of all people. So, as we sing our opening hymn together, let us open our hearts and minds to think anew about what it means for us to love our country and each other as we endeavor to be responsible citizens of the world and members of the whole human race.

First Reading

from "What Does it Mean to be an American?"

David Batstone and Eduardo Mendieta

The American flag is a symbol so laden with meaning that ... [it] has [been] described as 'a kind of eucharistic symbol.' Sacred, then, in some way. Many politicians have urged a Constitutional amendment that would make it a crime to desecrate, mangle, violate, burn, or otherwise misuse it. And yet, ... 'Americans make jeans, t-shirts, and underwear out of it, and use it to advertise everything from gas stations to hot-dog stands.'

A flag, after all, doesn't mean anything by itself. It's an empty signifier, however powerful it may become. The flag is often used to evoke patriotism, and it can call up sincere tears of gratitude and reverence. But it can be used for the most pedestrian, even vulgar displays of commercialism. The flag is a symbol of our covenant with one another, but it can easily be an alibi for our entrepreneurial spirit Sometimes our flag is used to mean that consumption and commodification are our only viable forms of patriotism and citizenship, conveying the simple message that 'to be American' is 'to buy American.'

The flag means all these things because its power — its meaning — derives from its symbolic use by a given community over time. We might, then, think of the flag not as an object but as a history — the history of acts of representation undertaken by a community of citizens.²

² David Batstone and Eduardo Mendieta. "What Does It Mean to Be an American?" in *The Good Citizen*, ed. by David Batstone and Eduardo Mendieta. (New York: Routledge, 1999) pp. 1-2.

Second Reading
from "The American Geographies"
Barry Lopez

...[I]f one begins among the blue crabs of Chesapeake Bay and wanders for several years, down through the Smoky Mountains and back to the bluegrass hills, along the drainages of the Ohio and into the hill country of Missouri, where in summer a chorus of cicadas might drown out human conversation, then up the Missouri itself, reading on the way the entries of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark and musing on the demise of the plains grizzly and the sturgeon, crosses west into the drainage of the Platte ... then drops south to Palo Duro Canyon and the irrigated farms of the Llano Estacado in Texas, turns west across the Sangre de Cristo, southern-most of the Rocky Mountain ranges, and moves north and west up the slickrock mesas of Utah, those browns and oranges, the ochreous hues reverberating in the deep canyons, and goes north, swinging west to the insular ranges that sit like battleships in the pelagic space of Nevada, camps at the steaming edge of sulphur springs in the Black Rock Desert, where alkaline pans are glazed with a ferocious light, a heat to melt iron, then crosses the northern Sierra Nevada, waist-deep in summer snow in the passes, to descend to the valley of the Sacramento, and rises through groves of elephantine redwoods in the Coast Range to arrive at Cape Mendocino, before Balboa's Pacific, cormorants and gulls, gray whales headed north for Unimak Pass in the Aleutians, the winds crashing down on you, facing the ocean over the blue ocean that gives the scene its true vastness, making this crossing, having been so often astonished at the line and the color of the land, the ingenious lives of its plants and animals, the varieties of its darkneses, the intensity of the stars overhead, you would be ashamed to discover, then, in yourself, any capacity to focus on ravages in the

land that left you unsettled. You would have seen so much, breathtaking, startling, and outsize, that you might not, for a long time, be able to break the spell, the sense ... that the land had not been as rearranged or quite as compromised as you had first imagined.

After you had slept some nights on the beach, however, ... you would be compelled by memory, obligated by your own involvement, to speak of what left you troubled. To find the rivers dammed and shrunken, the soil washed away, the land fenced, a tracery of pipes and wires and roads laid down everywhere, blocking and channeling the movement of water and animals, cutting the eye off repeatedly and confining it. ... It troubles you no more than your despair over the ruthlessness, the insensitivity, the impetuosity of modern life. ...

The geographies of North America, the myriad small landscapes that make up the national fabric, are threatened — by ignorance of what makes them unique, by utilitarian attitudes, by failure to include them in the moral universe, and by brutal disregard. ... [The responsibility of care and stewardship for the landscapes] falls ultimately to the national community, a vague and fragile entity to be sure, but one that, in America, can be ferocious in exerting its will.

Geography ... calls up something in the land we recognize and respond to. It gives us a sense of place and a sense of community. Both are indispensable to a state of well-being, an individual's and a country's.³

³ Barry Lopez. "The American Geographies" in *Finding Home: Writing on Nature and Culture from Orion Magazine*, ed. by Peter Sauer. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992) pp. 127-130 (excerpted).

Sermon⁴

Duane Fickeisen

I walked up the street to look for flags this week. Within a few blocks of our house I found many official US flags flying — one thin enough to see cars and trucks behind it; one brand new and still wrinkled, fresh from its package; three small ones on fence posts that were so tattered that the faded stripes had come apart from each other to form fluttering streamers.

Several advertise a parking lot; a decal on a car in the lot — that was ironically torn right through the flag image — declared “I’m proud to be an American!” A flag-themed wind-sock marks the door of a business. Bunting, several small flags in window boxes, and at least four larger ones on poles at the top of the building decorate the Gingerbread Man bar.

A quilted “flag” with a single, vaguely Native American four-pointed star in the blue field is displayed in the fabric store window. Across from it is a red and blue bench on the sidewalk outside the barbershop — does that count as a declaration of patriotism?

Around the corner and down the street a banner that looks somewhat like a flag has stars of at least three different sizes. Another neighbor flies a yellowed flag with 13 stars in a circle. It’s just a few feet from the wrinkled brand-new one. The historic one belongs to the most recent new arrival on our block; the new one to a collector of antiques.

Some of the flags I saw caught the breeze and snapped smartly while others hung nearly motionless. Those at the old and new courthouse buildings and outside the old prison flew at half staff, presumably in honor of Senator Byrd, who died this week. And of course there were many small flags stuck in

⁴ ©2010 Duane H. Fickeisen, Boiling Springs, PA

the ground near the memorials to the war dead in the town square and more in the cemetery behind St. Patrick's church and in the larger cemetery along East South Street, where Molly Pitcher herself lies at rest.

Someone sent me a broadcast e-mail message yesterday describing the fate of the 56 men who signed the Declaration of Independence — nine died fighting in the Revolutionary War, five were captured and tortured by the British before they died, and twelve had their houses ransacked, including Judy's ancestor, George Clymer. There were poignant stories illustrating the price they paid for pledging their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor for independence. The message concluded with a plea to thank those first US patriots in silence today and to spread the word that patriotism is not a sin.

We'll thank them in spoken prayer, not in silence. But I'm not so sure about the "not-a-sin part." The meanings of patriotism are as complex and perhaps even more fraught than the many things our flag symbolizes.

Some of you remember the gathering on the courthouse steps in Carlisle to protest the war days before we invaded Iraq on the spring equinox in 2003. A guy driving down the street in a gimungous SUV slowed down, opened his passenger-side window, and leaned over to yell at us that we had no right to protest and dishonor the patriots whose blood was spilled for freedom. I bet he didn't get the irony of his rant. Those patriots suffered and lost their lives to gain the right to protest. Where but on the courthouse steps should we stand in witness to the pending atrocity? And just how does that mean we don't support the men and women in uniform who carry out the orders of warfare? (Our protest was before the invasion and occupation — once it was launched we turned toward grieving the loss of lives on all sides.)

The patriotism that equals blind support of actions and policies our government takes even when we deem them immoral, harmful, or just plain dumb, does seem to me to be a sin. It abets a divisiveness that distances us from others and moves us further from realizing paradise in this life.

Are we not called to embrace the right of conscience? And does that not mean speaking up and speaking out about the things we believe to be wrong? To protest vigorously *and* to work and sacrifice to create a stronger, more just and compassionate society?

If patriotism means support of the common good, work toward a society that values education, conservation, peace and freedom along with the conditions that make it possible for every one of its citizens to thrive, then count me in. But if patriotism means wrapping in the flag and declaring support for systems of oppression, an economics that favors the already rich and concentrates wealth ever more narrowly, rations health care based on the ability to pay, and even condones racial profiling, then I'm against it.

Like the owner of the torn decal, I'm proud to be an American. This land of such beauty and diversity as Barry Lopez describes it, with its wealth of resources and our country's foundation in the freedom to pursue the inalienable rights that our forefathers declared engenders pride. And rightly so! Indeed we have much to be proud of. But I'm also proud of my Norwegian, Danish, German, and English ancestry. And of my half-Vietnamese grandson and his immigrant father, who worked very hard to gain citizenship. Other lands have sunlight, clover, and blue skies, too. And several have even better health care, education, transportation systems, and communication infrastructure than we do.

When our patriotism becomes parochial — that is having a

narrow and limited scope — too narrowly focused on our own tribe and on the boundaries that mark our territory — we move into the danger and hubris of imagining ourselves as inherently better than others. The resulting xenophobia — our fear of anyone outside our own tribe — is extremely dangerous in a world that is so vastly different from the world of July 4, 1776. Our technology has changed radically. The transformations of agriculture, industry, transportation and travel, and communication mean that our collective actions impact the whole globe, often without regard for national boundaries.

The current battle over undocumented immigrants appears to be centered in Arizona with passage of legislation enabling local police to enforce federal immigration law. It opens the door to racial profiling, and it has a nationalist appeal to many. From this vantage point, it certainly seems to be grounded in racial prejudice. It takes an intolerant and phobic stance — a narrow-minded view that ignores the fact that many Americans are the descendants of illegal immigrants who stole the landscape Lopez so eloquently describes from the people who were here before the conquest by Europeans seeking gold and religious freedom. The Arizona law is fueled by prejudice and lies — the number of undocumented immigrants crossing the border from Mexico has declined, not increased, in recent years and crime in border towns has dropped significantly, despite a few high-profile cases.

Good people differ on how to respond to immigrants. In an opinion piece published yesterday in the Washington Post, Jeb Bush and Robert Putnam call for a liberal and welcoming immigration policy. What is clear is that people of European descent will soon become a minority in the US.

We can't afford to be so xenophobic in the interconnected world we live in where the dangers we face include battles

over access to resources, diminishing supplies of fossil fuels, and the climate change and sea-level rise resulting from greenhouse-gas emissions. With the potential for outbreaks of pandemic disease, collapse of international monetary systems, or disasters from industrial accidents such as the Chernobyl meltdown and the Deepwater Horizon blowout and ensuing oil spill, we can't afford to isolate ourselves.

Rather if we want to survive, we must cross those boundaries and learn to collaborate with others in seeking global solutions. I believe that is best accomplished when we come with a position of strength based on pride and healthy patriotism — recognizing the best of American values, resources, ingenuity and creativity, and compassion and at the same time celebrating the pride and patriotism of other countries.

That's the sort of pride and patriotism that offers us reason to celebrate today and inspires hope for even better times ahead and the empowerment of all people regardless of their location.

But a narrow patriotism based on prejudice that nourishes a narrow parochialism will almost surely fuel hatred for us and become the best possible recruiting tool for terrorist organizations bent toward using violence to wreak havoc.

As religious Unitarian Universalists, our faith calls us to celebrate beauty and abundance, to comfort the suffering with compassion, to afflict the comfortable with commitment to justice, and to embrace the inherent worth and dignity of every person. We ought to be proud of our religious heritage and its living, ever-evolving tradition without becoming narrowly parochial in our outlook. Transformation of the world requires that we join hands and work together across borders, even the borders that separate faiths. There is more that unites us than divides us. As our Transylvanian Unitarian forebear, Francis

David said in 1568, “we need not think alike to love alike.”

It is through working together across boundaries that we will actualize the great commission to bless the world — to actualize and celebrate the kingdom of God here, in this world, in this place.

Now go forth and celebrate the birthday of this great nation, practice the pursuit of happiness that is your birthright, and celebrate this great country of ours that is ever on the forming edge, still becoming, still profoundly beautiful, and still so filled with opportunity.

Before you dig into your potato salad and hot dog or hamburger or Bocaburger this afternoon, pause to consider whence we have come and to be proud of your own probably multiple heritages and of this nation that embraces all that you are and can become. That’s the patriotic thing to do today.

May it ever be so. Amen.

Closing Words

Remembering Our Spiritual, Courageous Ancestors

Rhys Williams

Remembering our spiritual, courageous ancestors who forsook oppression with security to gain freedom with opportunity — may we go forth to master ourselves by accepting duty with responsibility, by showing balance in our judgments and by having breadth of vision in our deliberations.

May we be exemplars of that spirit, moving forward with conviction and commitment, with unity without uniformity, with brotherhood and sisterhood to serve the truth that sets us free.

Image: Summer Morning on East Street. ©2010 Duane H. Fickeisen. Used with permission.