

Reflection on Faith and Responsive Discussion

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- by Norma Bailey

I want to start out by asking each of you to think about what patriotism means to you? Then please share your thoughts with one other person for 1-2 minutes.

I chose as my reflective piece this morning a blog by Michael Cade Hughes, originally written on August 29, 2016, and then updated on August 30, 2017.

What Is Real Patriotism Anyway?

Ask anyone the question, "What does patriotism mean to you?", and I promise you, you will not get one standard, clear answer. Sure, you're going to be told how we live in the greatest country on earth, and how we're the free and the brave, and you'll certainly hear about the military, and all the sacrifices that go along with service to our nation. What you probably won't hear are the many other, deeper ideologies that play into one's patriotism, or lack thereof.

The concept of patriotism is a very complex one. It's not as simple as reciting a pledge or singing an anthem. Patriotism, by simple definition, is the exaltation of national eminence, typically expressed as power over other nations, and an emotional attachment to the nation that one originates from. Patriotism is an extension of politics and its expressions and meanings are not easily agreed upon. There are so many ways in which people feel patriotism, and there are so many differing ideas of what it means to be patriotic. To most, being patriotic is all about the military and the exaltation of our troops. To some, being patriotic is simply exercising the right to vote and elect the leaders of our nation, or to fully embrace the rights of all of us to live freely and speak out against injustices in society. And then to some, apparently, patriotism is defined by a symbolic act at a sporting event.

I am deeply disturbed by the assertion that, because a sports figure refuses to participate in the singing of the National Anthem, he is then un-American and a disgrace. Adlai Stevenson summed it up perfectly when he said, "Patriotism is not short, frenzied outbursts of emotion, but the tranquil, steady dedication of a lifetime." I don't know precisely when sporting events became synonymous with American patriotism, but I do find it very interesting that you don't see these grand exaltations of our flag and anthem in very many places besides sports arenas and ball fields

For myself — and I suspect, people such as Colin Kaepernick, true patriotism means standing up for those in society who aren't given the same opportunities, those who aren't being treated with the same respect and given the same individual liberty that others are. To me, true patriotism is to align oneself with the ideas this country was built upon. What ideas, you ask? Read or re-read the Declaration of Independence. It's all laid out beautifully for you. All men are created equal. They are endowed not by government, but by birth, with certain unalienable rights. First and foremost among

those rights are the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Government must be committed and bound to protecting the peace and preserving our individual liberties, and doing so through the informed consent of the people. It's the inalienable right of a free people to rid themselves of a government that becomes destructive of those liberties, just as our Founders did in a supreme act of courage and defiance more than two hundred years ago. And when these liberties are in danger — dissent is inevitable. Thomas Jefferson is quoted as saying that “dissent is the highest form of patriotism”, and I believe that to be true. And apparently, so does Colin Kaepernick.

So, what is real patriotism? I believe that real patriotism comes from the heart and is always voluntary. It's a feeling of loyalty that comes with certain conditions. Those conditions being that our nation is serving ALL of our interests - and when that isn't the case, dissent is so very patriotic.

My Reflection

As I think about these words from the blog about what is real patriotism - about the notion of serving ALL people's interests and about the need to dissent when this does not occur – I think I've probably always lived this kind of patriotism. I didn't have words that would have described it that way; I just did it. I defended a little Native American boy when he was being teased when we were both about 7 years old. I volunteered in migrant camps in Traverse City when I was a teenager. I lost my first teaching job by speaking up about a number of inequities I saw in the ways some students were being treated by the system. I taught a curriculum called “Journey of Conscience” to my eighth graders to help them better understand how the United States, while always striving to live up to its ideals has not always done so well. And I have always been an advocate for students whose needs were not being met, both at the middle school level and at the university.

At the same time, I have often struggled with the trappings of patriotism in times past – and even now. Do I stand, place my hand over my heart and pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States when my civil rights as a lesbian are not protected? Do I stand and sing the national anthem? How do I resolve my internal conflict between my utter distaste for militarism and my support for the men and women who serve our country in the military? How do I have pride in being an American while recognizing all the ugliness that is currently occurring in our country today?

I have found some of my answers in the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

“History will have to record that the greatest tragedy of this period of social transition was not the strident clamor of the bad people, but the appalling silence of the good people.”

“He who passively accepts evil is as much involved in it as he who helps to perpetrate it. He who accepts evil without protesting against it is really cooperating with it.”

“Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.”

I also have found inspiration in the type of patriotism that the black poet Langston Hughes expressed in his 1935 poem ‘*Let America be America again.*’

O, let America be America again –

The land that never has been yet –

And yet must be.

I don’t know if these words are helpful to you; they were to me. There is a mismatch between our ideals and our reality, but there always has been. I don’t have the answers to my questions of how to negotiate that discrepancy, but I do know that I must not give up hope and I cannot remain silent and unengaged.

I also know that the seven Unitarian Universalist principles that we covenant to affirm and promote – the ones that were the basis for our reading for today – keep me grounded, challenge me and support me. I carry a copy of them in my backpack at all times – a needed reminder when I flounder in waves of despair, a too-often occurrence this past couple of years.

In this most difficult of times in our country, I hold on to my personal core values, supported by my participation in this UU Fellowship and our seven principles, and I choose to engage in what Congressman John Lewis said a year or so ago “...massive, well-organized, non-violent dissent and criticism of this great nation and its laws to move toward a greater sense of equality in America.”

I choose to be patriotic in support of

The land that never has been yet –

And yet must be.

So...my question for you all is: What does patriotism mean to you, and how does our UU faith sustain and support you (assuming it does)?