

“PROUD TO BE AN AMERICAN?”

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“Is the glass half full or empty
I ask her as I fill it
She said it doesn’t really matter
Pretty soon you’re bound to spill it”¹

I’ve loved this lyric ever since I first heard the Indigo Girls sing it some 15 years ago...and fortunately recalled it, as I began thinking about today’s talk, because it provides a convenient framework for my perspective on being an American.

Until sometime in late 2002-early 2003, I was a “glass half-full” American. Sure, I was well aware that our nation had its share of blemishes and blind spots, had committed many blunders, and had long ago met its quota of bluster. But I also believed that the institutions created and sustained by our forbearers were nothing short of brilliant – because they provided a foundation on which individual freedom could be preserved and flourish.

The best example of this, of course, are the checks and balances embedded in our Constitution – specific provisions designed to separate the legislative, executive and judicial functions of law so that no one branch of government can threaten the laws of our land or the freedom those laws support. We’ve seen many periods in which Congress or the White House was the more vigorous voice within our political system. But our Constitution, the rule of law, has prevented the other branches from being silenced forever.

Another example is our two-party political system. I’ve long regarded our two main parties to be something of a blessing. As a pair, they represent what I see as the two basic strategies an individual can adopt when it comes to maximizing his or her chances of survival when living with other humans: competition or cooperation. Each party embraces one of these strategies as its philosophical anchor (I don’t think I need to specify which espouses competition and which cooperation). The ebb and flow of each party’s political fortunes, over time, has meant that the worst aspects of competition and cooperation have been mitigated while the positive aspects of each tend to persist.

These two brief examples reveal the essence of why I was proud to be an American: They show the counterbalancing core of our political system in both its formal and informal institutions. To return to the glass metaphor: Republicans and Democrats are grasping the glass, pulling it in opposite directions. Likewise, so are Congress, the President and Supreme Court. By so doing, each in their own way has prevented the glass from spilling – they’ve preserved our freedom.

One of the things I learned in my former life as an historian is that history sometimes moves in cycles. The fortunes of political parties, like nations, waxes and wanes. The FDR coalition dominated the landscape from the 1930s through the 1960s. The Republicans have had better luck since the 1980s. Congress was dominant in the 19th century while the Presidency got the upper hand during the 20th century. But, the counterbalancing nature of our political system prevented any party or branch from gaining uncontested power permanently.

¹ Indigo Girls, “The Girl with the Weight of the World in Her Hands,” Nomads Indians Saints (1990)

My study of history also taught me that history doesn't always move in pendulum-like cycles. It can also unfold in a linear fashion. Just think about how technology has changed in your lifetime. The fortunes of nations rise and fall, sometimes never to rise again – remember the Mongols, the Hapsburgs, or the British Empire.

As I've witnessed the Bush administration's prosecution of the War on Terror, the war in Iraq, and the 2004 presidential election, I've come to believe that our nation may in fact be on a linear downward course away from its ideals. I've come to see the glass as half empty. Republican campaign tactics, the Patriot Act, extraordinary rendition, unitary executive theory, denying citizens access to the legal system. These are just a few examples and I won't belabor them: Whether or not you agree with it, the critique of the current administration is well known. I find it convincing and compelling.

In light of these and related policies, it seems to me that not only is the Presidency ascendant right now, its actions threaten to undermine the ability of either Congress or the Supreme Court to challenge that primacy in the future. The abrogation of civil liberties in the name of fighting terrorism threatens the rule of law and its commitment to freedom that define America. What's more, our two political parties, which have balanced competition and cooperation so well for so long, show signs of having ossified to the point of favoring institutional survival over the public welfare. In short, not only is the glass half empty, it seems like it's about to spill.

This was my state of mind in early May when I had the good fortune of being called to jury duty in Hamilton county. I'd never been summoned before and really didn't know what to expect (I certainly didn't expect to find three fellow First Church members to be serving at the same time – Joe Busby, Al Gerhardstein, and Peter Hoyt). On the second day, I was empanelled as the 2nd alternate juror in a civil case. That case lasted 10 days. Even though, as an alternate, I didn't take part in the deliberations, I left the courthouse after closing arguments with the same sense of exhilaration I'd felt every day the preceding 2 weeks.

Everyone involved in the case – judge, bailiff, plaintiff, defendant, witnesses, and jurors all – manifested a profound respect for the law, the rule of law that preserves our freedom. This was most pronounced (and surprising) among us “non-professionals”, the jurors. We were a Duke Energy line repairman, a young P&G engineer, an elderly housewife, a former Hasbro toy executive, an artist, a middle manager and a computer programmer. We came from the East side, the West side and outside Cincinnati. We had one person who when asked about his hobbies responded that he liked to do things “revolving around family values.” And we had one person who had to confirm that a Bible would not be involved during the swearing in process. We were all very different.

And yet we were the same – each of us was committed to fulfilling our responsibility. Not one of us begrudged our service, not even as we entered a 3rd week of duty with no certainty that the trial would conclude any time soon. We paid attention to the judge and to the lawyers. We listened to the long parade of witnesses, which wasn't always easy since it included watching about 10 hours of video testimony! All of us were genuinely curious to learn as much as we could about the legal process, while being very respectful of the fact that we could not discuss our specific case with anyone. In short, we all felt a profound duty to support “the system,” the rule of law.

What I experienced in those 11 days of service leads me to believe that there are many Americans, hailing from different backgrounds and holding divergent belief systems, who are united in at least one thing: respect for and commitment to the rule of law and the fair

adjudication of our laws. There might yet be hands on the glass of American liberty strong enough to steady its current wobbling.

In closing, let me add that the Supreme Court's recent decision to limit severely the President's ability to conduct special military tribunals for those detained as 'enemy combatants' only heightens my optimism. Maybe, just maybe, we are beginning to ascend from the depths of a historical trough rather veering down a path away from our nation's long commitment to individual freedom. Unlike that girl (in the Indigo Girls' song) with the weight of the world in her hands, at least now I have hope and that's a start.

“Being An American”
2 July 2006
Prof. Kathleen Smythe

Five or six years ago in one of my African history classes, I was demonstrating to my students that ethnicity and identity can be fluid concepts. What I wanted them to see was that in Africa's past, it was possible for one person to think of herself as a savanna dweller one day and a farmer of millet the next and thus to slip between what many now think of as rigid ethnic boundaries. So I was asking them to make some personal identity choices; one of them was between being African and American, for example, a choice of import for my dozen or more students of African descent. I was taken aback when, upon completing the exercise, one of my students asked me where I would have stood for that choice, on the African or American side. They had already heard enough of my appreciation, respect and deep admiration for the Africans I have lived with and learned from to question where my loyalties, at least, if not my identity, lay. I answered by saying that I would have chosen the American side because no matter how long I have spent or could spend in Tanzania or elsewhere on the continent, I was very different than my African friends in fundamental ways; there were and are cultural traditions to which I and my family are fundamentally attached. But beneath their question was something I did not fathom at the time, which is that for this generation one's identity is not only fluid, but downright slippery, as they have come of age in a globalized world, which literally opens up to them millions of possibilities for being and desiring. As it turns out, they might not have needed the exercise after all.

This potpourri of ideas and identities to which not only the current generation of students have been exposed since birth, but also to which we are all currently exposed, comes at us in many ways. We can now choose or purchase our identities or facets of them from cultures and peoples we have never met or lived with. It is this individualism that I want to explore briefly today.

Alexis de Tocqueville, a 19th century French observer of America, noted positively Americans' habit of association. Tocqueville wrote,

Americans of all ages, all stations in life, and all types of disposition are forever forming associations. There are not only commercial and industrial associations in which all take part, but others of a thousand different types—religious, moral, serious, futile, very general and very limited, immensely large and very minute.

And these associations were one of the principal ways of maintaining our democracy, he thought.

But, he warned readers about individualism, a word with little use before him, and a concept he thought was born of democracy. Tocqueville wrote,

Individualism is a calm and considered feeling, which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows...

As this tendency grows, he wrote,

there are more and more people who, ... have gained or kept enough wealth and enough understanding to look after their own needs. Such folk owe no man anything and hardly expect anything from anybody. They form the habit of thinking of themselves in isolation and imagine that their whole destiny [and, as my students think, their identity] is in their hands.

For decades now, many social and political critics have been noting a marked tendency away from associationism and a definite shift toward individualism.

I happen to have been born and come of age in an era that Robert Putnam, a political scientist at Harvard, would mark as one of the low points of this century in terms of civic involvement and participation. From the 1960s on, Americans have been more disengaged than the previous several generations. That is, they are less likely to attend PTA meetings, less likely to vote, less likely to read the newspaper, and less likely to join neighborhood associations. On the other hand, they are likely to give money to the Sierra Club, for example, without ever making human contact with any of its members or officers. Putnam argues in his book *Bowling Alone* that this decrease in civic participation is due to many factors including two-career families, urban sprawl, television, and other mass media. Robert Bellah and others were writing about individualism and American politics in the 1980s in their popular book, *Habits of the Heart*. They argue that successful social and political movements are those in which the individual finds fulfillment and dignity in relation to and working with others. By this standard, giving \$100 to the Sierra Club does not add to personal dignity or fulfillment or to effective politics.

Without necessarily being able to articulate this at first, beginning in 1988 and intermittently since then, I have sought to learn from people, particularly Africans, who maintain greater levels of social capital than do I and my country people. Social capital refers to connections among individuals that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit.

One of Putnam's conclusions is that there is a striking correlation between high levels of social capital and lower levels of television viewing, violent crime, and of tax evasion, and on the flip side a correlation between high levels of social capital and good public health, and higher levels of tolerance for racial integration, gender equality, and civil liberties. According to Putnam, what most of us would recognize as a high quality of life is built from a dense network of social connections, the kinds of associations Tocqueville noticed almost two centuries ago. In Putnam's view, then, rampant individualism is creating a low quality of life in American neighborhoods.

Others are even stronger in their analysis of contemporary American individualism. Anthony Elliott and Charles Lemert, professors of sociology, argue that individualism is thriving not only in the United States but also in the West generally. In their view, uneven economic globalization is leading to two worlds, one where individualism reigns and is often psychologically damaging and another where marginalized peoples continue to be the bearers of traditions—religious and ethnic—as they navigate in a world with limited means and options. In this view, then, Americans will likely continue to be more and more adrift--unmoored from tradition, and stable

social connections--while the Africans I know will maintain their rootedness and their richer social networks while struggling for a decent living.

While it does make sense that changes of the post-WWII world, such as television and economic globalization are contributing factors to our unprecedented levels of individualism, I think there are deep-rooted reasons as well, reasons that enable Americans to readily become more individualistic when other factors also push in that direction. I want to explore one of these before closing. One of the things that strikes any visitor to Africa is the very quiet nature of African children. They rarely cry and they rarely fuss. I watched how babies were carried practically 16 hours a day, every day for several years, mostly by their mothers or by older siblings. I witnessed children, not just infants, nursing anywhere; I once saw a woman walking down the road with half a tree on her head nursing twins! I thought with such constant warm, nurturing contact who wouldn't be content and not need to cry or fuss.

Meredith Small, who explores the field of ethnopediatrics in her book Our Babies, Ourselves argues that the current way in which we raise our babies reveals deep-seated cultural traditions. For example, here in the United States, we place babies in high chairs, bouncy seats and in car seats so that we can eat in peace, drive where we want, and continue to get our work done. I am ashamed to admit it now, but when my eldest child was born, I was finishing my dissertation and he spent a lot of time in a family heirloom baby basket next to my computer as I struggled to write. We also encourage our babies to go to sleep on their own in their own crib or bed from as early an age as possible. All of this breeds children who learn that independence and self-reliance are very important. Fipa, on the other hand, the peoples I work with in Tanzania, carry their babies from birth, and before missionary influence, they used to sleep first with their mother, then with their grandmothers, and then with their peers. They were never alone, but more than that, such successive sleeping arrangements taught them about their wider kin networks and created deep bonds with their peers. During these multiple stages, children had increasing opportunities to make individual choices about with whom they slept, such as their own grandmother or a friend's grandmother. Fipa childhood emphasized the development of social capital and individual identity, thus achieving an important balance.

For me, being an American and a patriot means understanding and interrogating my cultural and political heritage and bringing the best of it to bear on contemporary problems. From the way we raise our babies to the way we think about our identities and our communities, many, if not most, Americans of the early 21st century are deeply individualistic. This suggests that it might be necessary to return to one of the characteristics of American life Tocqueville noted, that of associationism. The good news is that while we might learn about social capital as it exists in other societies, as I have, we don't have to reach for the traditions of others, but can recover some of our own, for we have a rich tradition, not too long ago, even, of stronger social capital. And, as parents we can ask grandparents about their own childhoods and child-rearing practices and about their experiences of community as we seek activities, practices and disciplines that promote children who value social connectedness as much as individual achievement. And, we can continue in our churches, one of the remarkable continuities of social engagement in American history, to build community and social networks within and without. The result of such efforts could be a country that is far more politically and economically inspiring and socially and emotionally fulfilling for our sons and daughters. Until then, I will continue to think of myself as an American, while longing and working for the social connectedness that my ancestors experienced and that my African friends still experience.

