

America: A nation as big and complex as the human spirit



BARB GUY

Our country is complicated.

You can tell yourself you're a true American if you patrol our borders in search of undocumented neighbors. You can tell yourself you're a true American if you help undocumented neighbors learn English and find work here.

You're a hero if you exercise your right to bear arms; you're a hero if you work for gun control. You're a patriot if you write an amendment to protect our flag; you're a patriot if you say free speech allows one to burn it. No matter your stripe, you can point to something our founders wrote that supports your point.

Our country was started by very bright people, visionaries. They allowed for complexity, in fact they planned on it. They made room for conflict, disagreement and dissent. They wanted a

country that would neither prohibit nor establish religion.

They wanted a country of the people, by the people, for the people. But their whole frame of reference was white, male and Christian.

In between the lines of our country's founding documents, the authors saved space for things they could scarcely imagine, complexities that the world would confront long after they were gone. They knew that we would have to navigate the interstices without them.

I love this schizophrenic country. There are people who think naughty words and pictures are ruining us and people who think censorship is ruining us. Some cherish the notion that protest is an integral part of American citizenship, while others see no irony in saying if-you-don't-like-it-here-well- then-just-leave.

We have folks who think it's un-American to question the president's choices and folks who think that, given his record, it's un-American not to. We have people who think that the Patriot Act is a reasonable measure for our troubled times, and people who think there is nothing patriotic about it.

In relation to many of the world's old dogs, our country is hardly out of puppyhood. We're

still exuberant and show-offish. We're eager to tug everyone else into our game. But our teeth are sharp. Some Americans think we should show the world how to live, no matter the cost, others think we ought to mind our own business until we've got it perfected here at home.

I love the language used by those who were knocked dizzy by their crush on America: life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness; the purple mountains, the spacious skies; the huddled masses yearning to breathe free; the twilight's last gleaming; the curvaceous slopes of California; the redwood forest to the gulf stream waters; the sweet land of liberty.

When I hear their words I feel sentimental and proud. When I get away from the city and see the land, I pulse with gratitude. When I see strangers pitching in to help strangers I see the promise of our country realized.

When we look back to the time of our nation's founding we see a far simpler time, a land of log cabins and apple pie. But we didn't just recently grow complicated. The beautiful phrases written to extol the wonder of America were penned during times of great conflict and uncertainty, times like our own.

While our founders were doing all that allowing for ambiguity, all

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that providing for minority opinion and for lawful protest, an entire race of people was being held as slaves, our native peoples were being lost to genocide, women were being denied full rights of citizenship - and those same visionaries, the brilliant people who invented our great country, were the otherwise high-minded perpetrators.

The thing is, a group of people - philosophers, dreamers, crackpots, rebels, oppressors, geniuses - were engaged in an experiment called Let's Make a New Country and they passed the amazing yet imperfect result on to us. Whether they would be proud, or sickened, by what we've done with it is anyone's guess.

A fluke of birth got most of us to this wonderful, lucky, prosperous, varied land. Every day, other people in less-well-crafted countries risk their lives to come here. They want to live freely, to live safely, to live independently and to raise their children in the land of limitless opportunity. They want to be protected from religious persecution. They want to make a decent living. They want to partake of the greatness of America.

No matter how we all got here, it's ours now, this country, and we get to take our turn at shaping it before we pass it on. The founders built a republic and challenged us to keep it. Because they are gone, we must be the visionaries now.

In my version we nurture every citizen from Bed-Stuy to Bel Air, we preserve our wild places, we respect our differences, we admit our mistakes, and we tread very lightly on the world stage. No doubt your dream is different.

How very American.

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