

## **The Paradox of Independence**

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I grew up believing in America – the dream, the promise, the reality – lock, stock, and barrel. I believed that America was an exceptional country, rooted in lofty ideals of justice and equality. But we weren't a land of dreamy-eyed idealists. We were tough, too. We won every war we fought, and rightly so, because we were always on the right side of history.

Well, there was that race thing, but it was a minor blip to a boy growing up north of Syracuse, New York. It was a Southern problem, and I sure hoped they could fix it. I was sure that the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. would take care of that.

I knew that some people thought the war in Vietnam was controversial, but not me. I believed in America as the world's defender of freedom, and so I attended my first protest march against the war in Vietnam as a counter-protest in support of America's involvement. I even wrote a song about it that said, in part, "Last night I fell asleep in this lousy bunker and dreamed about my family back home. By day I'm on patrol, and by night I face my soul. And I wonder if it's really right or wrong." And it ended with the line, "But all these people want is their freedom, and without our help they haven't got a prayer."

My America was defined by Henry Luce, promoted by *Time* magazine, and governed by Rockefeller Republicans.

But I grew up a little, left high school, and started having some first-hand experiences of what America was like for people who were different from me.

I didn't go to college after high school, so I got a job to support myself, and the best job I could find with my high school diploma was in an industrial laundry. They did the washing for businesses, hotels, restaurants, and hospitals. It was hot, steamy, hard work, but I had a softer job filling orders with clean laundry, probably because I could be counted on to understand the work orders and do simple math.

This was my first exposure to the lives of lower-class working people, and I realized that they lived differently from the way I had been raised. I saw that the

relative comfort and abundance I'd had as a child was not universally shared. These people came from homes smaller than mine, their language was cruder, and they expected to spend their whole working lives working incredibly hard, for minimum wage.

I guess I knew there were poor people, but I thought that it was because they were lazy. But these people worked harder than I ever did and never expected to get ahead. And for all their apparent privations, they shared a deep level of camaraderie, affection, and support that went far beyond the casual connections and petty sniping I'd been accustomed to in my middle class growing up.

And then my friends started going to Vietnam. When they came back they told me what it was like over there, the violence, cruelty, and fundamental meaninglessness of the war. The Vietnamese had been fighting for independence for centuries. They fought the Chinese, they fought the French, and now they were fighting the Americans. It wasn't so much that they wanted to be communists as they hated America more. This was not the war that had been advertised. America's veil was beginning to slip for me.

So, naturally, I became a long-haired, bearded advocate for justice, working for Students for a Democratic Society and counseling would-be conscientious objectors in how to file a successful challenge to the draft.

But it was during this period that I discovered that it was possible to be hated for how one looked. There were people in America who saw my long hair and beard and assumed that I was an un-American troublemaker, or worse. I outran more than one jeep full of rednecks who wanted to beat me with their fists, belts, and hammers. Arrested for a minor offense, the judge bemoaned that he wasn't going to be able to put me in prison where I belonged. "You people are worse than murderers," he said.

I wondered about King's words, that we would be judged by the content of our character, rather than the color of our skin. Well, my skin was white, but I was still being judged for how I looked without any regard to my honesty or integrity.

This gave me a twinge of what it might be like to be Black in America, but with one big difference: I could choose the way I looked, but black skin was forever.

And then there was the 1973 assassination of Salvador Allende, the president of Chile who had been pursuing democratic reforms. The revelation that the CIA had

orchestrated his murder was a shock and disappointment for many. It certainly was a disillusionment for me. I was horrified to discover that my government had a murderous foreign policy that repudiated the very ideals on which America was founded. The errors of Vietnam weren't an isolated event; they were the rule!

From then on, my eyes were opened and I began to see injustice, inequality, and exploitation everywhere.

I'd been taught that the westward migration in the 1930's was the result of the Midwest dust bowl, that greedy farmers had misused their land, and when it ceased to yield they just, almost inexplicably, walked away from their land, their farms, and their homes to go to California.

I discovered that wasn't the case at all. Survival in the Midwest was always tough for small farmers, who needed to borrow money from banks to get their crops in. And it only took a couple of hard years for the loans to default and the ownership of the land shifted to the banks, making the former owners into tenant farmers, sharecroppers, really. And then, when the economy crashed in the depression, the banks that owned the land decided they could get a better return if they eliminated the farmers from the picture. Hundreds of thousands of farmers, families, and children were forced off their land by the banks. With nowhere to go, California seemed like their only hope. It was such a powerful betrayal of the American way of life that it's no wonder that revolutionary ideas of socialism and communism began to take root. Money was revealed to be more important than people in America, a harsh reality that Karl Marx had predicted less than a century before.

You'd think that I was immune to any further disillusionment by then, but you'd be wrong. In the mid-90's I did a major research project on the Vietnam War using recently declassified documents obtained through the Freedom of Information Act. I learned from America's leaders, in their own words, the real reason and logic behind the Vietnam War. It was a move in our cold war with Russia. We wanted a contained area where we were sure the violence wouldn't spread, because we wanted to demonstrate to the Russians our willingness to sacrifice American lives to make a point. 58,151 Americans and more than a million Vietnamese died, not for any good reason except to prove to Russia that we weren't so soft a nation that we would shrink from sacrificing our own.

And then Howard Zinn revealed that what we were seeing was no recent moral degradation, but that the entirety of America history is shot through with the tortured, exploited, and murdered lives of the underclass, whether they be indigenous people, African-Americans, Chinese, Irish, the dirt poor, or just those unfortunate enough to find themselves in the wrong part of the work force.

Within this framework, the events of Ferguson, Missouri and elsewhere don't really come as a surprise at all. The pattern of policing in black neighborhoods, though less explicit, is no less unequal than it was during the Jim Crow era. Our own news media have made it clear, over and over, that white lives matter more than black. How many times have we been moved to tears at the plight of some attractive young white woman while ignoring that the same thing may happen to black women all the time! It's time for us to realize that black lives really do matter, too.

So I join with Langston Hughes in calling for America to be America again: "O, let my land be a land where Liberty is crowned with no false patriotic wreath, but opportunity is real, and life is free, equality is in the air we breathe."

We live in a land where the individualistic ideal of independence pretends to walk hand in hand with the beautiful ideal of freedom. But they're not as compatible as they might seem. Independence is always independence *from* something. When this basic truth is lost, independence can masquerade as an absolute value, something that is good in and of itself.

Independence is sometimes celebrated as an absolute kind of freedom – free as a bird! But take a look at the bird on our order of service. It is free, but it isn't free from its need for the nectar of the flower. It isn't free from want; what happens when there are no flowers? It starves. It's certainly not free from fear; there are many creatures that lust after that bird as their food. Freedom is of limited use to a dead bird.

It turns out that the paradox of independence is that it takes a lot of things going right for us to be free.

Consider Roosevelt's Four Freedoms: freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, freedom from fear. It takes a lot of cooperation to have those freedoms; radical individualistic independence makes them impossible.

America may be an unrealized promise, but we needn't look too far afield to find unrealized promises all around us, even in our own denomination.

At the Service of the Living Tradition at last week's General Assembly in Portland, Oregon, the Rev. Marlin Lavinhar told about something that had happened in his church in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

He described a man in his church, a stalwart member, a lawyer and humanist who had been a member of the church for over 30 years. He'd held a variety of leadership positions over the years and was one of those people you always could count on.

Well, one day, this fellow walked into his minister's office and said he had something to share. He said, "Marlin, I want to tell you something that I would have never told anyone in this church and never have.

"I grew up Pentecostal and to this day I still speak in tongues."

Marlin said that he tried not to look too surprised. But he was shocked.

As Rev. Lavinhar continued the story, he recalled that he asked the man, "How often?" and he said, "Probably about once or twice a week." He described it as a kind of meditation that allows his mind to rest.

Marlin recalled, "Once I got over my initial disbelief & quietly checked my own prejudices, I was struck hardest by realizing that this is a central part of his spiritual life, and he has spent 30 years in our congregation and has never felt he could tell anyone in our church without being judged negatively and maybe even made to feel like an outsider. And he was right."

Marlin went on, "I know, because that's how I felt myself initially. Of course, he's the same intelligent, successful, rational, justice-centered man I've always known. It made me bump-up against my own prejudices.

"It was a pretty stark condemnation of me and my community, that he felt he had to keep his truth, his spirituality, in the closet in order to be welcome in our church."

Marlin went on to ask, "Don't you wonder, how many are hiding themselves and their spirituality within our congregations? I'll tell you one thing, we'll never grow our churches if they're places where people have to be spiritually closeted."

Do you remember the old Cinderella story – not the Disney one but the original one from the Brothers Grimm? It's pretty grim. Cinderella's stepsisters wanted so badly to fit into the glass slipper that one of them cut off a toe trying to fit in, and the other cut off her heel. What an incredibly gruesome and painful

metaphor for trying to fit in! Is that the kind of spiritual community we want to be, one that requires people to either hide or cut off parts of themselves in order to be accepted?

We've gone long beyond the point where Unitarian Universalist congregations can serve as safe hiding places for progressive atheists. If we are to grow into our own unfulfilled promise, we need to live the radical inclusion that we claim to preach. We need to extend our welcome to those who are different. We need to stop hiding our own differences from one another.

Ask yourselves how many people already in our congregation, and those not yet in our congregation, could experience the richness of Roosevelt's Four Freedoms here on a Sunday morning? Freedom of worship? Not if they speak in tongues. Freedom of speech? Not if they want to tell the truth about how their lives are different from yours. Freedom from fear? Not if we react with disapproval and distance toward those whose views we find disagreeable.

If we are to fulfill our unrealized promise, we need to learn to be comfortable being uncomfortable with difference. The day when a devout Christian feels as welcome here as an atheist, when a Muslim feels as safe here as a secular humanist, is the day when we will begin to take our unique place in the evolving American religious landscape.

Or how about those who fear they might bring the wrong snack, or flowers, or put something away in the wrong place? Our criticisms and judgments are certainly not limited to theology.

As we open our hearts to those suffering from the excesses of our society, let's not forget to remember those suffering from the judgmentalism and exclusion right here in our midst. We've got a long way to go, too.

May it be so.