

“Echoes of the Heart”

Reflections on Life and Community Living

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Patriotism: a messy sorting out. With our July 4th celebrations behind us and with *election 2008* gaining full stride, talk of *patriotism* continues to sound out, recalling the vision of our forefathers to form a *more perfect union*.

If we reflect on it, what is patriotism? Is it sporting an American flag lapel pin on our dress or suit coat? Is it displaying an American flag in front of our home on special holidays?

Is patriotism supporting our government no matter what it does, or is it respectful dissent when our government falls short of our expectations and our sense of our Founding Fathers' ideals?

In simple terms, *patriotism* is love of country. But of course, it's never that simple.

For example, most Americans, at some point, were immigrants. Indeed, other than the Native Americans, we're a robust nation of proud immigrants. From all over planet earth we have come.

With that in mind, do we love our country by being open and welcoming of new immigrants? Or do we better express our patriotism by closing our borders and constructing twenty foot fences along hundreds of miles of our border with Mexico?

Looking back and looking forward. Part of the national divide here is over the usual conservative/ progressive fault lines. Do we *look back* or do we *look forward*? And better still, why can't it be a blending of both?

Looking back evokes celebrative memories of our history and our cherished traditions. Many such memories recall noble achievements and acts of national sacrifice and generosity. Our involvement and eventual triumph in around World War II comes to mind.

However, other memories are more messy, evoking stirring controversy—as with the Vietnam War and our current war in Iraq. To be deemed *patriotic*, are we obligated to defend the actions of our nation even when history has proven us wrong and international opinion runs overwhelmingly against us?

It's at this point that a healthy patriotism *looks forward*, where looking forward evokes our highest ideals and our undimmed hope of a *more perfect union*.

Certainly, there are dangers in a too-zealous patriotism—a patriotism where the fever of nationalism runs too high. For love of country must never be understood as *apart from* and *independent of* the global community.

It's like with our families. When we love individual family members to the detriment of the total family, dysfunction is soon to follow. It's the same with nations vis-à-vis the larger family of nations.

While *patriotism* certainly leads us to love our nation—imperfections and all—still, the true patriot must always be free to dissent. Sometimes dissent is the path that leads to *a more perfect union*. The Founding Fathers seemed to intuitively grasp this; for always, we are evolving, seeking to make things better and moving to higher ground.

Recognizing pluralism. In our increasingly pluralistic United States, a broadening understanding of patriotism is needed. Wherever the guiding light of our people is *towards a more perfect union*, diverse voices of patriotism merit a hearing.

Our nation never does well with *cookie cutter* definitions of American life. That's because such *too-easy* definitions run counter to the pluralism that is all about us. In a word, the ethos of our spirit asks for more.

Narrow definitions of patriotism smack in the face of our constitutional rights. And always, somebody (some ethnic group or religion) is being left out, scorned or snubbed.

All of which is to suggest that there are a myriad of ways to love one's country and we have to be careful in the sorting out process. The best of our patriots come in many stripes and colors and, at their best, they continue to inspire us to live out the highest ideals of the nation we love.