

Readings:

From Walt Whitman, in *Leaves of Grass*:

THOUGHTS

Of these years I sing.

How they pass and have pass'd through convuls'd pains, as through parturitions,

How America illustrates birth, muscular youth, the promise, the sure fulfillment,
the absolute success, despite of people – illustrates evil as well as good,

How many hold despairingly to the models departed, caste, myths, obedience, compulsion, and to infidelity,

How the great cities appear – how the Democratic masses, turbulent, willful, as I love them,

How the whirl, the contest, the wrestle of evil with good,
The sounding and resounding, keep on and on,

How society waits unform'd, and is for a while between things ended,
And things begun.

TO THE STATES

To the States, or any one of them, or any city of the States:
Resist much, obey little.

Once unquestioning obedience, once fully enslaved.

Once fully enslaved, no nation, state, city of this earth,
ever afterward resumes its liberty.

A Religious Look at the Fourth of July

Chico Hathaway

July 29, 2008

Summer's here, and the Fourth of July is just around the corner. The forecast calls for ... plenty of bratwurst on the grill, potato salad, and fireworks. And, as has been the tradition for centuries, we will have Fourth of July parades, and a veritable tsunami of American flags -- and all things red, white and blue. You can be sure that there will also be a flood of speeches - grand-sounding oration extolling American freedom, independence, and patriotism.

If we think of patriotism as a sort of national religion, Independence Day is clearly America's high holy day. Christians have Christmas and Easter, Jews have Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and Americans have... the Fourth.

And when you stop to think about it, there really are obvious religious aspects to this national holiday. In fact, the religious nature of the speech and symbols connected with the fourth are plain as the fireworks against the night sky. Consider how July 4, 1776, the date that marks the birth of the nation, is held up as a defining moment, like the Nativity of Jesus. Or how physical reminders of the original Independence Day – the parchment copy of the Declaration, Thomas Jefferson's desk, the liberty bell, the flag that flew over Fort Sumter - are painstakingly preserved and treated like the

reliquary bones of the holy Christian saints and martyrs – so they can be worshipped by pilgrims on bended knee.

Pay attention also to the religious overtones of the politicians' speeches. You will hear the founding fathers spoken of in the reverential manner normally reserved for the Old Testament prophets or Jesus' disciples.

And the politicians' speeches will be strongly seasoned with the words "freedom" and "independence." It's as though that the very mention of these words is supposed to create sunbeams from heaven and a trumpet fanfare in the minds of Americans - though nobody really bothers to say precisely what they mean when they use these words. "We're fighting this war for our freedom!" That's nice. Was someone about to enslave us? "Above all else, we value freedom!" Really? Above all else? So we should joyfully watch while people exercise their freedom to rob houses, or commit murder? Or "American independence will not be compromised!" As if global interdependence were not an accepted reality, or as if the British were about to sail across the Atlantic so they could batter down our gates and retake what they lost more than two centuries ago. In Catholic grade school, we were taught to always bow our heads in reverence when the name of Jesus was spoken. In a very similar way, the word "freedom" is supposed to generate a reflexive reverence in each of us.

And especially on the Fourth, a reverence for the holiness of the American flag is not only hoped-for, but demanded. It's plain that in this country the flag holds a special status normally given only to religious icons. Consider the outrage over flag "desecration" (the word itself means *violation of*

something sacred!). Consider the long list of official policies for the proper display and treatment of the flag. Consider that we have a pledge of allegiance directed toward (not the nation first, but) the flag! On occasion, the flag's religious status is even stated explicitly: In 1900 a book entitled *The Crime of the Century – the Desecration of the American Flag* insisted that citizens protect “those three sacred jewels – the cross, the bible, and the flag.”

Look: I have no problem with religion; I admire reverence. And if we swell our chests a little on Independence Day, and get a little misty-eyed when the octogenarian World War II veterans pass by as part of the Fourth of July, there's a good reason. We all want to feel like we ourselves are part of something bigger, grander, more noble. We want to know that our everyday lives are contributing to something good, something holy. We want to have the sense that something great has happened, and is happening, and we are part of it. That is a profoundly religious sentiment. That is the spirit of God calling us from deep within, from before we were born. And... isn't that why we keep breathing?

The problem is that these noble inclinations, these religious leanings, are prone to being twisted to serve the goals of dishonest government officials and business tycoons. Religion is powerful, and religious symbols are powerful. These can be used, and have been used, and will be used to lead us away from what we really hold dear. Our natural inclination toward nobility can be turned into something twisted and ugly: My country – love it or leave it! Or – My country, right or wrong! Or – My country, if you're not with us, you're against us! Or consider nationalism – the notion that my

country is better than all the others, and is therefore entitled to trample on all other nations. And why does my country deserve this ultimate authority? As it turns out, just because I happen to have been born here! Nationalism is patriotism disfigured.

These deviant forms of patriotism are the equivalents of the worst of religious fundamentalism: You relieve me of the burden of questioning, you tell me what to think, you tell me what to do, and I'll follow blindly.

That these contorted and ugly corruptions of patriotism even exist is a tremendous shame. Because we really do have a lot to be proud of. The founding principles of our nationhood really do deserve our reverence.

On the Fourth of July in the USA we celebrate the signing of the Declaration of Independence, wherein the 13 original colonies gave notice to England that they no longer considered British authority valid. The Declaration's preamble contains these famous words:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it,

There is much to be proud of here!

The idea that all people “are created equal” – though it took decades before slavery was abolished, decades more before women were allowed to vote, and remains imperfectly realized to this day – rings with respect for the divine nature in all of us. And it is profoundly noble to assert that all of us have fundamental rights – just by dint of being human. And the authors of the Declaration rightly deserve praise for raising up the common citizen by proclaiming that governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed – and not from some “divine authority,” or birthright.

Easily overlooked but perhaps most important is the opening of the preamble: “We hold these truths to be self-evident...” For here the authors assert that they have taken stock of the world and have seen themselves what is true, and they are holding that up for the world to see... on their own authority. Just their own authority. Consider that – it’s almost shocking. It’s just... us. “We hold these truths to be self-evident...” No approval by a king, or a queen, or a church, or a pope, is required. We are capable of discerning the truth, and acting upon it. Indeed, it is our duty to do so.

The Declaration of Independence codified a new understanding of what it is to be human. No longer servants of an external authority, the new Americans were to be little less than angels - strong, capable, independent agents, in charge of guiding their own destiny. There is much to be proud of here, much to respect and honor, much even to worship.

OK – so say you’re a person who has taken stock of all this, and really sees the beauty of the American ideal. Maybe you even hear echoes of those

ideals in the principles of this church. What might patriotism look like for you?

Let me give you an example:

On a Fourth of July more than 150 years ago, in 1852, the weather was hot, and the controversy over slavery was boiling. The great Frederick Douglass, a self-educated man, himself a former slave, stood up before a gathering in Rochester New York's Corinthian hall. Here is just a part of what he said:

What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer; a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciation of tyrants, brass fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade and solemnity, are, to Him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy -- a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages. There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices more shocking and bloody than are the people of the United States, at this very hour.

Powerful stuff! Here is a form of patriotism that we can admire! What he was doing here was simply holding up a mirror for Americans, and making them look into it. You claim you have noble ideals? Get up and act on

them! You say you believe in justice and equality and human dignity?
Show me! He said – There's a problem here, people, and you know it!
Things need to change!

Since Frederick Douglass' time, we have certainly made progress. Slavery has been abolished, and the right to vote has been extended to all citizens. The New Deal helped create a safety net for the least powerful. Civil rights legislation advanced the status of disadvantaged Americans. But our religious and patriotic duty requires that we continue to hold up a mirror to ourselves, and conduct a fearless moral inventory. What about today? Are we honoring our ideals? Do our domestic laws and foreign policies reflect an unwavering commitment to equality, dignity, and self-determination? The honest answer is: No. We are not there yet. There remains a lot that needs fixing.

As people who believe in the ideals of our country, as people who seek to live their religion, we can follow the example of patriots like Frederick Douglass, and the founding fathers. We can speak up about the injustices, unequal treatment, failure to respect human dignity. And we can work to bring about change.

No matter who we are, all of us can help. A good start is to simply pay attention more – and then begin to connect more with neighbors and friends. All of us can speak up – within our communities, and by contacting those with more direct influence – government representatives, and news outlets, for example. We can consciously teach our children and grandchildren about the values we hold dear, and the need to keep insisting on those ideals.

There are literally thousands of groups of people working to make this nation better – walk into the parish hall after the service and you’ll notice several right there. Join one of these thousands of groups – or start your own! Pitch in! Put your shoulder to the wheel!

Throughout his life, even after slavery was abolished, Frederick Douglass viewed the Fourth of July not as “a day of complacent self-congratulation, but a day in which all Americans should reflect on how far they have come in realizing the noble ideals of the nation’s Founders.” That’s a model for all of us – the Fourth to be a day of honest reflection on our successes, and our failures.

So give me no smug self-satisfied patriotism – of the America-love it or leave it variety. The founding fathers would have no respect for the lazy patriot that salutes the flag, applauds and cheers for vacuous speeches about “freedom” – and then goes back inside and watches TV. Our challenge is to be honest, admit our failings, and then (OK, after a couple of brats and some potato salad) ... and then roll up our sleeves and get to work to make things better. It’s the patriotic thing to do! And it’s the religious thing to do. It’s nothing more than what the founding fathers did.

As we say in this church, we are all born one more redeemer. It’s just us.