

What Does Being a Patriot Mean to Me?

Transcending Words and Symbols

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The sun stood atop the horizon, skipping pebbles of light across the water. My grandfather and I sat across from each other at a table on the deck overlooking the bay. He was, as always, in his wheelchair. My chair was wet from the earlier rain, but I didn't mind; we were already deep in conversation.

"Why didn't I know you're a veteran?" I asked. "Why didn't you tell me?" I felt incredibly confused. He had always pinned his wheelchair on a childhood illness. He paused to look out at the sunset, and I did the same, remorseful that I had said something wrong.

We spent a lot of time looking out at the water that evening. The sun never retreated behind the edge of the world—but maybe that was just my imagination. After a while, he answered, "Because I didn't want my grandson to think less of me."

The tension was palpable. Why would I think less of him? I'd heard tales about the harrowing things soldiers experience, and judging by his silence over the years, he hadn't had the most delightful time either, but that's nothing by which to judge someone.

Another pause. Shortly, he cut to the core: "We didn't win. They called us losers. They spat on us."

"No," I said. "I understand what it means to lay your life on the line for your country. In fact, I respect you even more."

A third pause. This one was the longest. I could feel the pressure mounting as we both looked over the edge toward the Chesapeake. At last, I couldn't tolerate it anymore. I asked the question burning in my mind since the beginning of our conversation: "Would you do it again?"

My grandfather looked at me deeply, pressed his hands against his withered legs, and said without hesitation: "Yes."

It occurred to me at that moment by the shore that the story of our nation is written by silent patriots like my grandfather. From the foggy fields of Concord and the shot heard round the world--to the rooftops of Fallujah and the mile-long strikes of American snipers--the true authors of our freedom are nameless patriots: a farmer setting aside his plow to pick up a musket, a nurse putting motherhood on hold to answer the call of duty, a pastor praying for the souls of his congregation at home while giving hope to his platoon overseas. In my grandfather's eyes I see that patriotic hope, a hope for America's future. But at the same time, I sense a need for appreciation in the hearts of silent patriots like him—a need so deep that he felt ashamed for so long to share with me his most cherished honor. It's disheartening that so many Americans are either unable or unwilling to acknowledge that need.

I would not take away any American's freedom. Although I recite it with every fiber, I cannot command my peers to face Old Glory and stand for The Pledge. Nor can I legislate that an athlete stand for "The Star-Spangled Banner" or that a teenager put down his hot dog and Dr. Pepper so he can put his hand over his heart. So little do some Americans know about the real game-changers in our democracy. We lionize the ones who score touchdowns on Sunday while we marginalize the ones who touched-down on Normandy. How can we discredit the sacrifices of a veteran? How can we torment a wheelchair-bound hero like my grandfather, with both

insults and with neglect? Jesus Christ explained such behavior with more compassion than I'm able to muster: "Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do."

Sadly, those who ignore our banner and our anthem are ignorant of what they stand for. Sure, placing our hands over our hearts is a symbol of patriotism, but the flag's symbolism is steeped in the history and the blood of our soldiers. From Bunker Hill to San Juan Hill to Hamburger Hill, soldiers have defended our rights and our opportunities to accomplish our dreams. Our only hope for a future is to acknowledge *what*--and more importantly, *who*--made America possible.

In an era of maniacal dictators wielding toy-box missiles, in an age of dogmatic mullahs igniting jihadist ideologies, it is easy to forget that our greatest war is always against ignorance. This fight is on our soil—and our willingness to fight it will define us either as patriots or cowards. The mission starts at home. It strengthens in our churches. It is our patriotic duty to carry it into our schools and workplaces. It's a war that every American who has plumbed the full measure of what it means to be a patriot must win. I plan to fight it as a history teacher by amplifying America's mission and by adopting, as I am now, the voice of a patriot. But if the ultimate metric of my patriotism is how loudly I speak the truth, then the decibel level of my voice may have no more residual value than a knee taken during an anthem, for both behaviors are purely symbolic.

True patriots speak with action.

They make bold sacrifices that put them in wheelchairs, tear them from their families, and cripple their finances. By definition, a patriot must serve, with boots on the ground or with wings in the air. This I must do, retracing my grandfather's hallowed steps, even if they lead me

to the ultimate sacrifice. But for now, my patriotic mission is to proclaim through my writing the silent histories of those who defend freedom--and to spread those histories to those who do not understand. The things our veterans have lost—the things they still carry silently with them—these are the things that will bind our history and our hope together.

My grandfather is a patriot—a silent hero who would do it again to protect our nation's legacy. Where his leaves off, my mission begins.

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