

READING

Tao Te Ching as rendered by Ursula LeGwin

To follow the way yourself is real power.
To follow it in the family is abundant power.
To follow it in the community is steady power.
To follow it in the whole country is lasting power.
To follow it in the world is universal power.

So in myself I see what self is.
In my household I see what family is.
In my town I see what community is.
In my nation I see what a country is.
In my world I see what is under heaven.



Mark Ward

Peaceable Patriotism

UU Church West, Brookfield

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Mark Ward, a life-long Unitarian Universalist and nearly 20-year member of UUCW, is entering his final year of seminary at Meadville Lombard Theological School in Chicago after completing his internship at First Unitarian Society in Madison. He and his wife, Debbie, have raised three daughters, Anna, Erica and Meredith, in this church.

SERMON

Last spring during the demonstrations opposing the war in Iraq, one slogan in particular seemed to capture people's attention. "Peace" the placards declared, "is patriotic." There were those who scoffed, who saw in the slogan a cynical gesture aimed at the television cameras and could only hear calls for peace as bids for appeasement.

It's certainly true that in the course of this nation's history, peace and patriotism are two words that are rarely joined. We grow up with the notion imprinted in our minds that the greatest acts of patriotism are those accomplished in warfare. And so celebrations of patriotism are often accompanied by the show of arms and tales of noble battles won. Our national anthem, the Star Spangled Banner, after all, evokes steadfastness in the heat of battle as the greatest measure of devotion to country.

I wonder, though, whether it is time to broaden our notion of all that counts as patriotism. I don't mean in any way to dispute the honor due to those who have taken arms for their country, but I do want to suggest that devotion to this country has other dimensions as well. It's worth considering what, ultimately, patriotism is, and what it requires of us. I won't deny that love of country requires us to defend our values, and there are occasions when doing that may require the use of force. What I want to argue is that there are peaceable elements of patriotism that need exploring and reviving, and that these elements, far from weakening the nation hold the seeds to enduring peace.

Let's begin by looking at the founding document of American patriotism, the Declaration of Independence. And I want to focus on that most famous section, which Forrest Church describes as "The American Creed." Here's how it goes:

"We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among

these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men.”

In a recent book, Church argues that two fundamental principles arise out of this section that capture the heart of the American experiment: justice for all, because we are equal, and liberty for all, because the rights identified in the document are inherent to, they belong to, each of us. No appeal is made to outside authority. These principles are held to be “self-evident,” essential facts of human existence.

Justice and liberty, then, we could reasonably call the touchstones, the twin poles, if you will, of the American vision, the yardsticks by which we can measure our progress as a nation. The two have a kind of yin, yang quality to them: justice tempers liberty; it stands for the principle that each of us has a claim on the other. Liberty stands for the principle that there are limits to the claims that can be made on us.

Each is grounded in a fundamental notion of what it means to be human, what it is to live lives that are “happy,” that is satisfying and fulfilling. The purpose of government, the founders said, is to craft as practicable a way as possible to make that happen.

My earliest memories of patriotic celebrations go back to the Fourth of July parades in the small town in New Jersey where I grew up. I would wrap my bicycle in red, white and blue streamers and tool along Main Street as the fire trucks and high school bands passed by. It was a welcome moment in this quiet town when we as neighbors would attend to and celebrate each other. Patriotism, love of country, has its origins in moments like these: not in lofty lectures or history lessons but in the care we show for one another. To this day, I have a fondness for that little town, borne of the pride I felt in such moments.

But there can be a down side to that kind of fondness. Harnessed to fear, pride can turn into chauvinism – a fanatical devotion to country – and chauvinism breeds suspicion and prejudice. The world becomes divided into “us” and “them,” the sheep and the goats. On a large scale this becomes expressed as nationalism, the belief in the superiority of one’s native land or people. And once we begin arguing for a pecking order of humanity we open the door to all kinds of mischief. If we regard others as lesser than us, we need have no compunction about riding over them roughshod to accomplish our ends. We may even argue we do them a service by doing so.

Nationalists identifying a demonic “them,” tend to draw narrow boundaries around what they regard as the righteous “us” and demand a strong level of allegiance to that ideal. The ultimate expression of this perspective is Stephan Decatur’s toast to America in 1816: “Our country, right or wrong.”

G.K. Chesterton had one of the best responses to this line. “My country, right or wrong is a thing no patriot would ever think of saying, except in a desperate case,” Chesterton said. “It is like saying, ‘My mother, drunk or sober.’”

We can laugh at Chesterton’s joke, but we also recognize the truth behind it. We make a mistake in confusing the nationalist’s chauvinism with the patriot’s love of country. Yes, our country remains our country, however it may stumble. But we do it no service in ignoring its missteps.

“America, America, God mend thine every flaw,” wrote Katherine Lee Bates in “America the Beautiful,” which we sang earlier. “Confirm thy soul in self-control, thy liberty in law.”

The flaws that Bates warns of in her poem clearly are those of excess. In 1893, the year she wrote “America the Beautiful,” pressures were growing to expand American dominion further in the world.

These pressures would later result in the Spanish-American War of 1898.

At the time, Bates, the daughter of a Congregationalist pastor, was head of the English department of Wellesley College. She had been on an extended holiday when her party visited Pike’s Peak in Colorado. Returning to her room that night after viewing the “purple mountain majesties” she is said to have remarked to a friend that she felt countries like England had failed because, while they may have been “great,” they had not been “good.” “Unless we crown our greatness with goodness, and our bounty with brotherhood,” she went on, “our beloved America may go the same way.”

America’s ascendancy in the world in the 1890s, the growing bounty of its people, left no doubt about its emerging greatness. Yet, goodness: that was another matter. “Confirm thy soul in self-control,” Bates urged. Let us not become infatuated with our strength. The nation’s moral center, the principles of democracy, demand reins on our ambitions, reins that, rather than limiting our liberties, will enshrine them in law.

Sometimes the patriot’s duty is to stand up against the nationalist’s shrill demands. As Medea Benjamin, founder of “Code Pink,” one of the newly emerging antiwar groups, put it, “The ultimate in patriotism is loving your country so much that you hold it to a higher standard, and you are willing to do everything you can to help it reach that standard.”

The patriot’s love of country, then, is more than simply a warm feeling for one’s native soil. It is a commitment to, a deep appreciation for the principles of democracy as well as the traditions and practices that have come to embody them. Patriotism becomes a way of being in the world.

And the curious thing is that patriotism lived that way is not exclusionary. Concern for the good of one’s own country leads not to suspicion or inflated pride but to concern for the wider human family.

The good will we learn by extending our circle of concern to our neighbors and fellow citizens naturally carries us beyond our borders.

Still, it's worth asking: Does patriotism have a future in our interdependent world? Martha Nussbaum, of the University of Chicago, doubts that it does. She says we find the sources of our obligations to each other in the community of all humankind, not in our countries of origin. Sure, we should attend to our family, our city, our country, but our main obligation is a larger one to all humanity. "If we really do believe that all human beings are created equal and endowed with certain inalienable rights," she said, "we are morally required to think about what that conception requires us to do with and for the rest of the world."

I think that's right, but I also think it can be in tune with patriotism. We find the greatness of America, the source of our patriotic pride, not in some attribute unique to this nation or its people. We see it, rather, in a vision of human capability and worth that took root here and could contribute much to the reconciliation of the Earth's peoples.

This is what I mean by a peaceable patriotism. If, in the words of Katherine Lee Bates, we would be not merely a great nation, but a good one, we would carry that great vision forward – "crown our good with brotherhood from sea to shining sea" – and be the beacon for hope that our nation's founders aspired to be.

Now, let me carry that a step further and talk about the means we use to achieve it. In a recent article in *Atlantic Monthly*, journalist Robert Kaplan argues that now that the U.S. is an established global power it must use its advantage it has to "manage an unruly world." It is, he says, "American power, and American power only, that can serve as an organizing

principle for the worldwide expansion of liberal civil society."

The difficulty is, of course, that, when nations like ours foment change, they create the conditions for their own demise. "The very spread of the democracy for which we struggle weakens our grip on many heretofore docile governments," he says. Getting our way, Kaplan says, requires us to be "devious." We must enlist our military to "operate nimbly, in the shadows and behind closed doors . . . Don't bluster, don't threaten, but quietly and severely punish bad behavior. It's the way the Romans did it."

Now, when I hear someone advocating the methods of the Roman Empire to advance liberal democracy, no less praise stealth and devious dealings to promote open, honest and responsible government, alarm bells start to ring in my head. There is plainly some deep denial going on here.

As an antidote to this way of thinking, I commend to you a recent book by Jonathan Schell called "The Unconquerable World." Schell says that lines of argument like Kaplan's are dead-end thinking that needs to be reassessed. It is sadly true, he says, that democratic republics have a historical tendency to pursue imperial ambitions. It was true of the Athens of Pericles, of France, of England, as Katherine Bates remarked, and, now, the United States. Imperialism invariably, he says, proves to be "a menace to republican government; it destroys the institutions out of which it arises."

What happens, Schell says, is that the energy and vitality that freedom gives to republican government, is converted into force. And this force is often used to restrict freedom. This circle is not as vicious as it seems, though, because at its heart is a mistaken assumption: that violence is the most successful tool for accruing power and accomplishing change.

It seems obvious, doesn't it? From our earliest days in the schoolyard we learn to give wide berth to those who would assault or intimidate us. Commentators like Kaplan, and many in power in Washington today, see in our nation's military might the means to remake the world in our image, republican democracy American style. When, in fact, the violence they do on its behalf, no matter how subtle and clever, only alienates those they seek to convince. It works directly against the interests and ethos of democracy.

Why? Because democracy and violence are antithetical; they work against each other. The 20th century philosopher Hannah Arendt said that power is created, not when some people coerce others, but when they willingly take action together in support of common purposes. Power is in the hands, not of those who issue the commands, but of those who obey them. Think of your teacher's advice about that schoolyard bully: he only has as much power over you as you give him. Arendt goes so far as to say that violence and power are opposites: the more violence you employ, the less power, ultimately, you have. That's not to say oppressors can't force their way for the short term, but they dare not turn their backs.

So what is the alternative? Let's return to our mistaken assumption. If violence used to make another person to do something is the opposite of power, then true power is an approach that enlists others to act on their own free will. It respects the dignity of others and enlists their aid, rather than demanding their compliance. It is something very much like democracy.

We remember John Adams, who in his old age wrote that the decisive events in the revolution came long before the colonists fired on the British. It was the solidarity of a people determined not to do the crown's bidding – not success at arms – that won the nation its independence, he said.

This lesson is not unlike what Gandhi learned in his campaign of satyagraha, or non-violent resistance, in

the struggle to overthrow British control of India: action without violence in support of one's beliefs can defeat seeming overwhelming strength. And what is it that motivates such world-changing actions? Well, in a word, it's love.

"We call that person free," Schell writes, "who, in disregard of force and fear, acts in accord with what his soul prompts him to love." Likewise, it seems to me that true patriotism also is grounded in love. And by love I don't mean sentimental affection: I mean a deep, demanding, life-changing orientation to oneself, one's neighbors and the world that sees all as connected and of worth.

It is born of the happy moments of celebration where we acknowledge our affection, affinity and duty to one another, and it finds its best expression in a generous, cooperative spirit in support of those actions that promote justice and liberty.

The poetic language of the Tao te Ching that we heard at the start of the service suggests that love of country does not separate us from others but is one more example of the widening circles of concern that guide our lives. I begin with myself. I understand myself as I am and as I relate to others: to family, community, country and ultimately all that is. Here, as far as I am concerned, is where the hard work of patriotism remains: to enact and embody the values that we claim to fight for. It requires that we take seriously what justice and liberty require, in a spirit of deep appreciation for the worth of each. In the words of Katharine Lee Bates, may we attend a little more to our goodness, that whatever greatness we aspire to will have been deserved.

BENEDICTION

Go now in peace,
in the durable hope that the work of our lives
will bring comfort and meaning,
that our hearts will be open to our own and the
world's great need.

May our fellowship in this place feed our longing,
still our fears
and teach us the ways of love and life.
Go in peace.