

Tough Love

Michelle Chihara, AlterNet
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I'm a patriot -- always have been, always will be. My patriotism isn't new, and it isn't nice. But it's deep. It doesn't translate easily into bumper stickers. That doesn't diminish its strength.

I inherited my love of country from my parents, particularly from my father. He was born in this country, the son of a Japanese immigrant, in 1932. Following President Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066 in 1942, he and his entire family were placed in an internment camp in Minidoka, Idaho. He was shipped there at age 10. He left two and a half years later, a year before the war ended.

The camps were a gross violation of America's Constitution. The U.S. government has since apologized to Japanese Americans and offered \$20,000 per survivor, in reparation for property and livelihood lost during the internments. The money, generous though it was, works out to less than 10 cents on the dollar of what Japanese Americans lost.

But despite it all, my Japanese American forefathers passed down no resentment toward this country, no sense of bitterness about one of the U.S. government's gravest mistakes. Instead, I inherited an immigrant's gratitude for America's freedom and an immigrant's appreciation of just how fragile that freedom can be. Patriotism, as I grew up understanding it, means constant vigilance.

If we've learned anything from history, it's that during times of crisis we most need to keep watch over our government's actions.

On Sept. 11, I watched the twin towers crumble in real time on cable TV, while standing in a hotel in Quito, Ecuador. Desperate to get to New York (I was scheduled to fly on Sept. 13), traumatized, grieving, I couldn't stand to hear criticisms of America for a few days. At one point, I ran into an American in a bookstore in Quito who asked me if I had been watching CNN. I began reeling off the latest headlines. And this young American woman responded by complaining about U.S. television coverage. She seemed to be saying that Americans shouldn't take so much television news at face value. "I wish Americans would just think more," she said.

I turned and walked away. For once in my life, I just couldn't listen to anything critical of America or Americans. If there was ever a piece of news to be taken at face value, I felt, it was the stark, inescapable image of the twin towers falling.

My reaction, at that moment, was understandable. On Sept. 13, the missing count was still rising and the planes were still unable to fly to New York. I was grieving, and not yet ready to take a step back and critique the media coverage.

But my reaction -- a need to grieve first and analyze later -- wasn't patriotism, and my compatriot was tactless, not un-patriotic. One of the most obvious perks of living in the U.S. is that you are always allowed to trash it. Even when people around you get offended, patriotism must always involve passionate and constructive critiques of the U.S. By speaking out against policies or trends I disagree with, I'm trying to hold the U.S. to the highest standards of excellence, to everything that I believe it stands for.

My time in Ecuador came at the end of a yearlong stay in South America. Most of that time I spent living in Brazil, in Rio de Janeiro. Rio is a beautiful, vibrant, amazing place to live. But it gave me a newfound appreciation for a host of blessings we North Americans often forget to count. For one thing, in Brazil I had to buy a phone line on the black market. For another, in Brazil it seemed like the dogged news magazine *Veja* could dig up a whopping political scandal every week. Brazilians watched crooked senators siphon millions of taxpayer dollars into Swiss bank accounts and luxury properties. Then they watched the millions stay gone, even after the scandals had hit the press. In the U.S., we like to complain about voter apathy. In Brazil, *Veja* called on its readers to fight voter hopelessness.

In Brazil, I heard people compare believing in honest Brazilian politicians to believing in Santa Claus. But honest Brazilian politicians do exist, in significant numbers, and they're fighting to exorcize corruption in their government. Activists and lawyers are fighting to reform the Brazilian justice system. Reformers are fighting to reduce the gaping abyss between rich and poor, which just about everyone in Brazil recognizes as its primary concern. The Brazilians who most love their country, it seemed clear to me, were the ones working for change.

We live with a level of transparency and accountability in this country that we sometimes take for granted. But that transparency takes upkeep, that accountability means nothing if we don't actively hold our officials accountable. We have so much to be thankful for. Take it for granted, and we might watch it disappear.

Now, in the mainstream media, any difference of opinion on how we should wage the war on terrorism is being set up as a straw man in opposition to patriotism. Alessandra Stanley of the *New York Times* glibly wrote that the public finds all voices questioning America's war in Afghanistan "loopy and treasonous." Time

magazine reports that "for the eternal skeptics, whose views were defined by Vietnam and its aftermath, the new patriotism represents a kind of homecoming."

For most Americans, however, patriotism doesn't mean blind acceptance, and it's not a release from post-Vietnam, or any other brand, of skepticism. Most Americans can recognize the absurdity and atrocity of various U.S. policies, past and present, at the same time that we recognize that the United States has come closer to creating a just and equal society than any other nation in the history of the world.

I say that despite a host of other nations that might challenge that claim. But they have small, relatively homogenous states. The U.S. created a tide that raised the standard of living for millions upon millions of people. It has absorbed wave after wave of immigrants, from every ethnicity and country in the world. That doesn't mean that each new wave hasn't had to fight for equal access to the American dream -- they have. But given the challenges we've faced, we've come closer to the free and open ideal than anyone else. We only get closer to that ideal through the patriotic efforts of reformers, activists and critics of all stripes. And we can only take pride in how far we've come if we understand that the fight isn't over.

It took a long time for Japanese American activists to obtain redress for the camps. But in the 1980s, the Supreme Court finally ruled the internment camps unconstitutional. In 1982, President Reagan's Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians published the following conclusion: "Executive Order 9066 was not justified by military necessity. The broad historical causes ... were race prejudice, war hysteria and failure of political leadership." The American government apologized, and paid reparations to living internees.

Who, then, were the patriots in 1942? The people who said nothing as their neighbors lost their lives' work, who bought their fishing boats for a pittance because they knew the Japanese Americans had no choice? Or the handful of Americans, many of them Jesuits and Quakers, who spoke out against the order and for the Constitution?

My issei grandfather came to this country when he was 14 years old, in search of the American dream (isei is the Japanese word for the first to arrive in America, nisei means the first generation born here). He spoke no English and had an 8th grade education. He worked on the railroads, and then in hotels, until he finally saved enough money to open his own general store. In 1941, he'd been living in the U.S. for 24 years as a legal immigrant, but was prevented by race-based laws from obtaining citizenship. He was a father of four.

The day after Pearl Harbor, my grandfather was taken into custody as a "dangerous alien." The primary allegations against him were membership in a Japanese fencing association (he taught kendo, the martial art where you fight with sticks) and a friendship with a former Japanese Navy officer. My grandmother was left by herself to round up her kids, pack up and abandon the store and their house, and take only a suitcase per person to Minidoka. My grandfather wasn't paroled and allowed to rejoin his family there until 1943.

But my family remained staunchly American. In the camp, my father tells me, "We celebrated all the usual American holidays, such as Christmas, New Year's and Thanksgiving. We listened to the radio and heard all the pop songs (that you know so well). Saw American movies when we could. We played American sports -- football, baseball. In short, camp was not a breeding ground for turning us into citizens of Japan."

My uncle tells me that my grandmother dressed up my youngest uncle, only 4 at the time, in a tiny general's uniform. "The amused issei women referred to him as 'Ma Ca Sa,'" my uncle says, "for General McArthur -- who was leading the U.S. campaign against the Japanese."

"There was the feeling in the camp that we would all be representatives someday of Japanese Americans," my father says. At the end of the war, when other families were hesitant to return to American society, my grandfather was one of the first to take his family out of Minidoka. Many Japanese were wary of a society that had rejected them, and (legitimately, in some cases) worried about hate crimes. Not my grandfather. "I suspect that he thought we should leave because he believed that his children would be better off in the outside world," my father says.

The family landed in Spokane, Washington. "We were the only Japanese family in the parish," my father says. "I don't know how I might have turned out if I had been shunned by everyone in my class as an enemy, but as it turned out, the kids were great. I was accepted as a classmate by everyone. I played on the football team for two years, I went camping with my classmates, and in general had great times there. I even went to dances. The nuns treated me as they did every other student. In such a milieu, it is no wonder that I felt I was an American."

Score one for Spokane, and for all-American acceptance.

Before and after the injustice of the camps, the U.S. managed to do enough right not to alienate the Japanese American community. Despite racist laws preventing Asian resident aliens from gaining citizenship, despite laws forbidding Asian legal aliens to own land, the American system provided enough opportunity to allow hundreds of thousands of Japanese Americans to make a life for themselves before the camps. After the war, despite everything the Japanese Americans had lost, and

how far they had been betrayed, Japanese Americans loved this country enough to want to re-integrate themselves. And American society proved open and tolerant enough to allow that to happen.

During the war, many Japanese Americans proved willing to go to any length to prove their loyalty to this country. When the American army came calling, 10,000 Japanese Americans volunteered for the 442nd Regimental Combat Team. Many of them volunteered from inside the camps. The 442nd went on to become the most decorated combat unit in U.S. military history. More than 800 of them died in one mission to save a stranded Texas battalion of 221 soldiers. They became known as the "Purple Heart Battalion" (the Purple Heart is a medal of honor awarded to those wounded or killed in the line of duty).

My father, who was only 10 years old at Minidoka, has always been proud of the 442nd.

Immigrants now make up a sizable portion of the waves of recruits showing up at Army offices across America. Some are hard up for a job, or are trying to speed the process of becoming a citizen (the wait drops two years for members of the military). Many of them, like the men of the 442nd, probably feel they have something to prove. Most are patriots. Like converts to a new religion, immigrants are often the most zealous believers in the American way. They cherish America's opportunities and liberties because they have firsthand experience with the alternatives.

We have even more to cherish today than in the days of the 442nd. Many battles have been won against racism and for civil rights. There will be no internment camps for Arab Americans. It's been heartening to see Japanese American organizations around the country throw their support behind the Arab-American community, organizing town meetings and talks. For every hate crime we hear about in the papers, we hear another story about people doing their best to make their Arab or Sikh or Muslim neighbors feel at ease. Lone American nut-jobs have thrown Molotov cocktails at gas stations owned or run by Arab Americans, and in response, scores of American neighbors have turned out with flowers and cakes and support.

But if we let down our guard, if we don't do everything in our power to keep our government in line, if we allow today's FBI and CIA to run roughshod over immigrants' and everyone else's civil liberties, then we cannot call ourselves patriots. The President (and I reserve the right to continue ragging on him) tells us the terrorists hate our freedom. So the patriotic thing to do is make sure America maintains those freedoms. The government made some of the same arguments for Executive Order 9066 that they are making now for the U.S.A. Patriot Act, and for the detention of over a thousand immigrants. The patriotic thing to do, here, is to

keep a close watch over the detention process, and to make sure no one's constitutional rights are trampled.

American patriotism means loyalty to American rights, to a beautiful set of principles, a brilliant constitution and a messy reality. Maybe being patriotic for the French, say, can mean pride in French food and wine, in French high culture, in the way French women pout. I've always been tempted to try and identify with other more cohesive, more homogenous cultures. But I'm not French, nor am I Japanese, and I can't locate national pride in my blood. I'm American, and American patriotism lives in the head and heart.

My Japanese grandfather is a myth to me. I never knew him and my family doesn't often speak of him and all that they went through. I imagine that he would probably find me strangely foreign -- weird clothes, weird music. Plus, I'm Jewish. My grandparents on my mother's side were Jewish, born in this country but of Eastern European descent. When my parents announced their engagement, my Jewish grandparents were shocked and upset (primarily because my father is a goy). But they came around. I was raised celebrating both Passover and Christmas, the child of a union unlikely to have happened anywhere else. I know that everything I am, everything I have, everything I may have accomplished, is based on the road my forefathers paved, both Jewish and Japanese. My grandparents all loved America, and while I claim both of their Old Worlds as influences on my own, I can only understand myself as an American.

On Sept. 11, my generation's age of innocence ended. But even if my patriotism is renewed, it's no different. I criticized my country before Sept. 11, and I'll keep carping until I feel that America is not in any danger of forgetting what she stands for.

Because if I don't, I would be letting down my grandparents, my father and everyone who ever fought or died for liberty and the American way of life.

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