

PATRIOTISM AND CIVIC LITERACY

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Since September 11, 2002 we have seen an extraordinary outward display of patriotism in the United States. Flags fluttering from doorways and the antennae of automobiles are commonplace. Bumper stickers proclaiming, "I'm Proud to be an American" appear on vehicles ranging from second-hand pickup trucks to sleek and smart sport and town cars. Those visible signs of patriotism are at once an expression of pride and a palliative for our grief and sorrow—an understandable response to a national tragedy. But more important, not only for our healing and the long-term health and vitality of our constitutional democracy, is a patriotism less visible, better understood, and more enduring. It is the kind of patriotism which calls for fidelity to the values and principles for which our country stands—and it is that kind of patriotic fidelity that I would like to discuss with you this morning. Let us consider together two major questions:

1. What should patriotism mean in a constitutional democracy?
2. What responsibilities do schools—and we as educators—have for helping students develop a “large and wholesome meaning” of patriotism?

Patriotism appropriate for our constitutional democracy is not narrow, self-serving, chauvinistic nationalism of the kind sometimes described as “the last refuge of scoundrels.” Neither is it a club which one group of citizens uses for impugning the motives of their fellow citizens or denigrating their worth. It is, on the contrary, a patriotism which has a “large and wholesome meaning.” Adlai Stevenson described that 2 meaning in an address to the American Legion convention in 1952, when he was a candidate for the presidency of the United States. Stevenson said: “I venture to suggest that what we mean [by patriotism] is a sense of national responsibility which will enable America to remain master of her power—to walk with it in serenity and wisdom, with self-respect and the respect of all mankind; a patriotism that puts

country ahead of self; a patriotism which is not short, frenzied outbursts of emotion, but the tranquil and steady dedication of a lifetime....”

When Stevenson spoke some 50 years ago, there was no way he could have foreseen the threat that terrorism poses for us today. Even so, his words had a prophetic ring. Stevenson concluded: “It was always accounted a virtue in a man to love his country. With us it is now something more than a virtue. It is a necessity, a condition of survival. When a man says he loves his country, he means not only that he loves the New England hills, the prairies glistening in the sun, the wide and rising plains, the great mountains and the sea. He means that he loves an inner air, an inner light in which freedom lives and in which a man can draw a breath of self-respect.

Men who have offered their lives for their country know that patriotism is not fear of something; it is the love of something. Patriotism with us is not hatred.... it is the love of this Republic and of the ideal of liberty of man and mind in which it was born and to which this republic is dedicated.”

To love this Republic and the “ideal of liberty of man and mind” for which it stands means more than that one is consumed with sentiment or filled with passive admiration. The verb to love is an active verb. It means to cherish, to care for, to nourish, to preserve, 3 to safeguard, and to defend. Thus, the citizen who truly loves this country must first understand and be freely committed to its ideals—the values and principles to which it is committed. The citizen who truly loves this Republic must also be willing to take part in safeguarding those values and principles and in helping to effect the more complete realization of this nation’s ideals. In short, the citizen must be both “enlightened and engaged,” to use adjectives currently in vogue with political scientists. While calls for an “active or engaged” citizenry are many, definitions of what those terms mean are few. For that reason it is helpful to consider the distinction that some scholars have drawn. Patricia Avery of the University of Minnesota, for one, explains it this way: “The engaged but unenlightened citizen participates in politics but without an ‘understanding of the game.’ He knows how to achieve results, but the results serve his narrow, self-interest.

The enlightened but unengaged citizen appreciates the norms of democracy and understands the nature of the public good but essentially operates as a bystander in the political sphere. She ‘watches’ but does not contribute.... The enlightened citizen understands core democratic principles such as popular sovereignty and constitutional government and is attentive

to actions and events that potentially undermine these principles.... In sum, the engaged citizen is attentive to politics because he is watching out for his own self-interest; the enlightened citizen is attentive because she is concerned about threats to the political system.”

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Patriotism is more than just a concept, an abstraction. It is abnegated or brought to life and vitality by people—by patriots. A responsibility of overriding importance for schools is to enable every child to become the kind of constitutional patriot so eloquently described by the African novelist Chinua Achebe. “Who is a patriot? He is a person who loves his country. He is not a person who says he loves his country. He is not even a person who shouts or swears or recites or sings his love of his country. He is one who cares deeply about the happiness and well-being of his country and all its people. Patriotism is an emotion of love directed by a critical intelligence. A true patriot will always demand the highest standards of his country and accept nothing but the best for and from his people. He will be outspoken in condemnation of their short-comings without giving way to superiority, despair or cynicism. That is my idea of a patriot.”

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