

A Patriot's Progress: September 11 and Freedom in America

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We are, consciously or not, in a continual search for a more noble expression of existence. The events of September 11 heightened that search and, whatever happens, we will be changed, possibly improved, for having examined ourselves more carefully.

I write this essay about a month before the first anniversary of September 11, in the same quiet Long Island, New York, village where I watched the attacks on television. And I am trying to take account of the progress of thought since that terrible day, which has something to do with patriotism, and something to do simply with the ways thought travels in a free country. Patriotism in America, or in any true democracy, is unstable and operates more elusively than it does in countries where individual thinking is more controlled. Love of country here is expansive and lusty one moment, qualified and crucial the next. It is judgmental and sentimental both, because one of the valuable perils of freedom is that the mind is on its own.

In the late days of summer, my village looks much the way it did shortly before September 11, especially on weekdays when there are fewer vacationers, and the power boats leave the bay to the gulls. Cormorants collect on the pilings. Egrets stalk the marshes, where a rank smell rises, sweetens. The sky wears a light blue gauze of mist much of the time, and the wind kicks up just enough to tremble the upper branches of the trees, which darken earlier these days and signal the entrance of a new season. If you asked any of my neighbors how they were feeling on a given morning, they'd say, "Great," and mean it, even though, after last year's murders, everyone knows that all this serenity can be targeted.

Anything can happen. A fallen character in John Guare's play *Lydie Breeze* says, "Anything can happen." The sentiment is sometimes expressed brightly, as when one buys a lottery ticket, but more often it is laced with embitterment, the result of a defeating encounter with reality that suggests one is helpless to control one's life. Anything can happen—cancer, car wrecks, planes flying into great buildings.

So it has gone, I think, with patriotic thought since September 11. Because it is free to do as it pleases, the

American mind has taken a number of turns—more than it has taken at any other point in my lifetime. One dealt with various spasms and manifestations of patriotism during the civil rights wars and during the 1960s, particularly concerning Vietnam, but never as many as in the past year. The extremes of thought, if not the passions, have been more stark; the thoughts within thoughts more nuanced. Also, because there have been no attacks on the country since September 11, the mind is not always keenly aware of what it is thinking about the state of things, and so thoughts of country flow naturally into thoughts of family, the dog, the kitchen, and of all that subtly adds up to living in America.

In the immediate aftermath of the attacks, patriotism both armed itself and wore garments of grief. For most of us, rage and sorrow came together, and one emotion inspired the other. This is as it must be when one is attacked so brutally. From my bucolic perch, I watched my people, my city damaged, and I wanted to strike back hard—not solely out of revenge, though that feeling ran high, but to protect my own. My country, my house.

For days everyone stared at the bodies hauled from the ruins, the anxious faces of the wives, husbands, and parents. We learned of personal connections to the dead. We attended funerals. The fiancé of a friend of my daughter's was killed as he worked as a trader in one of the World Trade Center towers. At the funeral, over a thousand people gathered, almost all in their twenties, reeling from the recognition that anything can happen. Hour after hour, we saw pictures of people struggling through impenetrable smoke and dust. Firefighters dead. Police dead. A father whose child had not been recovered expressed the hope that his child was wandering the city, dazed.

Soon something was added to the rage and grief, something calmer and more considered. One began to appreciate a quality that was not usually assigned to Americans—the essential dignity of the people. Much of what one witnessed in the heroic and tireless rescue operations was the dignity of people going about their jobs, the dignity inherent in work. This was the dignity of the common man, an old ideal revived by a dreadful circumstance, but latent in America always—the 19th-century "Man With the Hoe," the 20th-century "G.I. Joe." But the sympathy the workers extended toward one another, the sympathy extended by most Americans at the time, revealed a deeper form of dignity as well. There was a ceremonial sense of the preciousness of life arising,

literally, out of the ashes. No one who saw the rescue workers remove their hardhats and open a corridor for the flag-covered bodies will ever forget it.

Widening, one's patriotic thoughts then became more alert to events. One responded to governmental decisions in terms of how one viewed the country politically, historically. When the attacks first happened, only those looking to be intellectually cute or perverse turned their backs on the country in distress. But not long after that, when the Justice Department and others began to speak of military tribunals, interferences with lawyer-client confidences, and the detaining of suspects without charges or evidence, many Americans sat up and said, "Whoa!" One said "Whoa!" twice when it was learned that as a result of the USA PATRIOT Act—passed by Congress and signed into law by President Bush in October 2001—the FBI was poking around libraries to check what people were reading. My guess is that the destruction of every civilization began when the empowered checked what people were reading.

Patriotism required disloyalty to such notions. One of the clever components of this country is that it has disloyalty built into its system—disloyalty not to principles but to leaders. Whenever we find leaders straying from principles, we are encouraged, indeed obliged, to smack them down.

Other things began to be said, too, that went against the grain. We were right in our war against al Qaeda, certain people contended, because God was on our side. Coincidentally, this was precisely the thought of Mohammad Atta, one of the terrorists in the attacking planes. God was on the side of the Taliban, that's how they were able to succeed on their mission. The Taliban leader, Mohammad Omar, may have wondered how tight he was with God after all. On September 11, God was on his side. Some weeks later, when Kandahar surrendered, the mullah may have gone shopping around for a more competent deity.

"A fanatic," said Finley Peter Dunne's Mr. Dooley, "is a man that does what he thinks th' Lord wud do if He knew th' facts in th' case!"¹ The original reason for our separation of church and state was not merely to prevent a state religion, but to prevent the consequences of a state religion, the deadliest of which being the assumption that God is on our side. Of course, one would like to believe that God is on our side, because the terrorists are in the wrong and we are in the right, and any deity worth his

salt would be able to see that. But far better and healthier for the country not to pretend we know what God is up to. America is the most religious country in the industrialized world, and the reason may be that we see religion essentially as private property.

The patriotic mind thus became alert to its more disastrous inclinations. In October and November, it was easy to see every Muslim as a bomb thrower—not to be put in internment camps this time, but surely to be watched. The good thing was that there were very few instances of public harassment. President Bush was wholly admirable in stepping up right away and reminding us that Arab-Americans were, in fact, Americans. The bad thing was that we began to think categorically. One used the euphemism “racial profiling.” How was this for a test of patriotism? The country was made up of all we let in, and some of the invitees wanted to knock us off. Did we really mean it when we claimed to honor all traditions and beliefs? We became conscious, as we have in the past, of the terrors of the open door—we, the grateful products of the open door.

Thoughts like these and others were not formalized or orderly; they simply arose as occasions demanded. The American mind is no different when it deals with patriotism than when it considers a political candidate, a beer, or a flavor of ice cream. It goes with the flow, it is the flow. Tossed into the mix was the country laughing at itself; TV comics having a field day with the president’s verbal oddities; the president himself saying, “They underestimated me”; the country’s perpetual and deliberate confusion of respect and derision; our attitude of taking nothing and everything seriously, extending even to Osama bin Laden jokes. If one bothered to think about it (who did?), one saw that self-mockery was part of patriotism, too—the horse laugh as free speech.

Tossed into the mix, too, was America’s tendency to drift. Even in urgent, threatened situations, the mind finds itself heading for an exit, perhaps because life is generally good enough to allow such driftings, or because dreaming is a national tradition; the country was a dream in the first place. People elsewhere assume that because we are a can-do nation, we also want-to-do, but we know better. For all our reputation of being with it, Americans do a lot more mental sauntering than we’re given credit for. All our heroes were major saunterers—Huck, Holden, Rip,³ and some real ones, too, such as Jefferson, Franklin, and Edison. We live off the planet as much as on it. When I was a kid, the teacher would catch me drifting

out the window, and ask the shrill, predictable question: “Roger, would you care to rejoin the group?” I would think, “Not really.”

Related to our drifts was our desire to be outsiders—even after September 11, when we knew that we had to pull together toward a center. But our historical temperaments only permit us to pull together for so long. Then we propel ourselves outward. One of the strange charms of our country is that most of us not only feel out of things, we hardly know of anyone who thinks of himself as in things. If presidential candidates are to be believed, not one of them has ever set foot in Washington, D.C. Former congressmen and senators must have driven around the city on the beltway tossing in their votes from their cars. Washington is known as the city of insiders. To be an insider—the term implies—is not just to be where the power is, but to be wrong in one’s perspective, or to be a crook. Being an outsider is a form of self-congratulation; only the best people do it. War or no war, we remained as much apart from events as a part of them.

It stirs an odd soup, love of country in a democracy. One is free to love America a lot, a little, to love it or leave it, or not to love it at all. One is increasingly grateful, especially in a stressful time, for the First Amendment, for a Constitution that insisted on the ability to create amendments, for allowing all those things we do not want said, said. Some years ago, a nutcase relief pitcher for a major league baseball team complained that he couldn’t stand riding the New York subway with all those welfare mothers, queers, and immigrants. People shouted, “He can’t say that.” The beauty of our system is that he can say that, and worse, and he can step on the flag if he wants to, and we will hate hearing it and watching it, and we will take it. The First Amendment was made for everyone, in a way especially for jackasses.

Anything can happen. It was the lesson of September 11. Where were you on September 11? More to the point, where were you on September 10? The sudden movements of life, like those of the free mind, remain out of our control. Patriotism itself in the free country is out of control—anger, grief, sympathy, mutual appreciation, criticism, self-doubt, amusement, swerving to dreaminess, and individual independence. What can happen to a nation can happen to a state of mind, particularly in a country that is created out of a state of mind. If we were learning anything so far, it was that freedom was more difficult and complicated than we had ever dreamed.

By April and May, the country was hardly thinking of Afghanistan or Osama anymore—it had been months since we'd even seen him on tape. This was not Orwell's *1984*; we were not saddled with a government capable of whipping up our enmities falsely. It was not that we had forgotten our need to be safe, or even our desire to punish. But these thoughts had become submerged in other things that affected our lives, and in other news. Now Israel had become the prime target for terrorists, and European anti-Semitism was risen like the living dead. Now vast corporations turned out to be thieves, destroyers of lives. Now the market sank like a stone. Now baseball players and owners were about to sabotage a season out of greed.

Where were we in our own country? Where were we in relation to the rest of the world? We do not like to think about the rest of the world very much. Big business likes to think of the world as customers. But for the rest of us, the great wide world has merely become the place where floods and earthquakes happen far away, especially since Russia has transmogrified from menace to (sort of) friend. If we had been more aware of the Muslim world, people told us, we could have anticipated September 11, if not prevented it. If we were more aware of our enemies in the world, we were told, we could raise them from poverty and from their ignorance about us—how wonderful we are, when you get to know us, how decent, fair-minded, how playful.

Yet when patriotism bisects these earnest wishes, it dilutes them. For every moment of regretful self-inspection since September 11, there were two in which one thought, "The hell with the rest of the world. Why should we apologize for existing?" And if we have made calamitous blunders in our international history, are they any worse than those of the countries who grind their teeth at us? And what other country in history, we'd like to know, has done so much good for the rest of the starving, impoverished, war-destroyed planet? We went into Bosnia, we'd like to point out, for no other purpose than doing the right thing. This is something the Muslim states might recall when railing against the Great Satan.

In sum, our alertness to the conditions and attitudes of the wider world probably did nothing to draw us closer to it—except, in the most watery wishful thinking. America, we concluded, and rightly in my view, did nothing to deserve the murderous attacks on our people. If education would help in the future, by all means, let's all get educated. But that was a separable matter from the mad decisions of zealots.

Would I have thought myself capable of such strong reactions before September 11? I don't know. Anything can happen. The tests imposed by events upon one's patriotism were the tests the free mind takes every day. Many days I have not thought of September 11 at all, or of al Qaeda, or Iraq, or even that we were in a state of war or of emergency. If anything has remained consistent since that day, it is the images of suffering. The wife of the executed journalist, Danny Pearl; the parents of Nathan Ross Chapman, the first American soldier killed by enemy fire in early January—their noble submission to the worst news one can receive: that stays with me.

A good deal of patriotism in America concentrates on manageable particulars. I love my family. I love my village. Grander feelings change, enlarge, are diverted, come, and go. What we have in this country—more important than wealth and power—is a special sort of instability. We are, consciously or not, in a continual search for a more noble expression of existence. The events of September 11 heightened that search and, whatever happens, we will be changed, possibly improved, for having examined ourselves more carefully.

These late August evenings, the sun's coagulated rays flash more insistently, before they drop out of sight. The hedges shadow earlier, show signs of decay. Not far from here, the creeks merge with the bay, which noses through a channel where fishermen sit on pilings and expect the best; then it spreads into a larger bay, then into the Atlantic. I am somewhere. Our country is somewhere. We are sure that we mean something worthwhile to ourselves and to others, that we have good reasons to survive and to triumph, and we will look for more.

1. Martin Dooley, a bar owner, was the fictional creation of Chicago newspaper journalist Finley Peter Dunne. In the late 19th century, Mr. Dooley—speaking with the heavy accent of an Irish immigrant (written phonetically in Dunne's columns)—brought insight, irony, and humor to his fictitious discussions of American political and social issues with his Irish immigrant customers.

2. Huck Finn, the main character in Mark Twain's novel *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Holden Caulfield, the main character in J.D. Salinger's novel *The Catcher in the Rye*, and Rip Van Winkle, the title character in Washington Irving's story "Rip Van Winkle: A Posthumous Writing of Diedrich Knickerbocker."

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