

"My Country Tis of Thee"

Rev. Sara E. Ascher

6 November 2005

Every year the arrival of Veteran's Day makes me a little uncomfortable. For though I support and honor those who choose to give their lives to defend our nation, war is a frightening thing. The first Gulf War in 1991 was the first in my generation. The Vietnam War was already ending as my fellow generation X-ers were being born. So when we came to the defense of Kuwait it was the first time siblings of my college roommates were fighting. This current war in Iraq is the first where I have watched people my own age and younger die, come home disfigured or ill, or traumatized from battle.

The idea of war, my country being at war, has always been abstract to me, something that was waged by other generations, in other eras, not something that I had to witness. I listened to tales of WW II growing up from my grandparents and their friends, of the sacrifices the nation made in order to support the war effort; the rations and the time delay in receiving letters, the not knowing for days or weeks if a loved one was ever coming home. None of this seemed real to me, though it was obviously real to those who lived through it. Even now in my daily life it is hard to remember our nation is at war. Whether you strongly support our troops being in Iraq or whether you passionately believe the war to be wrong, our personal sacrifices on a daily basis (unless we have loved ones serving) are small. We go the mall or the bookstore, to do the shopping or go to work. Little of what life was like prior to our entering Iraq has changed which makes the idea of war all the more obscure and odd to me.

What complicates the issue is that from all sorts of sources we hear that this war, as with others, is to defend freedom, to defend democracy, to defend the United States, but what does that mean? We Americans (most of us anyway) would argue that the American way, our version of democracy is the best around or at least in the top of the list of nations that are considered free and democratic, but why? What makes us think that we have got it right? After all, our nation is in its adolescence in comparison to the age of many other countries. What could we possibly know or do better than we think we've got it right? Do we believe this because we are the most powerful nation or because we have some secret knowledge that makes us superior? Is it all arrogance or ego? I don't think so. There is some arrogance in our actions and policies and there have been for decades. But we are a relatively young nation and often the young can be overconfident and cocky. But, there is more than arrogance I believe behind the idea that America can be a model for the world.

There are elements of our nation's history that we should be proud of, that show how our forbearers struggled to create a nation that indeed "got it right." Whether we believe them to have been successful or that we modern Americans have strayed from their dream, the dream itself is something amazing.

Those who came to this country initially did so for a variety of reasons, but mainly for some sense of freedom from the religious or political or economic oppression or constraint they experienced at home. So they traveled to a new land for something new, an opportunity, a chance at liberty, the prospect of a new life and prosperity they

might not have known elsewhere.

We know that the settling of this country was not done so without great loss to those who lived here prior to the European settlers, and by no means does the admirable work of our founding fathers negate that part of history. We should remember that the freedom we have was delivered on the backs of not only of those who fought for independence from Britain, but also upon those whose land the settlers newly possessed.

It wasn't long from the time the first of the settlers arrived to the time unrest began, not more than 200 years. The longing for freedom from those who ruled at a distance was growing and the unease of a people carving out a life in an often harsh and difficult land was coming to a head. "We Americans," writes Gordon Wood in *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, "like to think of our revolution as not being radical; indeed, most of the time we consider it downright conservative. It certainly does not appear to resemble the revolutions of other nations in which people were killed, property was destroyed, and everything was turned upside down. The American revolutionary leaders do not fit our conventional image of revolutionaries – angry, passionate, reckless, maybe even bloodthirsty for the sake of a cause. They seem too stuffy, too solemn," Wood continues, "too cautious, too much the gentlemen. We cannot quite conceive of revolutionaries in powdered hair and knee breeches. The American revolutionaries seem to belong in drawing rooms or legislative halls, not in cellars or in the streets. They made speeches, not bombs; they wrote learned pamphlets, not manifestos. They were not abstract theorists and they were not social levelers. They did

not kill one another; they did not devour themselves. There was no reign of terror in the American Revolution and no resultant dictator-no Cromwell, no Bonaparte. The American Revolution does not seem to have the same kinds of causes-the social wrongs, the class conflict, the impoverishment, the grossly inequitable distributions of wealth-that presumably lie behind other revolutions.”

“But,” Wood continues, “if we measure the radicalism by the amount of social change that actually took place – by transformations in the relationships that bound people to each other – then the American Revolution was not conservative at all; on the contrary: it was as radical and as revolutionary as are any in history.”

Wood argues that the revolution wasn’t about independence per se, but rather the rights of American settlers over and against the British encroachments. The original goal of the revolution was to *preserve* American society not to dismantle it or necessarily reorganize it.

One of the greatest changes the revolution brought was the changing of people from subjects to citizens. No longer were the colonists under the power and control of the monarchy of Britain, but instead a gathering of free persons, who as Wood puts it “collectively possessed sovereignty.” The reality that ordinary people gained the power to determine for themselves the nature and structure of the system that would govern them is but one of the views and principles that emerged from the revolution that we still today hold dear. Those series of events and collection of documents hold the powerful reality that as citizens, our ancestors were offered an active role in the governing of a nation they

in essence were agreeing to create.

The ideals that flowed from this precept of participation are ones that still govern our beliefs and actions today. Michael Walzer in his book *What it Means to be an American* contends that the politics of the newly formed United States was one of difference, of diversity and the recognition of complexity. “The United States,” Walzer writes, “is not [nor has ever been] most importantly a union of states but of nations, races, and religions, all of them dispersed and inter-mixed, without ground of their own.” He argues that the foundational struggle for America is the one between the values of “singular citizenship and a radically pluralistic civil society,” the balance between self and a strongly defined diverse community.

This struggle is not unfamiliar to us. It is one that even within our religious tradition we wrestle with. How does a community balance the needs of the one against the needs of the whole? Especially when the value of the individual voice is of the utmost importance in our society. The revolution created an environment where the worth and dignity of every voice was deemed of value. Granted it took centuries to realize the fulfillment of this ideal (and in many ways we continue to the struggle). The roots of the women’s movement and civil rights movement are grounded in our Constitution and Bill of Rights. It is this notion of a person’s inalienable right to participate in their own governing that allowed for women and blacks to gain voting rights in America.

But the ideals set before us in the creation of this country do not stop there. We believe that each voice is of value, and yet, we go one step farther and state they we are

in fact equal to one another not only in voice but also in personhood. Our worth lays in the essence of our humanity not just our participation in government. The result of this was the dissolution of hierarchical class status. Now we can argue that class distinctions still exist and there is much evidence to prove it, but the underlying idea of our country is that no one person, regardless of status, is of greater importance to the whole of the nation than another. Wood writes, “The revolutionaries... hoped to destroy the bonds holding together the older monarchical society – kinship, patriarchy, and patronage – and to put in their place new social bonds of love, respect and consent.” The bonds of subordination were certainly dissolved, but the society of love and respect has taken a much harder and longer road and we appear to be still traveling it.

Another element of what Walzer refers to as the “politics of difference” is the belief that within this democracy it is individuals, not necessarily socio-economic status, race or gender that determine the course of one’s life. It is what we have come to call the American Dream, the idea that here anyone can become anything. We know life isn’t that simple, that our education and access to resources and opportunities do have something to do with our ethnicity, our gender, where and with how much we grew up. We know that the dream that anyone can make it in America is often seen through rose-colored glasses, but the truth is that it doesn’t stop us from trying anyway. Everyday people work hard to achieve what they long for, what generations before them didn’t have.

Maybe I am naïve in my struggle to look through all that is wrong or difficult or disappointing in our nation to see the core values and ideals that were ignited during the

birth of this nation. Maybe we can only see the hurt and wrongdoing, but if we don't also recognize the ethics and standards that emerged in the early development of our country, then we will never be able to help those dreams, those ideals, become truth. It is when we are in greatest despair for the future of this land that we love that we must hold tighter to its highest principles: that of equality and worth despite difference, that through dialogue and discussion, through knowledge and learning we can determine the best course of action, that individuals need to be involved in the process of governing themselves and that opposition assists in establishing what's best for the common good.

As Veteran's Day approaches, it is important to remember what it is we are fighting for, even if you believe the means to be wrong. Those who fight also believe in what our forbearers created. It is a matter of living what we believe. The values and dream of a nation that celebrates and honors difference, honors and allows for complexity, is the only way to honor our full humanity. Though it is messy and difficult, it is the only option for those of us who believe freedom is worth striving for and worth the struggle. It is now we must remember that this country, our country at its best, living from its highest ideals offers a place for us all. As closing lines of the poem from Emma Lazarus reads on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty,

“Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,

Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,

I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"