

The Declaration of Independence, Borders and Homelands
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July, 1, 2018

I met a man in a train station in Amsterdam last summer who had a sign that said: "Give me your change and I'll tell you a joke." I gave him a dollar and he asked, "Did you hear the one about the Dalai Lama?" "No," I replied. "The Dalai Lama goes to a hot dog stand and buys a hot dog and gives the vendor a 100-dollar bill. The vendor thanks him and goes on to the next customer.

The Dalai Lama interrupts and says, 'I gave you a hundred dollar bill. Is there any change?' 'Ah,' replied the vendor, 'Change comes from within.'"

During the American Revolution, the legal separation of the Thirteen Colonies from Great Britain occurred on July 2, 1776, when the Second Continental Congress voted to approve a resolution of independence that had been proposed in June by Richard Henry Lee of Virginia declaring the United States independent from Great Britain.

After voting for independence, Congress turned its attention to the Declaration of Independence, a statement explaining this decision, which had been prepared by a Committee of Five, with Thomas Jefferson as its principal author. Congress debated and revised the wording of the Declaration, finally approving it on July 4, 1776, and we have celebrated that day from then until now.

The following words stand engraved on all of our hearts and minds:

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. — That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, — That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness."¹

I dare say many things about the political world we live in now would shock Thomas Jefferson. Thomas Jefferson, our third president, was uncomfortable speaking publicly and lived in a day when the Electoral College and House of Representatives decided elections, by and large, and there was little campaigning. As Jefferson said, "In [the Founding Fathers'] minds, the person who was ambitious and wanted high office was the one person you should never trust."² In our political land where candidates spend millions of dollars

¹ <http://www.ushistory.org/declaration/document>

² Walter Kirn, "Confounding Father," in Thomas Jefferson, "America's Enduring Revolutionary," Time Magazine (New York: Time Books, 2015), 21. Magazine (New York: Time Books, 2015), 21.

and talk on end about why they are the right choice and others unfit, Jefferson would find himself without much trust for any candidate.

Noble as he was, research on Jefferson reveals contradictions: he claimed to loathe political parties but created America's first opposition party; he decried any robust exercise of executive power as monarchical, then took the most far-reaching executive action in American history by purchasing the Louisiana Territory, he bankrupted the New England states with his misguided embargo policy, he decried slavery and yet had slaves, including Sally Hemings with whom he had at least one child confirmed in 1998 by DNA testing.³

One thing is sure, Thomas Jefferson, CONTRADICTIONS and all, was known and is still known to be a patriot. Patriotism is generally defined as someone who feels strong support for his or her country.

But what was Thomas Jefferson's notion of patriotism and how might this offer us a window into what it is to be American today?

We all know examples of those called unpatriotic: Those who do not support an American war, or one who burns the flag (though of course burning the confederate flag is no longer blasphemy but an anti-racist act long past due). This gets all tangled in party politics and perspective of course. Is it unpatriotic to not support torture or patriotic? Former President Bush created the policy that justified torture in Iraq and others places. Is it patriotic or unpatriotic to believe torture is right or wrong?

Of course, it depends on whose version of patriotism you ask this of. But if we ask the Declaration of Independence, might there be an answer that becomes clearer?

Consider again the words,

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. The very next sentence of the Declaration of Independence reads:

That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness....

And then it lists all of the offenses of the British, defending the judgment that the British have indeed become such abusers and why and how. The list begins:

³ Joseph Ellis, "A Legacy of Myth and Contradiction," Time Magazine, 10.

He has forbidden his Governors to pass Laws of immediate and pressing importance, He has obstructed the Administration of Justice and so forth.

One such injustice stands out from the rest. It reads: He has excited domestic insurrections amongst us, and has endeavoured to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages whose known rule of warfare is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions.

And here our breath stops and we find it, the seed, the kernel, the place where we must take responsibility for all that we are, for all of the roots of our Americanism.

We are a good and generous people and we have long pointed at those whom we define as Other and made them responsible for that which they are not and in doing so, justified taking from them that which no one has the right to take from another human being.

And we are doing it again on our borders.

When the Declaration of Independence was signed, the erasure of Native Americans was in full swing. Many Native Americans were imprisoned in jails or guardhouses, often in the middle of the desert. One could even call these cages.

There were also over 500,000 slaves in colonies where slavery was legal in all 13 colonies. We know how slaves were treated. Many were caged like animals. Many children were taken from parents to be sold separately. We look out on to today's landscape where children are being taken from their parent's arms at the border and we wonder: How could this happen in our America? I think Jefferson would look out on today's landscape and respond: This has a long history of happening in America.

Over 2,000 Latino children have been separated from their parents and detained in cage like structures. There are no accommodations to change the diapers of the little ones because there are only 2-4 social workers on deck at any given time.

These children sit stranded in filthy diapers, in cages, forcibly separated from their parents, in our country. One reporter, Jacob Soboroff from NBC news, who witnessed this inside a detention center in Texas called it child abuse.

These children left the horrors of their own countries with one or both parents not knowing about the separation policy meant to deter them called "Zero Tolerance." Since the revoking of this order of separation which happened because of nation outrage, children have not been successfully reunited with parents.

The zero-tolerance policy is still in place but now everyone is arrested together for the misdemeanor of crossing borders without papers and put in privately-operated detention centers not required to follow guidelines for humane treatment of prisoners. The administration is now claiming authority to hold them indefinitely.

I return again to the Declaration of Independence: We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

Consider especially the phrase, *the pursuit of Happiness*. What does this mean?

Does my happiness include yours, or yours, or yours or theirs? Should it?

According to an article by Jon Meacham, "Free to Be Happy" the Jeffersonian notion of happiness and its pursuit "was ancient...(and reached back to Aristotle). Meacham writes, "Happiness is the end of action, the whole point of life...not about smiley faces, self-esteem or even feelings...it was ultimate good..."⁴

For Jefferson, eudaimonia- the Greek word for happiness- evokes virtue, good conduct, and generous citizenship. It was about pursuit of the good of the whole, because the good of the whole was crucial to the genuine well being of the individual. Happiness for Jefferson was the pursuit of individual excellence that shapes the life of the community.⁵

Happiness was never meant to become the pursuit of individual pleasure at the expense of all else. It was rooted in the thriving of what was not yet called The Beloved Community. In other words, if my happiness destroys your capacity for happiness, I can never be happy.

And what of patriotism? What does Jefferson have to say about that? According to Walter Kin in his article, "Confounding Father, "Jefferson was a born defender of the citizenry's right to dissent from and even actively oppose its leaders' decisions."⁶

Jefferson tried to steer the American vessel, but finally, he trusted in the people, our ability to discern when the government was not acting according to the will of the people, when it was betraying values we had not yet learned to live up to but that we enshrined in a document that might guide us into a better version of ourselves even as that very document reminds us with its pointing at Native Americans, that we have so much more to learn about what it means to be courageous, ethical and moral human beings.

Someone asked me while I was thinking this through: So, what is your immigration plan then Linda? I do not have a plan I said and yet should my lack of plan deter me from demanding that policy makers sit at a table as ethical human beings and consider the

⁴ Jon Meacham, "Free to be Happy," Time Magazine, 24.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Walter Kin, "Confounding Father," Time Magazine, 21.

effects of their actions, taking into consideration our complicity in the history of South and Central American, and look again and again at what is possible, humane and even moral?

We are Americans. We know how to dream. We know how to risk everything for what we believe. We know how to build a world on hard work and to make something out of nothing. And we know how to take from others everything they have until their existence becomes untenable at best. We must hold ourselves accountable and lean into the best of who we are.

Samuel Beckett, author of *Waiting for Godot* and many other novels and plays, once told a story about walking with a friend and seeing a man begging. Beckett gives him a large sum of money and his friend criticizes him saying, "What did you do that for? He'll just spend it all on drink."

"Maybe so," Becket replies, "But I couldn't afford to not take the chance."

We cannot afford to take the chance that our actions do not matter, that life will go on as it is regardless of what we do. We cannot afford this my friends because we are American and we have to be the patriots that defend happiness for the whole beloved community. Our very souls depend on it.

In the first draft of the Declaration, Jefferson began his famous second paragraph, which we have been quoting, "We hold these truths to be sacred and undeniable..." The draft shows Franklin's heavy printer's pen crossing out the phrase and changing it to, "We hold these truths to be self-evident." A strong advocate of the separation of church and state and one who believed Jesus was not the son of god but that he embodied "every human excellence" and nothing more,⁷ Jefferson did not believe that something had to be sacred in order for it to be worthy of our lives. It only had to be true and self-evident.

"[Jefferson's] theology was a mix of deism and Unitarianism and he declared in a letter written late in life that if there were a Unitarian church in Virginia, he would be a member...The actual theological underpinnings of the Declaration of Independence come from the beginning of an anti-creedal religious tradition, American Unitarianism...And the same Unitarian sentiments driving the Declaration informed other significant documents from Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address to Dr Martin Luther King's I have a Dream speech"⁸ which borrowed Unitarian minister's Rev. Theodore Parker's words, "The arc of the universe is long but it bends toward justice."

⁷ Walter Kirn, 21.

⁸ Rev. James Ishamel Ford, "Was Jefferson a Unitarian?"

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/monkeymind/2013/11/was-jefferson-a-unitarian-and-other-questions-concerning-the-influence-of-an-emergent-unitarianism-on-the-founding-of-the-american-republic.html>

Though non-creedal, Jefferson thought of himself as a man of faith. He expected that certain abiding truths would continue to guide the conscience of the nation long after he was gone.⁹

My friends, we stand in a unique place in history. What is ours to do now? What is true for us now; what is self evident?

Our salvation is tied up in one other's.

Thomas Jefferson was a man of many contradictions and a patriot. We are full of contradictions, all of us. What makes us American inside of them is our willingness to accept our humanity and to still work for justice, our willingness to see the places we fail, and still continue to seek what is worthy of us now, to hear the pain and the suffering and the fear and still know as self-evident the clear voice that whispers what love is calling us to do now.

May our gatherings as Unitarian Universalists, as people sewn into the history of this country, be ones that offer us all more hope, more voice, more capacity to stand proud on this shore as patriots.

Amen.

⁹ Ibid.