

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE AN AMERICAN

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One of the great things about living in Japan for almost fifteen years is the opportunity to view your culture from the outside. Over this period I have come to question myself time-and-again about what it means to be an American. I finally figured it out ten years ago when I was working on my doctoral dissertation, but it is only recently that I feel compelled to write something about it.

Just the other day I was teaching a class of Japanese students and the issue of “cultural identity” came up. So, my students and I compared the differences between Americans and Japanese, and in fact, we tried to identify our cultures in one- or two-word terms. The Japanese students came up with something quite interesting, which when you begin to see how things work in Japan it explains a whole lot. The students identified Japanese culture as “mura-shakai” (村社会) or “village society” which goes back about 10,000 years when agriculture was first introduced into human societies. Basically, the way they described it is that in a village society “collectivism” is the paramount driving force among the villagers. As a villager, everyone is equal, everyone must subscribe to the “collective thought pattern” of the village, and everyone must contribute his or her share to the success of the village. Hence, individuality is not a recognized characteristic if it does not contribute to the overall prosperity of the village. For example, if one of the villagers figures out how to make a new kind of saké, well, then this is acceptable because it contributes to everyone else’s enjoyment of saké. However, individuality for individuality’s sake is not recognized because this would undermine the “collective thought pattern” of the village and possibly contribute to the village’s ultimate downfall.

However, in terms of the American identity, “voluntary association,” and not “collectivism,” is the underlying cultural mechanism which makes our people distinctly American, and that its roots go as far back as the first English settlers on the American continent. As I explained it to my students, when English settlers came to the Americas they entered “voluntarily” into social compacts with their settlements. Though each settler collectively contributed what he or she could to the survival of the settlement, it was recognized that each person was there via his or her own volition (though it is debatable if women were really there on their own volition or at the will of their husbands and fathers since women had no rights). Of course, because several settlements were established for religious purposes, one can argue that there was a “collective thought pattern” and very rigid rules and regulations. However, the difference between the Japanese villager and the American settler is that of “voluntarism.” Americans were free to come-and-go as they chose. Japanese were not afforded such freedoms. In fact, during the Edo period Japanese were not allowed to leave their villages, towns, or cities without the approval of their overlord. This, as we know as Americans, has never been the case in our history.

Hence, because of this belief in “voluntary association” the American experience has come to be defined as the capacity for individuals to live their lives in accordance with the principles of self-government. That is with the understanding that self-government is grounded in the ideal of “justice” as it is embodied in that course of human activity known

to us, and expressed so eloquently in our Declaration of Independence, as “The Pursuit of Happiness;” meaning, that happiness is not just a feeling, but both a feeling and a condition.

The Pursuit of Happiness holds that each person is unique and each should discover whom he or she is—to actualize his or her true potential and to live the “good life” within the congeniality and complementarity of personal excellences of his or her fellow members of community. Therefore, through the course of pursuing one’s happiness a person is obligated to live up to individual expectations and the expectations of his or her community. And it is within this framework that we subscribe to the notion of limited government, where each and every member of the community pursues his or her happiness without the restraint of government, but only in the case where one’s life, liberty, and property are under threat.

The quote I like best which gets to the heart of this idea of justice is from philosopher David Norton (1991, 121-122):

The individual who possesses self-knowledge and lives by it manifests justice, first by not laying claim to goods that he or she cannot utilize, and second by actively willing such goods into the hands of those who can utilize them toward self-actualization. What is expressed in both cases is not “selflessness,” but the proportionality of a self-responsible self that is situated in relations of interdependence with other selves that are, or ought to be, self-responsible. An individual who possesses self-knowledge and lives by its direction recognizes goods to which he or she is not entitled as distractions from his or her proper course of life...And to will to others their true utilities is at the same time the concrete expression of respect for them as ends in themselves and recognition that we stand to gain from the worthy living of others.

In conclusion, this is the core of voluntary association. This is the core of liberty. This is the core of the free market system. And this is the core of being an American. By subscribing to this notion of justice which Norton describes, we understand more fully that free association (and the free market) IS justice, and that as Americans we emulate justice every day in our actions and deeds, and that is why America is still the beacon of liberty throughout the world.

Reference

Norton, David L. 1991. *Democracy and Moral Development: A Politics of Virtue*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press.

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