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On Patriotism

William Ayers

What's so great about America?

Near the top of my list is sweet home Chicago—a mesmerizing metropolis, once home to generations of Illini, Winnebago, and Miami peoples, rising along the shore of that immense inland sea and sweeping toward the dazzling prairie just beyond.

There's Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* and Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*, Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March*, and Richard Wright's *Native Son*. There's Nelson Algren's *The Man with the Golden Arm* and Studs Terkel's *Division Street*, Gwendolyn Brooks' *Maud Martha* and Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*.

So great, and there's more: Haki Madhubuti, Kevin Coval, Eve Ewing, and Chance the Rapper, Chris Ware, and Aleksandar Hemon, the Wachowski siblings, Muddy Waters, and Howlin' Wolf, Koko Taylor, and Yoko Noge, Lil Hardin, Bo Diddley, Jimmy McPartland, and the Sun Ra Arkestra. On and on.

What's so great about America?

The arts and the artists, the truth-tellers and the-never-say-die-ers, the land and *the people, yes, the people*—the opening lines to Carl Sandburg's classic love song to America.

Taking a teaching position at the University of Chicago, the philosopher John Dewey wrote that "Chicago is the place to make you appreciate at every turn the opportunity which chaos affords" (Dewey, 1894/1991).

Chaos and opportunity—there's constant contradiction in Chicago, in America, colliding and overlapping, always another incongruity or disparity or deviation to look into, always a challenge, an opposition or an absurdity, always another path opening. And that's surely a good thing, for contradiction is the force that may save us yet: nothing is settled, once and for all, everything is on the move and in the mix, and each of us is tripping the light fantastic in an endlessly refreshing and often exhausting dance of the dialectic.

In *Chicago, City on the Make*, Algren (2001, p. 14) wrote:

Not that there's been any lack of honest men and women sweating out Jane Addams' hopes here—but [the Do-Gooders] get only two outs to the inning while the hustlers are taking four.

When Jane Addams established the first settlement house in America with an intrepid group of crusading women in 1889, and went on to create the first Juvenile Court in the world, the first playground in a public park, the first public kindergartens, and a thousand other projects and reforms, she argued that building communities of care and compassion required more than "doing good," more than the beneficent but ultimately controlling stance of a Lady Bountiful. It required, rather, a radical oneness with others in

distress, an identity of purpose so that when she opened the Hull House and lived there with families in crisis and need, she acted *in solidarity with*—rather than *in service to*—the marginalized and exploited, and in fighting for their humanity, won a measure of her own.

Chaos, conflict, and contradiction: “City of the Big Shoulders.... Stormy, husky, brawling.... Come and show me another city with lifted head singing so proud to be alive and coarse and strong and cunning... half-naked, sweating, proud.” Carl Sandburg’s (1914) defiant chant gets Chicago in a vast Whitmanesque idiom, and, in that, gets something great about America.

What’s so great about America?

Centuries ago, a Genoan adventurer and his band of fellow travelers plunged into the unknown, rode the waves until they stumbled upon the Bahamas and, as the authorized texts tell us, “discovered America.” We all know that foundational myth by heart, and we know as well that centuries before that, another group of voyagers summoned their imaginations and visions, their own resourcefulness and courage to travel thousands of miles on foot across the Bering Strait, down through forests and mountains into the Great Plains of North America, to settle there and bring forth generations.

And there’s a third story to go with those two, also a central part of our shared American narrative and another piece of what’s so great about America: those Americans who rose up to oppose the Castilian invasion and to resist the Columbian genocide—Osceola and Crazy Horse and Cochise summoned courage and resourcefulness as they mobilized their own visions and their own American hopes.

We can see right away that every story has a prologue, every opening a foreword. History is in continual creation at the dynamic intersection of *what happened* and *what’s said to have happened*—the facts themselves, and then the narratives we construct to understand and circulate those facts. Each of us is both actor and narrator, thrust into a world not of our choosing, destined to choose who to be and what to become in the dynamic, unfolding drama that catches us and propels us forward. Every ending is necessarily temporary, too—there’s always more to say.

And so there it is, wherever you begin, deep within our human DNA, embedded in our collective American experience—imagination and hope, vision and resourcefulness, initiative and courage, conflict and contradiction.

There are the muckrakers and the whistle-blowers from Upton Sinclair to Daniel Ellsberg and Jeremy Hammond, Chelsea Manning, and Edward Snowden—and then there are the liars and the spies from the FBI to the CIA.

There are the Abolitionists—Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman with that inconvenient pistol in her pocket, John Brown, Wendell Phillips, William Lloyd Garrison, and Nat Turner—one of the great things about America—and then there’s slavery itself, an essential, foundational horror.

There's Seneca Falls and the feminist fighters like Sojourner Truth and the Grimke sisters, and then there's the sturdy legacy of patriarchy to overcome.

What's so great about America?

The spirit of democracy—the precious but fragile ideal that every human being is of incalculable value, endowed with certain inalienable rights—and a faith in democracy, using faith in the Biblical sense of “the evidence of things unseen,” a conviction that people need neither gods nor masters, and that we are quite capable of making the decisions that affect our lives—politically, economically, globally—and indeed that the people with the problems are necessarily the people with the solutions.

The inspirations of liberty—a sense that we are free to invent and reinvent ourselves, to shape our collective identities in every sphere of existence without traditional constraints of royal court or church, and whether we are concerned with our social character or our economic order, our manners or our sexuality, we can resist convention and strike out on a path of our own making.

Our radical imaginations unleashed—the rebels and radicals like Ida B. Wells-Barnett, who envisioned a world without lynching and then organized a movement to end it; Emma Goldman, Eugene Debs, and W.E.B. Du Bois, who went to the root of things and organized for a world in balance and powered by love. The legacy endured in the work of Ella Baker and Septima Clark, Martin Luther King Jr., Fred Hampton, and Malcolm X fifty years ago, and on up to today—Barbara Ransby and Bryan Stevenson, Undocumented and Unafraid, #MeToo, #Black Lives Matter. Ella Baker noted that the “movement made Martin, and not Martin the movement”: for every remembered leader there were multitudes putting their shoulders on history's wheel.

The country is as it is—a mass of contradictions and tragedies, rich with beauty and human accomplishment and possibility, vicious with human denial—a system that both drains us and replenishes us, gives us life and kills us: a trillion dollars a year on war, invasion, and occupation, a tiny group of over-privileged on the wrong side of any hope for a world in balance, acting as if large swaths of humanity are entirely disposable... and more.

All of this might move us to note that every human being is indigenous to planet Earth, and that there is, therefore, no such thing as a foreigner. We might work, then, to replace national patriotism with human solidarity—*sin fronteras*—in the spirit of Chicago's poet laureate Gwendolyn Brooks (1971, p. 14): “we are each other's harvest:/ we are each other's/ business:/ we are each other's/ magnitude and bond.”

The tools to become a patriotic internationalist are everywhere—humor and art, protest and spectacle, the quiet, patient intervention and the urgent thrust—and the rhythm is always the same: open your eyes and look unblinkingly at the world as it really is; be astonished by the beauty and horrified at the unnecessary suffering all around; dive into the wreckage and swim as hard as possible toward a distant and indistinct shore; doubt that your efforts made enough difference, and rethink, recalibrate, look again, link arms with others across the globe, and dive in once more.

Repeat for a lifetime.

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William Ayers (Bank Street College, 1987), Distinguished Professor of Education and Senior University Scholar (retired) at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) has written extensively about social justice and democracy, education and teaching as an essentially intellectual, ethical, and political enterprise. His books include *A Kind and Just Parent*; *Teaching Toward Freedom*; *Fugitive Days*; *Public Enemy*; *On the Side of the Child*; *To Teach: The Journey, in Comics*; and *Demand the Impossible!*