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Being American

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Last Updated: Wednesday, June 06th, 2007 11:49:20 AM

In these contentious political times, it might be important to remember (or learn) that we, as Americans, have much more in common than we do otherwise. In today's post-9/11 world, we have come to realize how a fundamentalist religious group or rogue foreign government just might launch an attack that could kill hundreds of thousands – if not millions – of our people in the blink of an eye. One day, we may have to dig down deep to our roots, and remember who we are.

It took me a long time to figure out why my dad loved westerns. He loved watching them on television and reading the paperbacks, and always made a point of having one of the storybooks handy on the nightstand by his bed.

When I was 10, I had major surgery. It was a big deal for me, and very scary. I recall those days recovering with absolute clarity. One night, on the small, black-and-white hospital television, huddled around my large, metal bed, my father, grandfather, and I watched an episode of some weekly western. It was at that very moment that I began to understand why my dad loved these shows, and why I loved them as well. I began to realize that I would soon be charting my own course in life through unknown territories. My father, I could see, was relieved to be resting after another day's battle; and my grandfather had already journeyed far from where he had begun so

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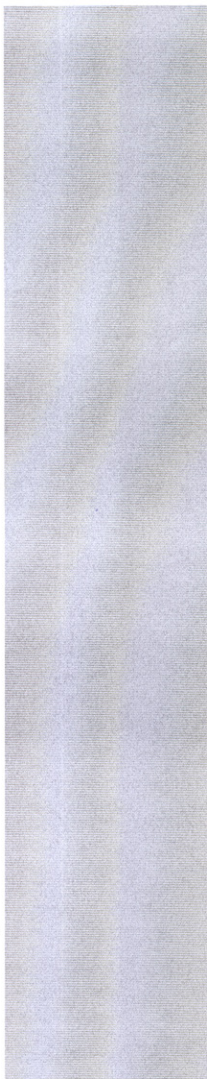
many years ago. All three of us, that night, could appreciate the company we kept ... looking out, into a world we so desperately longed for.

The years went on. With our trusty station wagon, and pop-up trailer in tow, each family vacation made us like modern-day settlers – foraying out into the unknown.

There was an allure to it all. Our destination may have been Orlando, or Ocean City, but I always saw it as a dusty old town on the outskirts of nowhere. They weren't campgrounds; they were visions of what life could be for me, and what it must have been years ago.

Getting older, I saw that being an American is many things – a kid in a real-life western movie, an underdog, a family living a dream. Learning about the early Americans in school, I often imagined what it must have been like to have been them. In my mind, I saw the first settlers unloading their pots and pans, books, and guns on the beaches of the Atlantic; they were unwittingly starting a unique brand of nation. Peoples from every walk of life, every color, and every religion would press their toes into that sand. These were men and women less concerned with rank and stature than with the consuming desire to succeed; theirs was a rare form of success in the making – the kind achieved only through self-awareness and inner pride. The kind that came with grit and circumstance ... far away from home – a little scared, but determined to make it through the night.

If you looked at them upon the canvas of human history, Americans would appear more like watercolors than oils. We've had neither the consistency, the time, nor the hubris to stand out like a blob of paint. We much prefer to absorb into the fabric of our environment, transforming it to our will. Our brush strokes have often been out of necessity – harsh and bold from battling the elements; but have also been delicate and daring out of passion and thrill. As our people moved over the mountains and vast plains, we founded a culture based less on



what had been given to us than on what we had created. We mastered our land, and then tamed ourselves with law and God.

We Americans have been a unique bunch. We feverishly seek challenges to become smarter, faster, stronger, but not without reflection from where we have come. We love the culture of our parents and our ancestors, but we remember the reasons that pushed us, perhaps hesitantly, into boats and across thousands of miles of ocean. We cherish the portrait that we have painted with our blood and sweat, and we cannot go back to the homes that gave us berth. We're proud of our ingenuity, and we value our independence – our self-reliance.

Being an American is not about a description of a people, or even the recitation of history. An American is a person who puts his best character on in the morning like a favorite shirt, not because it is his favorite design but because it is designed from his favorite things – hope, faith, and a undying desire to do better than yesterday. His outfit says to the world, "I am here – what can we do today?"

When I was a teenager, we often traveled from Washington, D.C., to my grandparents' apartment in New York City. When we would arrive, Grandma would always have food prepared from the old country, and Grandpa would tell stories of his boxing days down at the "Y." Later on, after a good meal, they would sit my sister, my brother, and me down and ask us about school and how we were doing. They wanted to make sure that we were working hard and got good grades; that we aspired to things that they had hoped for in their lives but had no possible way of achieving. Theirs had been a life running from chaos and evil. Ours should be a life of possibility and dreams that come true.

By the time that Mom and Dad were ready to head back home, Grandpa would already be comfortable in front of the television, watching some Hollywood rendition of the old west. In the end, there would be some big goodbyes, and then the hero riding off



into the sunset as the credits started to roll. Grandpa, like Dad, would get this satisfied look in his eyes and a content grin on his face. Sure, mistakes had been made during the journey, and we mourned those who didn't make it to the end of the show – but we were still on our horse. The cowboy had made it to begin yet another day, another journey, another dream. He was Grandpa, and Dad, and me. He was every person who had ever been scared, beaten down, and out of luck. He was every soul who had gotten out of his sick bed, looked towards the heavens, and found the strength to fight on. He had hope that he could make the world a better place. He was an American.

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