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PATRIOTISM

Mary Kay Harrington

“Cheer Up! The Worst is Yet to Come”

—*Mark Twain*

Six months after 9/11, when American flags were everywhere—taped on windows, flapping off cars, hanging outside of homes and businesses, etc.—I began to get uneasy. Of course, I realized that most people wanted to express solidarity, grief, and a sense of community. All of us wanted to connect with those who suffered from the terrible tragedy in those numbing days; we used the flag as a kind of emblem of pride and persistence. Later, the flag was joined by stickers on cars, pithy phrases such as, “Power of Pride,” “United We Stand,” etc., and I began thinking about the car stickers at the height of the Vietnam War, especially: “America: Love It Or Leave It.” Then I became even more anxious.

I found a website for Earth flags and I ordered one. You know it—that beautiful image of the blue and white earth taken from space—no borders, no lines that separate one sovereign nation from another, just a serene globe hanging magically in space. I naively thought that we’d start a movement, that all my neighbors, the whole town, in fact, would fly these flags and a fabulous shift of thinking would occur. We mounted our flag on our deck that could be seen from the street. Two or three days after the unveiling, we found a postcard of the American flag on our door. We had been flying the wrong flag!

I’ve spent some time thinking about this flag business (we are not the only country to wave them—the Scandinavians are relentless). Subtly we seemed to

move from grief to bellicosity. The flag became a way to say, “We’ll kick your ass,” or “We’re not afraid of nobody,” or “We’re number one!” The students who live near me with the biggest trucks and largest tires have big flags on them; I wanted to think that we’d become something better after 9/11, but the flag has taken on another meaning—a kind of knee-jerk patriotism. Sometimes the size of the flag signifies the testosterone levels of the inhabitants. I almost laugh when I see a run-down, beer-bottle covered lawn (replete with old couches) which has Old Glory flying stiffly from the peak of the roof, put up by six or so drunk guys one night who wanted to identify themselves as patriots.

Patriotism has some responsibility. Doesn’t it have something to do with citizenship? Shouldn’t pride in our country translate into some kind of concern for others? One house near the Cal Poly campus, with requisite beer signs in the windows, has a community service approach to citizenship. During the first week of fall quarter, these good citizens hang a sign (next to the flag) for all who are coming onto campus during WOW week. It says something like, “Parents, virgin check here” or “Virgin checkpoint.” I can’t remember which. The line comes to mind that patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel.

Patriotism has also become wrapped in religious garbs. My hair stylist who has cut my hair for years and I had an uncomfortable conversation about Christianity and the Muslim religion. He told me how hateful and dangerous the Koran was and how vicious Muslims are. I was shaken. He had a big flag flying from his car.

So, we can have patriotism wrapped in religion, in beer, in sex.

To make sure we are all fitting the appropriate patriotism mold, the *PATRIOT Act* came about. My favorite was the Justice Department’s TIPS program (which I hope is no longer ever considered). It didn’t take too long for the Terrorism Information and Protection System to be banned by the House. TIPS encouraged and enlisted corps of truck drivers, meter readers, and others (hair stylists?) to report suspicious activity to authorities. Evidently, the government saw many out there as “persons of interest.”

Richard Kerr, who was the Deputy Director of the CIA from 1988-1992 summed up what we may have in store for us: “Overseas, but also in this country, we have to become very intrusive, following where the money goes, where the terrorists gather, what they talk about. We’ve been taking some action to stop them. You don’t hear about it and you shouldn’t. Sometimes it means stepping

on people's toes. We'll make mistakes that when exposed will make people uncomfortable, lawyers and civil rights people."

I'd like to think I'm an interesting person. A strange thing happened to me the other day in the Post Office as I was ordering stamps. I asked what sorts of interesting stamps they had. The postal worker dragged out a sheet of American flag stamps and a sheet of tiny antique cars. Without thinking, I said (too loudly) "Oh, give me the little cars. I'm really tired of all those American flags." He arched one eyebrow (Could he have been a TIPS reporter?). I found myself glancing over my shoulder at the folks behind me in line to see if any reacted. I walked slowly to my car and stood by it for a while to see if I had been followed.

Mark Twain had many good lines. He eloquently sums up my position concerning loyalty and patriotism: "My kind of loyalty was loyalty to one's country, not its institutions or its office-holders. The country is the real thing, the substantial thing, the eternal thing; it is the thing to watch over, and care for, and be loyal to." 