

poems she seems to have brought with her onto this planet, I heard on the news that our state board of education was dropping the poetry requirement from our schools. The secretary of education explained that it took too much time to teach children poetry, when they were harder pressed than ever to master the essentials of the curriculum. He said we had to take a good, hard look at what was essential, and what was superfluous.

"*Superfluous*," I said to the radio.

"Math path boo!" said my child, undaunted by her new outlaw status.

This one was not going to get away. I threw down my dishtowel, swept the baby off her podium, and carried her under my arm as we stalked off to find a pencil. In my opinion, when you find yourself laughing and crying both at once, that is the time to write a poem. Maybe that's the only honest living there is.

And Our Flag Was Still There

My daughter came home from kindergarten and announced, "Tomorrow we all have to wear red, white, and blue."

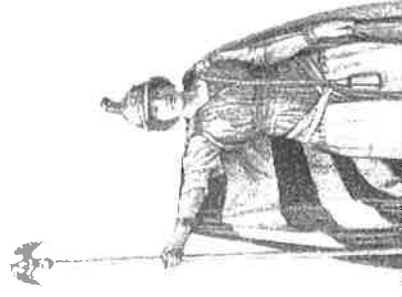
"Why?" I asked, trying not to sound anxious.

"For all the people that died when the airplanes hit the buildings."

I said quietly, "Why not wear black, then? Why the colors of the flag, what does that mean?"

"It means we're a country. Just all people together."

I love my country dearly. Not



listening to my older daughter and a hundred other teenagers in the orchestra play “Stars and Stripes Forever” on their earnest, vibrating strings, I burst into tears of simultaneous pride and grief. I love what we will do for one another in the name of inclusion and kindness. So I long to feel comforted and thrilled by the sight of Old Glory, as so many others seem to feel when our country plunges into war or dire straits. Symbols are many things to many people. In those raw months following the September 11 attacks, I saw my flag waved over used car and truck lots, designer-label clothing sales, and the funerals of genuine heroes. In my lifetime I have seen it waved over the sound of saber-rattling too many times for my comfort. When I heard about this kindergarten red-white-and-blue plan, my first impulse was to dread that my sweet child was being dragged to the newly patriotic cause of wreaking death in the wake of death. Nevertheless, any symbol conceived in liberty deserves the benefit of the doubt. We sent her to school in its colors because it felt to my daughter like some small thing she could do to help the people who were hurting. And because my wise husband put a hand on my arm and said, “You can’t let hateful people steal the flag from us.”

He didn’t mean foreign terrorists, he meant certain Americans. Like the man in a city near us who went on a rampage, crying “I’m an American” as he shot at foreign-born neighbors, killing a gentle Sikh man in a turban and terrifying every brown-skinned person I know. Or the talk-radio hosts who viciously bullied members of Congress and anyone else for showing sensible skepticism during the mad rush toward war. After Representative Barbara Lee cast the House’s only vote against handing over virtually unlimited war powers to a man whom fully half of us—let’s be honest—didn’t support a year before, so many red-blooded Americans threatened to kill her that she had to be assigned additional bodyguards.

carrying equally deadly threats to many other citizens did not get coverage. Hate radio reaches thousands of avid listeners, and fear stalked many families in the autumn and winter of our nation’s discontent, when belonging to *any* minority—including the one arguing for peaceful and diplomatic solutions to violence—was enough to put one at risk. When fear rules the day, many minds are weak enough to crack the world into nothing but “me” and “evildoers,” and as long as we’re proudly killing unlike minds over there, they feel emboldened to do the same over here. For minds like that, the great attraction to patriotism is, as Aldous Huxley wrote, that “it fulfills our worst wishes. In the person of our nation we are able, vicariously, to bully and cheat. Bully and cheat, what’s more, with a feeling that we are profoundly virtuous.”

Such cowards have surely never arrived at a majority in this country, though their power has taken the helm in such dark moments as the McCarthy persecutions and the Japanese American internments. At such times, patriotism falls to whoever claims it loudest, and the rest of us are left struggling to find a definition in a clamor of reaction. In the days and months following September 11, some bully-patriots claiming to own my flag promoted a brand of nationalism that threatened freedom of speech and religion with death, as witnessed by the Sikhs and Muslims in my own community, and U.S. Representative Barbara Lee in hers. (Several of her colleagues confessed they wanted to vote the same way she did, but were frightened by the obvious threat from vigilante patriots.) Such men were infuriated by thoughtful hesitation, constructive criticism of our leaders, and pleas for peace. They ridiculed and despised people of foreign birth (one of our congressmen actually used the hideous term “rag heads”) who’ve spent years becoming part of our culture and contributing their labor and talents to our economy. In one stunning statement

Civil Liberties Union for the horrors of September 11. In other words, these hoodlum-Americans were asking me to believe that their flag stood for intimidation, censorship, violence, bigotry, sexism, homophobia, and shoving the Constitution through a paper shredder? Well, *our* flag does not, and I'm determined that it never will. Outsiders can destroy airplanes and buildings, but only we the people have the power to demolish our own ideals.

It's a fact of our culture that the loudest mouths get the most airplay, and the loudmouths are saying that in times of crisis it's treasonous to question our leaders. Nonsense. That kind of thinking allowed the seeds of a dangerous racism to grow into fascism during the international economic crisis of the 1930s. It is precisely in critical times that our leaders need *most* to be influenced by the moderating force of dissent. That is the basis of democracy, especially when national choices are difficult and carry grave consequences. The flag was never meant to be a stand-in for information and good judgment.

In the wake of the September 11 attacks, an amazing windfall befell our local flag-and-map store, which had heretofore been one of the sleepest little independent businesses in the city. Suddenly it was swamped with unprecedented hordes of customers who came in to buy not maps, of course, but flags. After the stock quickly sold out, a cashier reported that customers came near to rioting as they stomped around empty-handed and the waiting list swelled to six hundred names. She said a few customers demanded to know why she personally wasn't in the back room sewing more Old Glories. Had I been in her position, I might have said, "Hey, friends and countrymen, wouldn't this be a great time to buy yourselves a map?" The sturdiest form of national pride is educated about the alternatives. And in fairness to my more polite compatriots, I was greatly heartened in that same season to see the country's

We're a much nobler country than our narrowest minds and loudest mouths suggest. I believe it is *my* patriotic duty to recapture my flag from the men who wave it in the name of jingoism and censorship. This is difficult, for many reasons. To begin with, when we civil libertarians on the one hand insist that every voice in the political spectrum must be heard, and the hard right on the other hand insists that our side should stuff a sock in it, the deck is stacked. And the next challenge is, I can never hope to match their nationalistic righteousness. The last time I looked at a flag with an unambiguous thrill, I was thirteen. Right after that, Vietnam began teaching me lessons in ambiguity, and the lessons have kept coming. I've learned of things my government has done to the world that make me shudder: Covert assassinations of democratically elected leaders in Chile and the Congo; support of brutal dictators in dozens of nations because they smiled on our economic interests; training of torturers in a military camp in Georgia; secret support even of the rising Taliban in Afghanistan, until that business partnership came to a nasty end. In history books and numbers of our *Congressional Record* I've discovered many secrets that made me ashamed of how my country's proud ideology sometimes places last, after money for the win and power for the show. And yet, when I've dared to speak up about these skeletons in our closet, I've been further alienated from my flag by people who waved it at me, declaring I should love it or leave it. I always wonder, What makes them think that's their flag and not mine? Why are *they* the good Americans, and not me? I have never shrunk from sacrifice but have always faced it head on when I needed to, in order to defend the American ideals of freedom and human kindness.

I've been told the pacifists should get down on their knees and thank the men who gave their lives for our freedom, and I've

had been born to a different time and gender with my present character otherwise intact, I might well have joined them, at least as a medic, or something. (Where I grew up, I'd likely have been conscripted into dying for the wrong side in the Civil War, but that's another story.) I wish I could claim to possess a nature I could honestly call pacifist, but I've had long friendships with genuine pacifists in the Quaker community and have seen in them a quality I lack. I can rarely summon the strength to pray for my enemies, as some do every day. On the rare occasions when my life has been put directly at risk by another, I've clawed like a lioness. My gut, if not my head, is a devotee of self-defense.

But my head is unconvinced by the sleight of hand and sloganeering that put the label "self-defense" on certain campaigns waged far from my bedroom window, against people who have no wish to come anywhere near it. It's extremely important to note that in my lifetime our multitude of wars in Central America and the Middle East have been not so much about the freedom of humans as about the freedom of financial markets. My spiritual faith does not allow me to accept equivalence of these two values; I wonder that anyone's does.

Our entry into wars most resembling self-defense, World War II and the 2001 Afghanistan campaign, both followed direct attacks on our country. The latter, at least, remains a far more convoluted entanglement than the headlines ever suggested. In the 1990s, most of us have now learned, the United States tacitly supported the viciously sexist, violent Taliban warlords—only to then bomb them out of power in 2001. I'm profoundly relieved to see any such violent men removed from command, of course. But I'm deeply uncomfortable, also, with the notion that two wrongs add up to one right, and I'm worried about the next turn of that logic. It is only prudent to ask questions, and only reasonable to discuss

icans who read and think have frequently seen how the much-touted "national interest" can differ drastically from their own.

And Americans who read and think are patriots of the first order—the kind who know enough to roll their eyes whenever anyone tries to claim sole custody of the flag and wield it as a blunt instrument. There are as many ways to love America as there are Americans, and our country needs us all. The rights and liberties described in our Constitution are guaranteed not just to those citizens who have the most money and power, but also to those who have the least, and yet it has taken hard struggle through every year of our history to hold our nation to that promise. Dissidents innocent of any crime greater than a belief in fair treatment of our poorest and ill-treated citizens have died right here on American soil for our freedom, as tragically as any soldier in any war: Karen Silkwood, Medgar Evars, Malcolm X, Denise McNair, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, Addie Mae Collins, Martin Luther King Jr., Albert Parsons, August Spies, Adolph Fisher, George Engel, Joe Hill, Nicola Sacco, Bartolomeo Vanzetti—the list of names stretches on endlessly and makes me tremble with gratitude. Any of us who steps up to the platform of American protest is standing on bloodstained and hallowed ground, and let no one ever dare call it un-American or uncourageous. While we peace lovers are down on our knees with gratitude, as requested, the warriors might do well to get down here with us and give thanks for Dr. King and Gandhi and a thousand other peacemakers who gave their lives to help lift humanity out of the trough of bare-toothed carnage. Where in the Bill of Rights is it written that the entitlement to bear arms—and use them—trumps any aspiration to peaceful solutions? I search my soul and find I cannot rejoice over killing, but that does not make me any less a citizen. When I look at the flag, why must I see it backlit with the rockets' red

The first time I thought of it that way, I stumbled on a huge revelation. *This is why the war supporters so easily gain the upper hand in the patriot game: Our nation was established with a fight for independence, so our iconography grew out of war. Anyone who is tempted to dismiss art as useless in matters of politics must agree that art is supremely powerful here, in connecting patriotism with war. Our national anthem celebrates it; our nationalist imagery memorializes it; our most familiar poetry of patriotism is inseparable from a battle cry. Our every military campaign is still launched with phrases about men dying for the freedoms we hold dear, even when this is impossible to square with reality. During the Gulf War I heard plenty of words about freedom's defense as our military rushed to the aid of Kuwait, a monarchy in which women enjoyed approximately the same rights as a nineteenth-century American slave. The values we fought for there are best understood by oil companies and the royalty of Saudi Arabia—the ones who asked us to do this work on the Iraq-Kuwaiti border, and with whom we remain friendly. (Not incidentally, we have never confronted the Saudis about women-hating Wahhabism and vast, unending support for schools of anti-American wrath.) After a swift and celebrated U.S. victory, a nation of Iraqi civilians was left with its hospitals, its water-delivery lines, and its food-production systems devastated, its capacity for reconstruction crushed by our ongoing economic sanctions, and its fate—at the time of this writing—still in the hands of one of the vilest dictators I've ever read about. There's the reality of war for you: Freedom often *loses*.*

Stating these realities is not so poetic, granted, but it is absolutely a form of patriotism. Questioning our government's actions does not violate the principles of liberty, equality, and freedom of speech; it exercises them, and by exercise we grow stronger. I have read enough of Thomas Jefferson to feel sure he

stand that to a democratic people, freedom of speech and belief are not just nice luxuries, they're as necessary as breathing. The authors of our Constitution knew, from experience with King George and company, that governments don't remain benevolent to the interests of all, including their less powerful members, without constant vigilance and reasoned criticism. And so the founding fathers guaranteed the right of reasoned criticism in our citizenship contract—for *always*. No emergency shutdowns allowed. However desperate things may get, there are to be no historical moments when beliefs can be abridged, vegetarians required to praise meat, Christians forced to pray as Muslims, or vice versa. Angry critics have said to me in stressful periods, "Don't you understand it's *wartime*?" As if this were just such a historical moment of emergency shutdown. Yes, we all know it's wartime. It's easy to speak up for peace in peacetime—anybody can do that. Now is when it gets hard. But our flag is not just a logo for wars; it's the flag of American pacifists, too. It's the flag of all of us who love our country enough to do the hard work of living up to its highest ideals.

I have two American flags. Both were gifts. One was handed out of colored paper by my younger child; it's a few stars shy of regulation but nonetheless cherished. Each has its place in my home, so I can look up from time to time and remember, *That's mine*. Maybe this is hard for some men to understand, but that emblem wasn't handed to me by soldiers on foreign soil; it wasn't handed to me by men at all—they withheld it from women for our nation's first century and a half. I would never have gained it if everyone's idea of patriotism had been simply to go along with the status quo. That flag protects and represents me only because of Ida B. Wells, Lucy Stone, Susan B. Anthony, and countless other women who risked everything so I could be a full citizen. Each of

precious debt to courageous Americans before us who risked threats and public ridicule for an unpopular cause: ours. Now that flag is mine to carry on, promising me that I may, and that I must, continue believing in the dignity and sanctity of life, and stating that position in a public forum.

And so I would like to stand up for my flag and wave it over a few things I believe in, including but not limited to the protection of dissenting points of view. After 225 years, I vote to retire the rockets' red glare and the bloody bandage as obsolete symbols of Old Glory. We desperately need a new iconography of patriotism. I propose that we rip strips of cloth from the uniforms of the unbelievably courageous firefighters who rescued the injured and panic-stricken from the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, and remained at their posts until the buildings collapsed on them. Praise the red glare of candles held up in vigils everywhere as peace-loving people pray for the bereaved and plead for compassionate resolutions. Honor the blood donated to the Red Cross; respect the stars of all kinds who have used their influence to raise funds for humanitarian assistance; glory in the generous hands of schoolchildren collecting pennies, teddy bears, and anything else they think might help the kids who've lost their moms and dads. Let me sing praise to the ballot box and the jury box, and to the unyielding protest marches of my foremothers who fought for those rights so I could be fully human under our Constitution. What could be a more honorable symbol of American freedom than the suffragist's banner, the striker's picket, the abolitionist's drinking gourd, the placards of humane protest from every decade of our forward-marching history? Let me propose aloud that the dove is at least as honorable a creature as the carnivorous eagle. And give me liberty, now, with signs of life.

Shortly after the September attacks, my town became famous

flag on a baseball field and had their photograph taken from above. That picture soon began to turn up everywhere, but we saw it first on our newspaper's front page. Our family stood in silence for a minute looking at that stunningly beautiful photograph of a human flag, trying to know what to make of it. Then my teenager, who has a quick mind for numbers and a sensitive heart, did an interesting thing. She laid her hand over part of the picture, leaving visible more or less five thousand people, and said, "In New York, that many might be dead." We stared at what that looked like—that many innocent souls, particolored and packed into a conjoined destiny—and shuddered at the one simple truth behind all the noise, which was that so many beloved, fragile lives were suddenly gone from us. That is my flag, and that's what it means: We're all just people, together.