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JANUARY 2008 UNBOUND ATLANTIC MONTHLY

Essays by Atlantic readers

The American Idea

For The Atlantic's [150th-anniversary issue](#) in November, we asked a variety of writers, artists, and public figures to define their concept of the American idea. We invited our readers to do the same.

From the more than 400 reader submissions we received (from 40 states and eight countries), we've selected the following 25. The authors of these essays will each receive a copy of [The American Idea: The Best of the Atlantic Monthly; 150 Years of Writers and Thinkers Who Shaped Our History](#), a new anthology compiled by Atlantic editor-at-large Robert Vare.

Every so often, the elements sandpapered our town of Shiprock, New Mexico. Shaking in the howl, I counted to fifty, willing evil spirits away. If anyone shouts "sandstorm!" to me now, I lurch to my feet, tensed for action. Old habits never die. When the wind woke from his lethargy and whipped sand from the earth, the fool caught outside was helpless. With cunning and old dishrags placed under window cracks, we repelled the invading sand.

As a blond, Caucasian girl growing up on the Indian Reservation, I was the only kid in Nizhoni Elementary who wasn't Navajo. On Self Portrait Day in kindergarten, I waved my melted-crayon masterpiece aloft. Through the window, the darkening sky geared up for another sandstorm. Inside, my teacher snatched up my drawing and stared at me for a moment. I still have the picture, somewhere. In the first self portrait by my five-year-old and wisest self, I am not white. I'm Navajo.

The American Idea is a moment of stillness, really. It is the eye of the storm. When sand swirls outside and grinds the world down to its foundations, that idea is a micro-shock of clarity, the echoes of which endure beyond manipulation.

Marguerite Atterbury

Santa Fe, NM

Living abroad – in my case as a writer in Shanghai – clarifies one's notion of the American idea. My Chinese friends often ask about America and our system of government. A sense of pride swells when someone from China learns for the first time that, yes, you can protest the American

President directly in front of his house and you won't be jailed. A deep sense of shame emerges when you're asked about urban poverty or if you can help explain what waterboarding is.

But the particulars often miss what to me is the Organizing Principle or Idea of America: there is none. The American Idea, really, is the individual idea. When governments fail to offer master plans or grand visions for collective action, as ours has done, a spontaneous and organic order arises. Think of the local church support network, a pick-up basketball league, or the small bakery that opened down the road. These are Edmund Burke's "little platoons," and they can be bigoted and exclusionary or welcoming and expressive.

For China, who in rhetoric and action aims to move as a cohesive whole, this is an idea that deserves to be heard.

Jude Blanchette

Charlotte, VT

We as keepers of The American Idea have become popular kids during their senior year of high school (engorged with confidence but in constant fear of what's next) who then immediately enter mid-life crisis (so fortunate that we can't stop fretting about our good fortune). We are choking on abstraction, and need to go to boot camp, fat camp...any place that takes a hammer to our ego: a place where we repeat to ourselves daily that we are not the greatest country in the world, so that we may truly enliven the spirit of competition; a place where competition is not beating one's opponent into submission; a place where we would never invoke the word "freedom" without putting it in context, as we are in danger of abusing that word of all its power, until it joins the ranks of "amazing", "surreal", and any great cuss word that now simply serves as conversational yeast; and ultimately, a place where we would never treat braggadocio, privilege, or violence as ironic or cute, be it via t-shirt, hat, body language, or decal. We need to peel The American Idea off the back windows of our automobiles and put it back to work.

Sean Boling

Paso Robles, CA

A Twenty-Four-Seven Society's "To-do" List:

Number 35: Buy Lawn Chair

It's 11:39 pm but it is urgent, critical even, that I buy a lawn chair this instant! Thankfully, the American interpretation of time, the child of Puritan punctuality and Fordism efficiency, has now twisted itself into an obsession with twenty-four-hour shopping. Within a ten-mile radius of my home, I can find three Wal-marts, a Wegmans grocers, and two CVS drugstores with doors still open,

lights still burning, and cheery cashiers with open registers.

I need to be awake by 6:00 am, and yet here I stand, brain-fried at 11:51 pm staring at my local Walmart's selection of lawn chairs. Watching the customers to my left and right, I conclude that midnight must also be the appropriate hour for buying prom dresses, new chainsaws, and bakery items.

What has happened in America to make this acceptable? Why am I not in bed? Why is this store full? Because at the core of the American Idea is time, and a rather sick interpretation thereof. The same idea that keeps me reading my e-mails at 1:00 am keeps America's parking lots packed after midnight; our obsession to beat the clock – to cross items off our never-ending “to-do” lists.

Heather Carmody

Haddonfield, NJ

As the home of immigrants and the progeny of those immigrants, America is a nation that is universal in her origins. This fact separates America from other countries in that it prohibits her from constructing a culture rooted in the principles of uniformity and regularity, and instead begs her to understand that our differences do not bind us to a future of enmity, but to a future of equality. As Walt Whitman once wrote, "do I contradict myself? Very well, then I contradict myself. I am large. I contain multitudes." Indeed, just as the differences between individuals are varied and vast, so the Idea of America must also be varied and vast. Within this Idea the lines that separate us as individuals, though contradictory, are not boundaries that divide; they are interstices that connect. Differences between heritages, religions and beliefs no longer represent irreconcilable forces that must be melted and molded into a single image. They represent necessary diversity. It is a misconception to think that the American Idea promotes the individual at the expense of the collective. The American Idea promotes the individual for the sake of the collective. By valuing the differences between people we acknowledge that the potential of each individual is different and that the potential for our collective nation is infinite.

Anna Crawley

Danville, VA

Not long ago, when the curators at Ford's Theatre in Washington looked anew at the plain black coat President Lincoln had worn the night he was assassinated, they found embroidered in the lining the words “One Country, One Destiny.” That is the American idea – a noble ideal, unfinished, incomplete, never to be achieved once and for all, tested again and again by great tragedy. Oneness, the *unum* derived from our *pluribus*, remains our elusive national theme. We are many still trying to be one, trying to be “we.” Four-score years ago, our now mostly forgotten historian-poet, Stephen Vincent Benet, chanted the American idea in his epic, “John Brown's Body.” Many had tried to

understand America, he wrote, but “only made it smaller with their art.” We may be one country, with one destiny, but we will also be forever not as one, a nation as various as the land in which we live: “All these you are,” wrote Benet, “and each is partly you, / And none is false, and none is wholly true.”

Missy Daniel

Washington, DC

When I was growing up, in the 1960s, The American Idea was light. A great American had invented the light bulb. American ingenuity was raising dams, wildcatting oil wells, splitting atoms and electrifying the world. Our way of life was a shining beacon, illuminating the dark corners of despotism in far away places.

As they often do, my sons, born at century's end, trained a klieg light on my glaring ignorance.

“Hawaii,” my fifth grader explained, “was hijacked into statehood by American pineapple plantation owners, with help from a shipload of Marines. Queen Lili'uokalani was under house arrest when she wrote Aloha 'Oe. Didn't you learn this in school?” No, I did not. When I was a schoolboy, we were taught that the Queen and her subjects loved democracy and freedom and admired the United States so much that they requested admittance to the union, a wish graciously granted by President Grover Cleveland and the Congress. Seriously, that was in our textbooks.

Unlearning early lessons has been painful, but I've discovered that the true American Idea is The Question. Doubting, digging, challenging. Refusing to settle for pat answers and platitudes will make my sons' America the light on the hill.

Andrew Dolson

Richmond, VA

The true essence of the American Idea is hope for the future. When the founding fathers were fighting and writing for the freedom of our country they were concerned with not only the present but with the future. Their hope was not only to bring freedom to themselves but to future generations. Their hope was that each generation would add to the country in a positive way and leave the country in a good place for future generations; that the country would always be free, with each person knowing that freedom; that each person would have equality; that justice would be fair and equal for all. The greatest challenge hope faces is the day to day. Each person has to have hope that we are changing for the better; that we are doing the right thing; that the country will be a better place for our future generations. If each person has hope, the future will be better than the present or past. Without hope for the future America will fail because people would only be concerned with the present and will end up destroying the country. Hope is the thread that keeps the fabric of our

country together.

Katie Gilley

Baton Rouge, LA

Most nations are homogeneous—their citizens bound together by similarities in appearance and philosophy, like colonies of termites or synchronized shoals of sardines.

America is different.

Her citizens do not all look alike, do not all think alike, do not all worship the same, and do not share identical hopes, goals, and dreams. They clump together, though, here—to form the United States of America—because of a powerful commonality, one pinprick point of convergence, tiny but profound. Even the strongest individuals can not resist this national gravity. Its pull on the strong and talented, in fact, is most powerful. They have the greatest mass.

This American idea, this national glue, is the same great truth understood by our founding fathers—individuals form nations, not the reverse. Since this nation's inception, individuality has been nurtured, celebrated, and elevated above conformity. The American idea continues to attract the strong and talented, continues to ensure a citizen's freedom to choose happiness, and continues to help the United States shine brightest in the firmament of nations.

Without it, we might as well live in a bee hive.

Thomas M. Hill

Hartland, WI

I am 31, and have been living on the global road for ten years. I am a proud anarchist, and trace my roots back to the freemasons who declared all independence from any authority that does not govern with consent. I've installed the South Pole, I've led climbing expeditions across the Himalayas, I sold drugs in South Africa, I am a practicing yogi, and my bachelor's degree is in investment banking. I am presently a homeless ascetic, a proud, flag-burning American sleeping under the stars in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. The West is still wild, you pussies.

The American Idea is about Anarchy. For that matter, so was Jesus. Both were crucified, for the obvious reason. True freedom requires us to believe in ourselves, needing no outside law and trusting none.

Listen well: your Babylon has no integrity. Your politicians are bribed liars, your religious fundamentalists are warmongers, momentum behind the debtor's union builds, and Rome falls around you. A global indigenous renaissance takes place beneath the radar of any economic data, and thank the Goddess for it, you know what I'm saying? It's about time. A generation bereft of useful

elders comes of age on a planet that is curiously explorable, habitable, perishable, and indeed home. Meanwhile, elders war for profit. nice touch, that white man's burden...(liberty or death, punk)

Matthew Ryan Kelley

Boulder, CO

My idealized vision of America is realized in old westerns like Shane, where it's clear who the toughest guy in town is, but he is governed by restraint, and has the wisdom to swear off force and violence. He is content to live under the plow and provide for friends and family. Only after a series of profoundly unjust provocations and constant dangers to his loved ones does he resort to violence in order to restore justice and safety to the community.

The real America may have fit that mold during World War II and for a split second after that, but paranoia has ruled ever since. It could have ended in 1989 when we "won" the cold war, but instead we continued to ostracize that dangerous superpower off the coast of Florida, and worse, we began to cultivate the next fear that caused our preemptive violence in 2003.

Ironically, the current administration and those who support it would agree with my idealized vision of America, and amazingly, would think that America still is Shane and that we only invaded Iraq as a last resort. Shane would be disappointed.

Chris Knief

Madison WI

Warring Against Nature

In Appalachia, the top of a mountain is blown into smithereens, exposing veins of coal. The resulting debris and spoil from the monstrous blast and ensuing excavation is then pushed into the valley below, burying thousands of acres of trees and countless perennial streams. Along a logging road in the Pacific Northwest, only the two-foot high stump of a mammoth Douglas Fir remains, serving as the resting place for a discarded beer can. Did the American idea contemplate an arrogant disregard for nature in its perpetuation of 21st century economic excesses to fund the American Dream? It did not. It was born out an agrarian restraint that revered the landscape, not only for the sustenance it could provide, but also for the spiritual enrichment essential to the complete development of the individual.

Chief Luther Standing Bear, a Lakota Sioux said, "The elders were wise. They knew that man's heart away from nature becomes hard; they knew that lack of respect for growing, living things soon led to a lack of respect for humans too." The harvest has already turned bitter.

David A. Lipstreu*Newbury, Ohio*

The American idea is homage to the noun itself—"idea." A free democracy incubates, facilitates, promotes, fights over, and provides conflict resolution and decision making for "ideas." For every idea there is a counter idea, a modified idea, a ridiculous idea, something sublime. A multitude of media, publications, and organizations overlaid by a variegated population means ideas, ideas, ideas.

Volume, variation, and distribution of ideas is woven into the fabric of America. Keep them coming, change them, laugh at them and cry. Debate them in the halls of Congress and legislative byways of state and local government. Let them collide in a court room. The cacaphony of democracy—ideas.

The tension stress and strain of competing ideas bears down on us. Sometimes it may fuel violent confrontation, but mostly it liberates: enrichment evolves and something akin to the ideal gets a chance. Ideas are ammunition for action and an improved society. Disputation from ideas is common, but exalted; it's America!

Michael H. Miller*Los Angeles, CA*

The American Century has ended, many say. What will replace it is not clear. The Age of Globalization? A new Dark Ages of religious conflict? A world inflamed by the gap between the developed world and the fringe-dwellers? America's time alone and unchallenged may be over.

Yet in this shifting world, the American Idea has just as much potency—poignancy even—as it ever had. No other nation seems prepared to champion the virtues of hard work, the moral imperative to liberty, and equal rights for women and minorities as the United States has. Can China take our place as leader of the free world? Barring massive governmental reform, no. Can Europe rise again? Demographics and history would argue it can't.

The world may be a difficult place for freedom and justice, but if the future of the world is to be safer and better than its past, America must lead the way. Despite its many flaws and failings, its strange psychoses, its unusual way of hiding its virtues until they are most needed, America is unique on earth in its ability for moral leadership. The American Idea is not perfect, but it is still necessary.

Will Munsil*Lakewood, CO*

The American idea is that fundamental human values (liberty, justice and equal opportunity, for example) are best nurtured by political and economic institutions accountable to people empowered to act freely. Implicit here, is confidence in our system's ability to absorb and adapt to change while remaining anchored to core values.

In recent decades, we've been challenged by change. Globalization, terrorism, resource scarcity, consumerism and technological advances are among the forces that test both our institutions and our values. An information free-for-all makes it hard to discover truth and distinguish between the significant and the trivial. A simplistic sense of right versus wrong, saved versus damned, good versus evil allows partisanship to overshadow community and impedes the search for common ground around the world.

The biggest challenge facing the American idea is how to anchor enduring values in this time of rapid and discordant change. Religious and cultural norms of a simpler past seem unable to secure shared values in the complex present.

Is the American idea resilient enough to embrace a rebirth of our political and economic systems? Will the American people push our institutions in the right direction? Our history may be short but our track record is reassuring.

Steve Norris

Denver, CO

As someone who emigrated from India and has lived half her life in the U.S., my appreciation of the American Idea is constant in its presence and constantly evolving in its flavor.

Coming as I do from a culture where platitudes like fate or karma and apathy stemming from lack of individual agency are the norm, knowing that this country unabashedly enshrines the pursuit of happiness is exhilarating. To me, happiness once meant little more than having "a room of my own." Achieving that modest goal has freed me to grapple with ever more complex, challenging, yet authentic-to-me definitions of happiness.

One such definition is the freedom to reinvent myself. Raised a non-observant Hindu, I have found my spiritual community among Unitarian Universalists. A techie by training and profession, I took up writing about five years ago, and ended up launching an online magazine.

The idea of reinvention – not considering anything as "settled" – extends to society as a whole. I see this in the efforts of those who espouse Intelligent Design and those who passionately argue for the rights of a whole range of minorities.

The essence of the American Idea, then, is that it is an engine of evolution – the personal as well as the social and cultural.

Nandini Pandya*Milford, CT***Live to Work, and Work to Live**

Work was one of the central aims of the first settlers in America: Freed from the chains of European class society, creating a life in prosperity out of nothing. Work gave them the opportunity to make a new beginning: A life in freedom without disgraceful repression by the upper-class—a basis for the famous pursuit of happiness.

The idea of work as one of the highest values in life continues today, although unfortunately it is often accepted uncritically. George W. Bush demonstrated this two years ago, answering a single mother of three children working three jobs: "Uniquely American, isn't it? I mean, that is fantastic that you're doing that."

Whether that working mom herself finds it fantastic is questionable. Even working 60 hours per week in a job based on the 2007 federal minimum wage would leave her with \$500 per month less than the current poverty threshold.

The early idea of work contained a notion of freedom and dignity. Situations like the working mother's question the coexistence of the values freedom, dignity, and work, especially in the context of minimum-wage jobs. The phrase is "live to work, and work to live"—but it is not supposed to be a struggle to survive.

Alexandra Pitzing*Leipzig, Germany***'An Idea, if we would keep it'**

Many believe the Author of Liberty became Man and died to cleanse us of the sin that rules our fallen world. It is a beautiful idea, radical and subversive as it embraces the multitudes within its arc and promises to free each individual among them. Imagine, then, the twinkle in the eye of Thomas Paine, the future hammer of Christianity, as he pamphleteered the idea that offered humanity salvation in this life.

For the American idea is an offer of absolution to every person. And the American is but the latest in an apostolic line of succession from the first immigrant, that Petros for which the American idea promised to remove the sins of the Old World and offer a personal resurrection, one to be freely chosen and loved.

Lady Liberty may no longer impress as she once did, but no matter: it was the idea that crossed oceans and welcomed the huddled masses, and it lives in the audacious individualism, rugged as ever,

that gives each person a chance at reinvention. When Ben Franklin's republic is a dim memory in the minds of those who once yearned, the idea will still christen humans' efforts to recreate themselves without the superstition and prejudice that shackled their forebears.

The American idea is most fluently expressed, as most ideas are, in characters played by Al Pacino. "I have my own plans for my future," broods Michael Corleone as *The Godfather: Part II* comes to a close, and after he has rebuffed the Family's plans, and centuries of tradition, by enlisting in the Marines. Of course, a tragedy wails through the famous tarantella: the Old World catches Michael, ends his futile experiment with independence, sets him on its own path.

But the classic film is fictional after all, as long as the American idea performs its redemptive mischief.

Anand Prakash

Arlington, VA

I see the future of the American Idea in the university classroom where I teach freshman writing. My students' thoughts flit and dodge across their essays, revealing brains that are hardwired for speed but unable to commit to deeper ideas or lucidity. It's no wonder that they embrace Reality TV, video games and text messaging; these forms of entertainment opt for immediate over delayed gratification, estrangement over intimacy. Their revolutionary impatience and detachment, not lousy teaching, is behind their infamously poor writing, which is really a poverty of thinking.

A growing movement seeks to emphasize standardized tests that would gauge whether public university students are thinking and writing critically and logically enough.

But this generation doesn't need more "useful" knowledge; they need to be taught how to think. That can only be accomplished the Old School way, by slowing down the brain long enough to reflect on an idea and contemplate its complexity—to get intimate with it. Their writing depends on this, but, more importantly, so does the future of the American Idea, because answers to tomorrow's defining, complex issues—global climate change, healthcare, America's Superpower relevance—can't be determined by joystick.

Andrew Reiner

Baltimore, MD

The American Idea, that abstract notion of liberty and natural rights, was transformed into political reality by our Constitution. It is the great barrier, erected in order to shelter the cause of liberty from government's potential for treachery, as the walls of the cities of the ancient world were built to shelter their inhabitants from harm. But even the greatest walls of that world were

destined to fall, unless reinforced from time to time, and to watch for harm people were set upon the tops of them.

We have seen the barriers to injustice in our Constitution give way in recent years. The question before us is this: Does the Constitution, that wall between our liberty and those who would diminish it, still confound such insidious designs? In a time of war, how can we best revise or reinvigorate the Constitution to meet the very real internal threat to our rights from unchecked executive power?

Or, more tragically, does this wall against tyranny, our Constitution, merely lack the watchmen? No political document designed to restrain government, however wise or prudent, can maintain against threats to it, without the people, knowledgeable and vigorous in its defense, ever watchful of its sanctity.

Thomas Rutkey

Niskayuna, NY

America is the place—still, after all these years—where you are limited only by your imagination. The streets are not paved with gold, of course, and the men (and women) governing are not angels, but that's because America is not utopia and was never meant to be. Instead, for this immigrant, as for all who came before me, it's the best country for realizing ambition. If you are mediocre this may not be the best place for you (though you'll do fine), but if you are a striver it is in the United States where you will be able to make the most of whatever talents you have. That is the American idea.

America is more than its government, its business leaders, its celebrities, its thinkers and writers. It's also more than the generic *homine americani* from central casting: the farmer, the cowboy, the stockbroker, the housewife, etc. It's man's last best hope for freedom in the world, and we have to guard that very American idea with all our industry, creativity, and ambition.

Ilya Shapiro

Washington, DC

In the 21st century now upon us, there is a real danger that all other centuries will fade away. The age is so full of information, yet so little of it will survive. The electronic age could not create an alternative universe to hold our collective memory, but the computer age has achieved just that; the only problem is that this alternative world we possess is disposable by design. The business model whereby we must vigilantly update all our records only to replace our recording products every few years has left us with a greater instability than most imagine.

This disposable culture is the latest and greatest American contribution to history. Imagine finding a library buried in the desert: its books will still be functional after a thousand years. But what will

become of all the CDs and cassettes and memory sticks left over from our epoch? No matter how much memory they contain in bytes, there will be no way to read them.

And it is not just a material phenomena, but this mode of culture is already affecting our memory. American culture is an obsession with fads, obsessively tracked to the neglect of history.

What will we leave behind?

James Stotts

Roslindale, MA

Four hundred years ago the founders of our American civilization discovered a physical world that was unimaginably vast. Endless forests, abundant clean water, wild game enough to live on—a wilderness of plenty waiting to be subdued. Later, coal, iron ore, gold and copper, and then oil poured forth from the earth. Deep soils produced limitless crops. No wonder then, as European settlers spread across the continent, that the pursuit of wealth became the ideal. Come to America. Strike it rich! Make your fortune. Enjoy the good life! Spend more. Enjoy your success!

Now we have found that resources are not inexhaustible, and the earth cannot absorb waste endlessly. The world is warming inexorably, and rivers dry up before they reach the sea. Population grows, and we eat our children's future. Slowly, we are realizing that we can't all be rich. Can we now learn to live in harmony with the earth? Can we cut back, husband our resources, and share more equally? Can we learn new forms of citizenship based upon participation and community? Is a new American idea possible in the age of limits?

Greg Studen

Novelty, OH

There are many ideas that we could call "American," but bedrock beneath them all is the belief that ideas alone suffice to define the American experience. We think a nation built wholly of ideas like liberty, justice, and equality can endure and prosper, and this is as revolutionary a claim now as it was when our forebears first made it. Though we understand them yet imperfectly, those ideas bind us to one another when we pursue their fullest and best realization.

Some assert a more concrete basis for our nation: we are Americans because we share a tongue, or a Bible, or a land, and we must reclaim these foundations because they are now in mortal peril. But the first of us chose the ideas they did because they knew something that only the last of us will forget: that race, religion, culture, and the rest are all, ultimately, also ideas—and ours are stronger and truer material for the forging of nations. We will continue to thrive so long as we remember that what sustains America is our fealty to the ideas that began it.

Miles Townes*Arlington, VA***didn't have to**

My birth in Thermopolis, Wyoming's Hot Springs County Hospital and graduation from Riverton High School weren't my choices; I grew up proud of Mom's decisions, but I didn't have to.

Mamo, my grandmother, said, "An education's one thing nobody can take away from you," and "You could be president." I didn't have to get an education; I didn't have to be president: I wanted to own a junk yard. Mom—still making my decisions, then—made me go to college. A year later draft number seven rescued me from academia. For years Mom said, "You had a college deferment; you didn't have to go."

Mom and Mamo's birthplace was a southwestern Virginia plantation house; I visited the ol' home place once; the only thing the fire didn't take away was the rock chimney. My red brick hospital overlooking the "World's Largest Hot Spring": gone, taken away in another catastrophe: some politician's vision of a clean skyline above the town of 1,500. My limestone high school held the old gym where I ate every day's bag lunch: erased, taken away for progress's sake.

During my 28-year Air Force career I earned undergrad and graduate degrees, but I didn't have to.

Robert Townsend*Atlantic City, WY***Beyond the First View**

I left my unjust but beloved country at the end of the 1970s. I left for many reasons: the interrogations of my husband about his father Aaron, who taught Hebrew to so-called "plane hijackers" who hoped to emigrate to Israel, KGB interrogations about our visitors from foreign lands, an eight-hour search of our apartment for the forbidden poems of Joseph Brodsky, the ever-present threat of arrest. I poured out my first impressions of America in letters that I wrote to my priest Father Alexander Men, the famous Jewish-born Moscow priest, writer, poet, educator, philosopher, and prophet. In 1991, on the way to his church, Father Alexander was murdered. We still don't know who did it, although his son is now Governor of the Moscow region. Apparently, his murder must remain unsolved, because it symbolizes the rejection of freedom by the former Soviet people. Americans are different than Russians, I wrote to Father Men. "They don't pry into your soul, but they don't let you into theirs, either. Friendship is different from ours." Father Alexander replied: "To live on a larger scale is the only way worthy of man ... Whatever convoluted fate awaits us, it all has a

purpose, if only we would find and understand it.”

New York City was stunning, fantastic, monstrous, thundering with cosmic cataclysms, turbulent with the cumulative energies of its millions of souls, each in pursuit of their separate visions of life, liberty, happiness, and I tried to fit in. New York surprised me with a new sense of myself—I gained time as if it were stretched. “Any breakthrough in love, creativity, beauty, and mystery is a victory over time,” Father Alexander would write to me. “And I would remind you once more of the words from the Bible: ‘time will be no more.’”

One day “the fallen world” of New York stunned me when a black taxi driver began to speak to us in Russian. He turned in his seat, bellowing “Pushkin! Pushkin!” And then he added in English, “He’s ours! Do you know what I’m saying?” I pronounced my first English phrase for a plumber who came to fix our faucets. When he saw that we were sitting in darkness without lights he went to a store and bought us candles and sweet marzipan rolls. I said to him, “Thank you, you are like a Russian.” But when he asked me, “Are you homesick?” I was too choked up to answer. After our faucets were fixed and he had gone away I sat there and stared at the candles, silently chewing the sweet rolls spiced with my salty marzipan tears. My husband Yakov consoled me, saying: “Now you have a chance to think about one of life’s deepest conflicts—freedom and fate.” And I smiled through the tears of freedom.

The Russian émigrés of my generation came from a country where the “material stimulus,” the taste for possessions, did not exist, where ethical values were derived from literature rather than everyday experience. Now that our children have become Americans, the word “freedom” has acquired a different meaning and sense than we once ascribed to it. Our naïve expectations of America—and the bemusement, disappointment, and love that we felt when we were first confronted with its vexing, paradoxical complexity—are now lost to us behind a wall of time. I don’t hunger for an ideal social system anymore. I enjoy moving in the direction of myself. “The eternal remains under any skies” as Father Alexander wrote, and people everywhere shuttle between good and evil.

Diana Vinkovetsky

Brookline, MA

This is America!

I was in the No Drinking Section of Boston’s Fenway Park, watching a ballgame. A man in front of me was enjoying a beer, apparently unaware of his transgression. Suddenly, a security officer appeared and told him he could not drink there. Taken aback, the man stood and cried out in disbelief: “This is America!”

This episode reveals something basic about the American idea. We Americans chafe at restrictions on our freedom. Thomas Paine understood that in 1776 when he wrote that even at best government was

but a necessary evil. Today that sentiment clearly endures.

Yet, notwithstanding the value of this instinctive bias toward freedom, we must recognize its downside. It fosters an excessive individualism, an unfettered reliance on markets, and an unrelenting distrust of government – each of which impedes our capacity to address urgent societal problems.

How, then, can we use government to our benefit without undermining essential freedoms? This vital question is not well addressed in sound bites or modern political campaigns. Yet we must confront it if the American idea is to serve us well in the years ahead. Somehow, we the people must develop a more textured understanding of the exclamation: “This is America!”

Mark R. Yessian

Boston, MA

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