

What it means to be an American

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As we turn our nation toward another election we are, once again, asked to define who we are as citizens of the United States.

The iconic America poet, Carl Sandburg wrote in his poem, "The People Yes," that we will always return to the nourishing earth for rootholds.

I touched the mist of Niagara Falls, and stroked the thick bark of the redwood trees in California. I snapped photographs of the buffalo in Texas and swam in the blue waters off the coast of Florida. I've seen the Rocky Mountains and the wide plains in Nebraska. I loved the cotton fields in Alabama, and sat at a roadside restaurant in Vermont and poured fresh maple syrup on my pancakes.

Robert Frost reminded us, "Young or new, we must be something." Who are we as a people? We are Gettysburg. We are Thomas Edison. We are Amelia Earhart.

But people are afraid these days. They look at the cost of food, calculate their dreams and look over at the children, and dread the future.

The future of America is not floating in oil wells or bank accounts. The future of America resides in our will to innovate and redefine ourselves each day. F. Scott Fitzgerald knew that Gatsby, the great Gatsby, was just a simple man from the Midwest with a dream about the future. His love for Daisy eluded him, but he reminded us to stretch out our arms farther with hope just the same.

Fitzgerald defined what it means to be Americans: a people who "beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past."

My father, a writer and college professor, died at 100 years old last week. Before his death, I asked him if he had any advice as he looked back over his past. "Live fully," he said emphatically. In one of his books he wrote, "The more we know how good are life and love, the harder it is to bear our present condition in which we find them in such limited and imperfect form."

We struggled as a nation with our imperfections to attain a good life and to love, but Abraham Lincoln was clear about his vision for America. He wrote in 1859, "Republicans, on the contrary, are for both the man and the dollar; but in case of conflict, the man before the dollar."

Anthony "Tony" Campolo, an American pastor, sociologist, author and speaker, wrote, "The reason why I buy into the Democratic Party is because there are over 2,000 verses of Scripture that deal with responding to the needs of the poor."

Lincoln had it right. Campolo has it right. Both parties, during times of national distress, revert to what is good for the people — yes, for all the people, not what is good for individuals and their stock portfolios.

Walt Whitman had it right. "Other lands have their vitality in a few, a class, but we have it in the bulk of our people."

We are in the throes of a class war in our nation. It is obvious to anyone who dares to simply say that the king has no clothes. We are a nation that claims we believe in life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness for all, and yet we watch the poor languish, the rich tan and the middle class forgo a new baseball mitt for the new Little League season. We need to remind ourselves that our country's vitality rests inside what is best for all the people.

I've been a schoolteacher for more than 30 years. My wife and I live in the same house we bought in 1977. While my salary increased over these past three decades, so did inflation and the cost of everything. We live no differently than we did when we first married, but we have three grown children, a cat and books on our shelves. The neighbors have been kind. I feed the squirrels. I have been privileged to live in the greatest country in the world, a land of contradictions, yes, a land whose people are divided at the moment, yes, but strip away the rhetoric of the conservatives and the liberals, and we all return to what makes us a successful people in the free world.

Babe Ruth had it right. "Never let the fear of striking out get in your way."

Christa McAuliffe, the teacher who lost her life in the Challenger space shuttle disaster, had it right. "Sometimes when things get kind of frantic, it helps to call my husband, Steve, because I think he's got a real good sense of where everything's gonna be in a few years."

If you want to know what this next election means to our country, it is all about finding the candidate who reminds us not to be afraid of striking out and who can tell us with conviction and wisdom where everything ought to be in a few years. That is the person we should vote for in November.

I am looking for the candidate who lives by the final words of Carl Sandburg's great poem, "The People Yes":

... There are men who can't be bought.

The fireborn are at home in fire.

The stars make no noise.

You can't hinder the wind from blowing.

Time is a great teacher.

Who can live without hope?

In the darkness with a great bundle of grief

the people march.

In the night, and overhead a shovel of stars for keeps, the people march:

"Where to? What next?"

Christopher de Vinck's 13th book is "Moments of Grace." He is a language arts supervisor at a rural New Jersey high school.

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