

The Responsibility of Independence

Scott Allenby, Proctor Academy

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Spending the 4th of July in Andover, New Hampshire should be a prerequisite to understanding the value of small town living. Our little town of 2,000 people bursts at the seams as thousands of visitors flock to the village green in the heart of Proctor's campus for a flea market and carnival-like atmosphere. At noon, local elementary students who had perfect attendance this year toll the bell in Maxwell Savage Hall to signal the start of the parade. Local fire companies, floats, and bands weave their way through campus along North Street before looping back down Main Street. The day ends as thousands more people gather on Carr Field to watch fireworks over the Proctor Ski Area.

It is a day that celebrates America's independence. Nearly everyone wears red, white, and blue. Flags fly on strollers, horses, and every other means of transportation as 90 degree temperatures melt snow cones faster than children can consume them. The Star Spangled Banner, America the Beautiful, and God Bless America blare over the loudspeakers throughout the morning. A healthy patriotic pride reminds each of us of the freedom we have to gather, worship, and speak our minds as Americans.

We love the way Andover celebrates Independence Day, but one cannot help but acknowledge how our little bubble of Americana stands in stark contrast to the actual experience of so many living in this country. Whether it is the on-going immigration and detention crisis at our southern border, the centuries old oppression of indigenous peoples, or our nation's deep seeded struggle to come to terms with contemporary racism and the legacy of slavery, the freedom we champion as an American ideal is clearly still a work in progress.

Independence walks hand in hand with responsibility; a responsibility to ensure our freedom never blinds us to our weaknesses. This is one of our biggest challenges - as a country, as a town, as a school, as individuals - how do we celebrate the best of who we are without ignoring our shortcomings? How do we move out of our binary, polarizing existence where we believe it impossible to simultaneously hold seemingly conflicting beliefs?

We must believe it is possible to possess deep gratitude to the veterans who fight to protect our nation's freedom AND to speak out against the treatment of migrant children detained at the border. We must believe it is possible to fly an American flag with pride AND to disagree with specific policies of our government. We must believe it is possible Proctor's educational model is perfectly suited to impact adolescents AND there is room to refine our work further as a school. We must believe it is possible to respectfully disagree without questioning each other's humanity.

The moment we fail to use our critical reasoning abilities to form our own opinions, to structure our own beliefs and to share them openly, we willingly accept society's blinders to our weaknesses, and compromise the very independence on which we base our lives. George Washington wrote, "If men are to be precluded from offering their sentiments on a matter, which may involve the most serious and alarming consequences that can invite the consideration of mankind, reason is of no use to us; the freedom of speech may be taken away, and dumb and silent we may be led, like sheep, to the slaughter." Independence is an incredible gift, one that carries with it great responsibility to preserve it for generations to come, but never, ever at someone else's expense.

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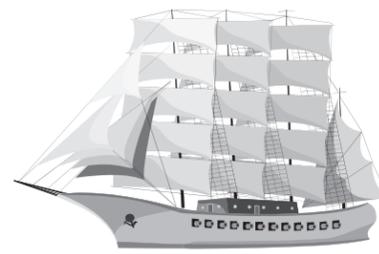
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To be included in next month's AYT, get your 30 words and optional photo to the *Beacon* by the 15th. Ads@AndoverBeacon.com • PO Box 149, Andover 03216 • 735-6099

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