



ESL MiniConference

Being Yourself Examples of Authenticity in Life and Song

I attended a wake for a friend the other day and was struck, outside the mortuary, by the words on a plaque at the foot of a flagpole:

"The Willingness to Sacrifice is the Prelude to Freedom."

This memorial is dedicated with appreciation to the men and women whose loyalty and service during times of war and peace define the character of the this great nation.

The quote about sacrifice, from the Passover seder, is perhaps an idea that many of us are familiar with, especially in the context of a government's decision to go to war. Certainly it is this idea that motivates us to respect the soldiers who fight in the name of our country, even when we do not support the policies that put them in harm's way.

But the dedication statement prompted me to consider what "loyalty" and "service" mean, and to imagine that those who dedicated this memorial intended for us to understand these key concepts in their fullest sense. What is the ideal that best describes America, and the life force that brought early settlers to this land; likewise, the life force that emanates from the land itself for those who were already here when the neverending waves of immigrants began arriving hundreds of years ago?

Isn't it freedom? The freedom to choose a religion. The freedom to practice a religion. The freedom also to not have a religion, as a matter of conscience. The freedom to speak and publish our thoughts, ideas, and beliefs. The freedom to disagree with popular ideas and beliefs of our times. The freedom to grow and develop ourselves in accord with an inner sense of what is healthy, what is right, and what is natural. The freedom to pursue our dreams, imagine a better world, and to work to bring that world into being.

Men and women whose lives demonstrate their loyalty to this ideal, and whose actions show service to their communities on behalf of the same ideal, are indeed owed our deepest appreciation, and their efforts are significant "during times of war and peace," as the memorial suggests.

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The lady whose life those of us at the mortuary that evening were celebrating dedicated more than 20 years to helping individuals with mental retardation find the resources they needed in order to live with dignity. Dozens of her clients came during the evening, and expressed their condolences to her family, including her husband, a good friend of mine. Yet this was also a woman whose devotion to her work and the people she worked with caused her to develop and freely express some frank views about the harsh effects of conservative policies cutting back funding for social services over the past 25 years.

During the early fall 2004 campaign season, a large rainbow-colored banner saying "**We the people just say no to the Bush agenda!**," proudly flew above their porch. And when I visited them earlier this year, they showed me a calendar which counts off the months until the end of the George Bush administration.

As it happened, on my drive home from the sad occasion of the passing away of this woman "whose loyalty and service during times of war and peace define the character of this great nation," I started listening to a CD called "[Watchfire](#)," by Pete Sears & Friends (1988), which is mainly a protest album against America's involvement in Central America. Pete Sears and his friends, including Jeanette Sears, Jerry Garcia, Mickey Hart, Sikiru Adeposu, David Auerbach, Kitty Beethoven, John Cipollina, Enrique Cruz, Jack Cunningham, Willard Dixon, Marty Elliott, Greg Errico, David Frazier, David Grisman, Geoff Grace, Paul Harris, David Hayes, Kevin Hayes, Tony Menjivar, Andy Narell, Holly Near, Babtunde Olatunji, Leo Rosales, Bob Ryken, Dimitri Vandellos, Archie Williams, Rand Witherwam, Mimi Farina, Rafael Manriquez, O.J. Ekemode, Christy Agbe, Paul Andrews, Nada Lewis, Nazir Latouf, and the Bay Area Men's Slavic Chorus, are also great examples of the "men and women whose loyalty and service during times of war and peace define the character of this great nation," as expressed in the memorial I saw that day.

One song, "One More Innocent," composed by Jeanette and Pete Sears, has lyrics so haunting that one could imagine them being applied to the current fighting in Iraq, or see in the song a challenge to the modern world to find more humane ways of settling differences than the primitive urge to make war.

The problem, according to this song, is that war can become just a minor distraction for people going about their daily business.

It's so easy to close your eyes,

Just believe what your leaders say.
If you don't like what your country's doing,
You can look the other way...

But the refrain of the song is a call to conscience and a challenge to those whose cynicism has hardened their hearts to the realities of war.

Every time we close our eyes
One more innocent dies.
Every time we believe in lies
One more innocent dies.
We steel ourselves against their cries;
One more innocent, one more innocent, one more innocent dies.

In another song, "Nothing Personal," with Jerry Garcia of the Grateful Dead on slide guitar, Pete Sears and friends rail against the farce of cold objectivity governments often try to maintain in wartime.

...We've been trying to conduct a decent war,
Restoring peace on a foreign shore;
Got nothin' against you as a race,
You just happen to be living in the wrong place.
It's nothing personal, you understand;
The plane just happened to be over your land;
We dropped some bombs on you today;
It was only because your village was in the way;
It's nothing personal, it's nothing personal...

And there is something absolutely prescient about the words of Pete and Jeanette Sears in the song "Save Something Now for the Children." They could have been talking about the flawed decision by the George Bush administration to go to war in Iraq and how far-reaching the repercussions of this foreign policy error may well be.

I see greed like a shadow,
darkening this land.
We've sacrificed much more than we understand;
Built a future on sinking sand...

It is a major challenge for ESL/EFL teachers in today's world to maintain a context of freedom and peace for their lessons, when so much of what is driving world events comes from fear, anger, and efforts to simply survive. In concluding this article, I wish to make two suggestions. First, find music that is really from the heart, and share the words and lyrics with your students, allowing topics to emerge naturally for discussion

and writing as follow-ups. Second, don't be afraid to let your students know who you are and what you believe, and, equally important, how much you tolerate and support their own individual views, beliefs, and paths to wisdom.

We do not often enough remember that, in many ways, teaching ESL/EFL in today's world entails teaching peace, based on mutual respect and personal freedom. As ESL teachers, we should aspire to be the exemplary "men and women whose loyalty and service during times of war and peace define the character" of not only our nations but the world of the future.

This article is dedicated to the memory of Marcia "Marti" Dawn Brock, 1957-2007.

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