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### Memories

Jury duty. A phrase that evokes passionate displays of patriotism like none other. From our almost universal response to that noble call of duty, the true character of an American citizen is revealed. "Well your honor, I can't serve because I'm biased! I already know he's guilty. I'm a professional psychic!" "Sir, that is not a legitimate reason for..." But I can tell he's guilty! Look at him, fox eyes, crooked nose, oily black toupee..." "Sir, you're describing the lawyer." Or better yet, don't even show up to court! Just throw away the jury summons, or do it in style like the man from Connecticut, who, according to Ananova News, took the jury summons, used it as toilet paper, and sent it back to the judge. When questioned, he replied, "Jury Duty... STINKS!" (Ananova News). You may laugh, but the underlying attitudes these stories reveal are widespread. For according to sociologist Morris Janowitz, Americans expect to be given a trial by jury, but we don't want to serve on one (8). We're freeloaders. Pirates, Buccaneers. We expect the community to give us rights, privileges, all sorts of goods. But we don't expect to give anything in return.

We can see this mindset in Santa Monica, California, where men were found dealing drugs in women's public restrooms. Obviously, the City Council didn't like this, so they prohibited both men and women from using the opposite sex's facilities. The drug sales ceased. However, a local activist, Gloria Allred, instantly protested. To her, this ordinance was a violation of a women's right to urinate in any public facility, at any time. As she stated, "This is the first step down a long dark road of restricting women's rights" (Etzioni, Spirit 5). The Rosa Parks of the 21<sup>st</sup> century: "I refuse to leave my bathroom!" You see, Allred was so obsessed with freedom that she forgot something essential. That maybe some kids don't want to be abused by drug dealers in the bathroom. That just maybe, some parents wouldn't like it either. Allred forgot common decency. Care for others around her. And she is not the only one.

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When the Foundation of People for the American Way did a survey on what made America special, the response was unanimous. One said "individualism" (People 9). Another said, "the right to do whatever you want" (11) another said "no limits" (11). Freedom, That's what we call it. Every genuine American knows how to use that word in a punch line, and if you're like Bush, it's probably the only word you know, besides "evil" and "greater evil" (*Axis of Evil*.) In other words, it's the cheapest word in the American dictionary. For as American Way concluded in its report, the citizens of America "fail to grasp the other half of the democratic equation" (15). That of duty and responsibility.

It's the kind of mentality that makes 2/3's of America report that they don't like the way the government runs, but at the same time, according to Roper Political Trends, we're 42% less likely to serve in a political organization, 42% less likely to work for a political cause (Putnam 45), and according to sociologist Russel Dalton, are the second most apathetic democratic population in the world (Dalton 74). Well Fine. Al Gore isn't exactly the most motivational speaker. Kinda more like a bad extemper. Well... kinda like a good one too. But have we taken this too far?

In America today, according to the Center of Popular Economics, over 44% of divorced fathers refuse to pay for the care of their own children (Albeda 50). Elsewhere, men and women burn flags in front of veterans of war, and then invoke the first amendment to protect themselves. There's a corporation for every letter of the alphabet that has used its power to swindle the public. And finally, despite the fact that according to Time magazine, 9 out of 10 nursing homes are inadequately staffed or have committed multiple health violations (Service 3), we put 1.7 million of our own parents into their hands. As a result, 3,500 of our elderly die from nursing home abuse and neglect each year (Thompson 45). Neglect doesn't happen overnight! When all this happened, where were we?

However, none of this comes close to the greatest fault of our society. I encountered it on my way home from school. I was in the city, lined up behind about 6 cars at an intersection, waiting for the light to change. On the side of the road, a man who had been sitting stood up. He knocked on each window, held up a placard asking for, and then mouthed the word "please", And as I watched, he went to every single car window in front of me, and no one moved. And when

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he came to my window, I closed it, locked the door, and straight ahead, pretending not to see him. I never took that road again.

According to the US census bureau, about 36 million Americans live in poverty ( U.S. Census Bureau). In France, these people are called les excluses (Leo 17). The excluded. In the Old Testament, the root word for "the poor" is more rightfully translated as "the oppressed" (Hanks). But what do we call them? Hobos. Bums. Welfare queens. The average industrialized nation spends 30% of the national budget on welfare for the poor (Etzioni, "How to..." 25). We spend half as much. According to sociologist Robert Putnam, charitable giving, already one of the lowest in the western world, has decreased by 30% since the 1960s (124). And finally, even when, according to the Children's Defense Fund, every 43 seconds, a child is born into poverty so extreme that their mental development is at risk (Children's Defense Fund 8). President Bush decides to give my 12- year old sister a \$200 tax rebate. Thanks. We really needed it. Maybe now she can pay her phone bill. Ladies and Gentleman, it's as if every window were closed, every door locked. Is this what we've come to? Is this who we are?

200 years ago, James Madison the chief architect of the constitution, stated, "I go on this great republican principle, that the people of America will have the virtue and the intelligence... to fight for the [common good], themselves..." (Bellah 253). With that undying faith in us, James Madison forcibly turned America into a democracy and forged the Bill of Rights, the greatest article of freedom in the world. But what have we done with that freedom? We've turned it into the freedom to ignore our families, shun that community, and leave children sleeping in the streets. The freedom to let our nation fall apart. Is this what James Madison fought for? Is this what Martin Luther King dreamed of? Is this what Joseph Farrelly, firefighter for New York's Division 1 battalion, died for?

You see, at the heart of their struggles was a different conception of freedom. It wasn't the freedom to just be yourself, be natural, and do whatever you feel like doing, because then we'd also be free to give oratories naked and dance like Janet Reno... at the same time! Freedom in that sense is foolish and meaningless. Rather, to them, freedom was as simple as this:

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I am third in line to sign the Declaration of Independence. Within two years, my son will be dead and I will be hanged for treason. I am an Irish refugee from my famine-stricken homeland, seeing the Statue of Liberty for the first time. I am a Nisei, a Japanese man in an internment camp, signing up to fight for the country that took everything I have. I'm walking on the moon. The success and shame, hopes and fears of ten thousand years flows through my veins, pushing me inexorably towards my future. I am not just me, I am so much more. And I alone realize that the whole history of the world can be changed by what I do. This is the kind of freedom I inherited. The greatest gift I ever received from mankind. But I refuse to believe that I am the only one that matters. That this gift is for my use and my use only. Because if Neil Armstrong only took one small step for himself, he'd be stepping into one lonely place, no matter how high, how grand. So instead, I go by the great Christian motto, that "to whomsoever much is given of him, much is to be expected" (The Holy Bible, Luke 12.48). And I am proud to stand ready, at the call of duty.

Citing the Bible is done by citing the version used, followed by the book, chapter and verse.

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