

All We Take for Granted

By Maurice Carter in The Covington News – June 23, 2013

Last weekend, we enjoyed a delightful evening celebrating the surprise news that one of our European friends had become a United States citizen. Married to an American, father of two beautiful children, and living in our community as a legal permanent resident, he surprised us by announcing he had applied for naturalization, passed the necessary examinations, and was sworn in last Friday.

Funny, but my first reaction was to feel just a little prouder of my own status as a natural-born citizen of the United States. I think a lot of this guy, and if HE wanted in, then maybe, just maybe, I was already part of something pretty special.

I suppose it's a bit like Groucho Marx allegedly once said: "I refuse to belong to any club that will take me as a member." It's easy to take for granted that which we... well... take for granted. And, in essence, citizenship is simply granted to those of us born within these borders. I never chose to be a citizen of the United States; I just am. I didn't earn it or pass a test. My friend, on the other hand, had to prove he was worthy.

His examples of the questions on the Civics exam convinced us we were pretty darn lucky not to have to pass a similar test ourselves. The blend of history, geography, and civics subjects was enough to suggest a passing grade would not be a slam dunk.

I knew the US Civil War was in the 1800s. With a little careful consideration, I identified three original colonies from the multiple choices given. And, I knew our economic system is capitalism. But, correctly identifying an author of the Federalist Papers was a lucky guess. Those constitutional amendments can get a little blurry. And, heck, even Secretary of State Alexander Haig stated the order of Presidential succession wrong in the harried hours after Ronald Reagan was shot.

Perhaps we should get tested regularly. A driver's license is only good for ten years. If I have to prove myself competent to drive, then why not to vote or hold office? It might make us all pay more attention to current events and to the business of governing if we got quizzed now and then.

One recent poll found 41% of respondents described events at the US embassy in Benghazi as "the biggest political scandal in American history." But, 39% were unable to identify the county where Benghazi is located. In an April 2012 Xavier University poll of 1,000 US citizens, 1 in 3 failed a random selection of ten questions from the US naturalization test. Watch "man on the street" interviews like the ones Jay Leno broadcasts for a laugh, and you realize we are a geographically, historically, and civically challenged people.

So, my friend's successful journey to citizenship leaves me feeling I should try a little harder. Maybe I need to buckle down, pull out that globe, and dust off those text books. Then, again, there is this little thing called the "internet." What is wrong with us?

No doubt we need immigration laws, border security, and such. But, I also feel about citizenship like I feel about marriage. If you really want to honor the sanctity of the institution, treat it like you really treasure it. Treat it like it's something you need to prove yourself worthy of every day. Spend less time worrying about what others are doing to cheapen the value of what you have and invest that time, that passion, and that caring into your marriage or your citizenship. Be the role model. That's how I feel.

And, that applies to citizenship at all levels – not just US. Sure, it's great to be born in this country, this state, this county, or this city. But, that's just the luck of the draw. It's not something you or I accomplished.

The true measure of a citizen is his or her involvement and engagement in the community he or she purports to treasure. Knowing how things work and how things get done... being someone who steps forward to make good things happen... being an informed voter... being an educated and willing candidate for office... being a community volunteer... That's what citizenship is really all about.

I want to thank my friend for inspiring me to not take it all for granted. I want to let him know I appreciate him reminding me that I have something special here – these rights and freedoms – and I should earn them all over every day.

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