

Conroy: Being Active Patriots Everyday

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My 5-year-old daughter asked me recently what the Fourth of July is all about. She had just celebrated her birthday and I told her that July 4 was our country's birthday. At our house, we play the "what are you going to be when you grow up" game on birthdays. Playfully, she asked, "What is our country going to be when it grows up?" (Wow! The things kids say ...!)

I answered by saying that our country was already pretty grown-up, and therefore July 4 is a time to both celebrate its accomplishments but also consider how it could improve. Is it using its strengths well - like our wonderful values of liberty, equality and justice for all, and our amazing economic resources and talents, and our democratic form of government? Is it meeting important everyday needs and not wasting money on desires and "nice-to-haves"?

I pointed out, for example, that food is a need, even though some people in our country go hungry. Ice cream is a nice-to-have. (Besides, I couldn't find any ice cream in the freezer!) Is our country treating other countries well and participating in building a healthy and strong global community?

I talked a little about the Revolutionary War and about patriots. I told her that patriots won our freedom from another country that was controlling us and not treating us fairly. I talked about how patriots today can be seen as people who continue to care about more than just themselves and are active in protecting our freedoms and doing good things for our society and our world. They take responsibility for helping to make things better.

We talked about how you can be a patriot in your family or local community. Some people dedicate themselves to taking care of a sick or needy relative. Some volunteer at the library, in school, in local government, or engage in other caring activities, like protecting the environment. She asked if my volunteerism as a soccer coach was a way to be a patriot. I told her that I hadn't actually thought of it that way, but that yes, I guess being involved as a soccer coach and commissioner and also by helping to explore ways to pay for a new high school building and other activities I've been involved with all promote the sense of community in our towns, and that's part of being a patriot.

And I said that I was now running for state representative because I wanted to strengthen our schools and services and community, to build from our strengths but then bring help where we need it, especially in getting more state aid that would ensure that people, and especially kids in our towns, get the education and services they deserve.

Thinking about other examples she and her older sisters would understand, I used the issue of the MCAS. Whether you like the testing or not, neither the state nor the federal government provides adequate support or funding to help our schools improve. I told her that one of my goals was to help government do that and about my prior efforts to bring in millions of dollars in federal assistance to Massachusetts so that our state government had enough money to serve all the foster children who needed homes.

My daughter wondered why everybody waves the flag on the Fourth of July. I told her that people waved flags because they were proud of what our country has accomplished and the things it stands for. But I also told her that you should never let your pride get in the way of being a good and careful thinker, supporting federal initiatives and institutions when they are doing the right things but also trying to change them when you think that they might not be doing the right things.

I explained that patriotism was the reason I went to Washington, D.C., after college to get involved in public service to our country. I worked on Capitol Hill for two U.S. senators, in my mind a civil service version of national service. In fact, the first speech I helped write for Sen. Gary Hart was on national service. The end of the military draft had come just a few years before, and Sen. Hart (and I) wanted to resurrect the ideals behind the old VISTA program started by President Kennedy. That form of patriotism had merit, too, we thought.

One thing to be most proud of is that our country has democracy that allows for debate, discourse and disagreement and the ability to change things by being a good patriot and voting for people you believe will do things better - or even running for office yourself. Both as individuals and as a nation, patriotism often means leading by example.

In the course of this conversation, I was reminded that explaining patriotism to a 5-year-old can be anything but child's play! But I do think that my daughter came away with a key message and one I wanted to share at our nation's 230th birthday - patriotism is about being proud of what we have accomplished but also about being honest with ourselves about our failings and what we can do better. Patriots care about our nation, its future, its direction, its principles, its values, its institutions and its actions. They care about doing the right things whether as an individual or a family; and whether in the community, the nation, or the world.

So, I told my daughter, as we celebrate our country's birthday, and think about patriotism, let's make sure that we are active patriots. For a 5-year-old, walking in a parade is a good way to start to see how you are part of a much larger family. Civic engagement starts by caring and then taking steps to be active.

Tom Conroy is a Wayland resident who is running for state representative. He has nearly 20 years of public and private sector experience, the last 12 in Massachusetts.