



FIRST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF DALLAS
WELCOMES SPECIAL GUEST MINISTER

ADAM LAWRENCE DYER

Proud To Be An American

Sunday, August 3rd, 2025

In-person worship at 9:30 and 11 am

Online worship at 9:30 & 11 am and 7 pm CST

In 1991, 34 years ago, when I was 10, I signed on for a seven-month contract as a dancer aboard the Royal Caribbean cruise line ship *Song of America*. It was a seven-day Western Caribbean cruise, where we went to Cozumel, Grand Cayman, Jamaica and Haiti. As dancers, in truth, we had very little to do other than perform and our shows weren't rocket science. And it was before the era of these mega ships of 250,000 tons, and our little 40,000-ton ship didn't have a full theater or an aqua show or race cars, zip lines. We had a show lounge, it was called the Can Can Lounge, and it was appropriately upholstered in red velvet and appointed in marble. And we danced on a parquet floor that also had a movable 12-foot extension, which was considered high-tech back in the day. And yes, it was in the days when there was still a smoking section on one side of the lounge, which of course made no sense whatsoever and was certainly not fun if you were already out of breath.

We had five set shows. In addition to a welcome aboard show and a farewell show, we had our three production shows, and they included city lights, a global international theme, make them laugh, a bookend show that had a different featured entertainer each week, and celebrate America, an Americana-themed show. This was during the last phase of the Gulf War, and the end of that show, the finale was Lee Greenwood's *God Bless the USA*, and it being 1991 and the end of Operation Desert Storm and the Gulf War, everyone was really into it. And there I was in a Stars and Stripes tailcoat with white trousers, a silver bow tie and a great big red, white and blue Uncle Sam-style top hat singing this song with the rest of the cast.

“And I'll gladly stand up next to you and defend her till today.”

That's all I remember. Those were the days. All I can think is that someone somewhere has a videotape of this and I'm just not sure how they'll use it.

So I'm sharing this story with you because when I hear the words, "I'm proud to be an American," having sung that song, which I did eventually for two years, being a Black American, the son of an immigrant and someone who has traveled extensively, I've thought a ton about what those words actually mean, and I wonder how much you've been willing, especially now, to think about it. I always assume that anytime I'm speaking, I have veterans and people who have worked for or with the military and the government in front of me. It is not my place as someone who speaks about spiritual issues to comment on that work, those positions or that commitment to service. I come from two generations of veterans, so my position is generally one of strong identification. I know that those of you who do identify this way have thought a great deal about what it means to say, "I'm proud to be an American."

But what I'm asking here is that for all of us, including people who have lived as part of the organism of government, defense, war, peace, conflict, I'm asking that we can all think deeply about what those words mean for everyone, proud to be an American, not a throwaway or an assumption, something to seriously consider. Pride. Pride is a funny thing, not just my personal favorite kind of pride, rainbow flags in June, but funny in a thought-provoking way. The saying is that pride goes before a fall, but in Unitarian Universalist spaces, we hear the saying and rarely do we ever consider the context from which it comes in the Hebrew Bible, the Book of Proverbs, chapter 16. I just want to share with you a few highlights that lead up to that part that we're most familiar with.

"Everyone that is proud in heart is an abomination to the Lord. Though hand join in hand, he shall not be unpunished," and, "Better is a little with righteousness than great revenues without right." And going on, "How much better is it to get wisdom than gold and to get understanding rather to be chosen than silver? The highway of this upright is to depart from evil. He that keepeth his way, preserveth his soul." And then, the big finish, "Pride goeth before destruction and an haughty spirit before a fall. Better it is to be of an humble spirit with the lowly than to divide the spoiled with the proud." Some Bible quotations, they work differently in the King James version and you've got to do the voice and things. And the Hebrew Bible, wow, it's so blunt.

And it makes me question, do I want to be proud to be an American? Is it really pride that we're trying to capture in how we feel about being part of this grand multi-century project of democracy? Is it maybe something else? And then, what does it mean to be an American? If you go anywhere in the United States of America, you will encounter people from all kinds of different places for all different kinds of reasons. This is a country of 341 million different origin stories, none of them is the same. Yet, we expect that they can all funnel into one destination of being American. Really? Okay, but is that really a good thing? Who is asked, or more importantly, required to leave parts of themselves out of the definition of being an American to get through the funnel, by whom, and more importantly, why?

Now, I could go on a rant about American history and belonging. I'm doing a PhD on religious studies with a focus on the experience of race and whiteness, which you'll hear about next week, so believe

me, I've got a ton of material on that. But performing a screed is not my goal here. Proud to be an American, what if when we hear these words, we hear them less literally and more poetically? The beauty of poetic listening is that we get the opportunity to hear and understand between the words, with more than our ears, but also with our hearts. If you listen closely enough, you can hear the words to be an American as a question. Do we belong to America, America, a set of rules and guidelines and economic and social expectations, is that what it means to be an American? Is it just a matter of being present on this land that was somehow claimed by a group of immigrants long after the original inhabitants of this land were already here? Is being American location, vocation or belief?

Maybe, just maybe what it means to be an American is to be the question. Maybe it's not as simple as God, guns and glory, or some subjective idea of freedom that has long escaped some and is an entitlement for others. But instead, it is being the embodiment of an ongoing question and challenge to what it means to claim freedom, any freedom, from a personal perspective. And this brings me back to the idea of what it means to be proud. Could it be that the pride here is not just self-justification, could it be the ability to recognize ourselves in something and recognize parts of ourselves in the whole?

For me, the pride of being an American is always an aspiration. It is less destination and more a direction, a constant trying to get there, recommitment, reimagining, reset, and calling others into that relationship with me. I can't just be proud to be an American, because to be an American, especially if it is a question, is never going to be one thing. But I can try to find the connection, I can try to belong to the person I've never met or didn't know, I can be proud to recognize myself in others asking the same question and hope they recognize something of themselves in me. Proud to be an American, an affirmation and an aspiration.

I will confess, Lee Greenwood's song doesn't completely work for me, not for any political reason, but because it feels two-dimensional. While we crave simplicity, the entire concept of what we call America is anything but simple. Still, when we sang that song on the Song of America cruise ship, and people not only applauded, but stood, because it moved them, even with its two dimensions, it was, and it still is, hard to keep singing because of all of the emotion it stirred in the room.

It's no secret that Unitarian Universalists love facts. As a general rule, many UUs don't sit well with a lot of mystery or myth or lore. There's a tendency toward the rational and the concrete, the provable and the probable. There is sometimes an expectation of us ministers that we will lead with the academic, which allows some to justify coming into a building on Sunday morning that says church outside. And that's the challenge for all of us really in a conversation about what it means to be proud to be an American, America is anything but academic as a concept. There is nothing concrete about America, very little about America over the years that has been completely rational, and we seem to prove over and over again that nothing is probable.

For some UUs, emotion gets short shrift when competing with dissertation. But this question, this motivation to stand when we hear someone sing about it, to feel the tears well and the throat close that for some bonkers reason is America, what I keep relearning over time is that to be proud to be an

American is an exercise in existing in the ambiguity of potential, a way of putting it that will make my dissertation folks happy, I'm sure. For the emotion folks, what I mean is that I think being proud to be an American is finding a way to be totally secure with being unsure or scared, always knowing that there is a possibility of something amazing.

"It's all America.

If you don't like it or if you do, it's still red, white and blue inside of you.

There's so much good gone great right here that you'll wonder why we need to fear.

If you blink, you'll miss what might appear in what's called America.

Some say it's crazy, some say it's crap, but it's still on the map as freedom's trapped.

In this nifty never, never nation, no one needs to know intimidation.

Join this joyous jumping jubilation.

We've got life, we've got a rhythm that's pounding out of us any strife.

It's exciting and new, both for me and for you.

Find a way to come back to this homeland, train, boat or plane, to your own sand.

It's all America.

If it's a bust or if it's a ball, it's grand and off the wall.

We're rising tall and singing proud.

We've got to come alive, take the dive.

Come inside, come out, come have a shout.

Come around, come through, come dance with you.

Come undone, come up, come round, come two.

Come above, come low, come high and say hello out loud.

It's all America."