

Learning Liberty

I was 19 when I encountered the biggest Constitution fanatic I had ever met. She served as president of a volunteer foundation for increasing patriotism and community awareness in teenagers. She carried a pocket Constitution around in her purse daily, and she was even enrolled in an online course learning the precepts of that foundational document. She was also my mother. I came home from my first year of college surprised to find a home newly brimming with ‘founding father fervor’, and I loved it. The experience left me to reflect, however, on the impact that her change and shared knowledge had brought into my life. Was I better off, having learned more about the structure and function of our country? I am thoroughly convinced that I was. I believe that I, and everyone else living in the United States of America, is better for learning the history and contents of the Constitution for one overarching reason; we grasp ownership of our country.

To grasp ownership, we must begin with understanding, and understanding is increased through inquiry. Dr. Jeffery Nokes, a professor at BYU, describes student inquiry as “opportunities for students to explore authentic questions about the past, with space to construct their own interpretations...” (Nokes). When young children are taught the Constitution, the seeds of ownership are planted through inquiry, leading to understanding. For instance, the middle school history class I co-teach sang the School House Rock ‘Preamble to the Constitution’ at the beginning of each period. With the vigor of thirty 13-year-olds brimming with energy, those words were sung, if not shouted, each day for a week or more. Interestingly, the more familiar they became with the Preamble, the more questions they had. What does ‘promoting the general welfare’ mean? What does it take to form ‘a more perfect Union’? After only a few days of learning the introduction to the Constitution, the students were engaging in high level inquiry

and exploring their authentic questions about the past. What does it take to form a ‘more perfect Union’? Well, what do they think it would take? And why? As their inquiry develops, their ownership over the precepts in the Constitution develops as well. Like the seed planted, Constitutional awareness and ownership need time and nourishment to grow to their full potential. Learning the contents of the Constitution, including the Preamble and Bill of Rights, inevitably sparks questions that young people grow into, sprouting into college-aged students, budding with potential and curiosity.

While college aged young adults have great potential to take ownership of their country through learning about the Constitution, fewer and fewer are finding any reason to take pride in their country and its founding documents. A 2016 study found that young adults led a large decline in the percentage of people who were “extremely proud to be an American”, comparing the percentage to one taken directly after the attack on 9/11 in which the “extremely proud” average was much higher (Jones). Young adults do not find reason to be proud to be an American because they do not understand where they fit in, and the long history that ideas of people like them have had.

National ownership would grow exponentially if college students deepened their understanding of the Constitution, finding their place within its past, present, and future. In one respect, the Constitution is a document written hundreds of years ago, and it’s the politicians’ jobs to worry about it. On the other hand, though, the Constitution is a living document that reflects the ability of the United States to change course toward a better path, and young adults can grasp ownership through guiding it. The history of the Constitution is one of amendment; it has been amended 27 times over the last 250 years. Each time, the needs and demands of the people living in that nation sparked the impetus for the amendments. With the exception of the

18th amendment, nearly every amendment has expanded rights in some way. The 15th and 21st amendment granted voting rights to all men and women, the 17th amendment granted people the right to directly elect their senators, and the first 10 amendments are even labeled the *Bill of Rights*. Clearly, there is a place for young adults' rights in the Constitution, including their right to seek for change. As young adults understand that change has started among people like them, they find their place within the Constitution. The seed that sprouted through inquiry years ago grows taller as college students find not only understanding but belonging in the history of the document.

The Constitution teaches that there is a place for disagreements in the United States. After all, a democratic country who cannot alter its course to align with the people is a democracy that cannot survive. History is rife with examples of monarchs ruling with an iron fist, but the United States is more flexible, adapting to the needs of its people. Consider the battle cry of Dr. Harris, an African American Revolutionary War veteran. He disagreed with the institution of slavery, but instead of resigning and murmuring a complaint about the state of the nation, he owned his country, with all of its problems, and sought for change by proclaiming,

“It surprises me that every man does not rally at the sound of liberty, and array himself with those who are laboring to abolish slavery in our country... then [in 1776] liberty meant something...the word slavery then filled their hearts with horror. They fought because they would not be slaves. Those whom liberty has cost nothing, do not know how to prize it” (Garrison).

Dr. Harris relied on the liberty that he had seen in the American Revolution to strengthen his faith in American justice. He had faith that his country would right their wrongs against their African American brothers and sisters, and amendments to the Constitution granted that. With

the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments African Americans' rights were codified into law, a change that could not have happened had freedom-loving Americans not known the amendment process and cared enough to take a stand. Like Dr. Harris exemplified, young adults can take the questions that they have and use them to improve this country; they can find belonging through disagreement and ownership through dissonance. The budding college student spreads its leaves as they find their place in the United States and own what happens within.

Grasping ownership of the United States comes to full maturity both through lived experience and continual learning of the Constitution as adults. Mature adults often have a greater well of experience than children and young adults, and that experience can nourish their appreciation for this country. In the same study that found young adult patriotism to be declining, mature adults had higher percentages of pride in their country. In fact, 64% of adults aged 50-64 years old were "extremely proud to be an American", 12% higher than the national average (Jones). Adults' lived experiences account, in part, for that higher percentage, giving them the perspective to own and appreciate living in the United States, the "land of the free, and home of the brave" (Key).

Simply living through historic times does not guarantee that citizens will reach the full potential of ownership implied in the iconic phrase, 'We, the people'. Instead, it takes continual study of the Constitution to keep grasping our role. As my mom understood more about the Constitution, her behavior changed. She took ownership of her community, increased her awareness of current events in the country, and grew an increased appreciation for America's opportunities for involvement. Her enthusiasm was contagious, her determination strong. In my experience, increased knowledge through the lens of formative life experiences gives a deep appreciation for the strength the Constitution offers our nation. My mom, like millions of other

adults, has decades of experience living in this country, but unlike many of those adults, she took a conscious step toward refreshing her own understanding of the foundations it was built on. Her experience contributed to a new, personal understanding of the powers and protections offered in the United States Constitution. Similarly, every adult benefits through engaging with the history and content of the Constitution because it provides depth and clarity for many of the lived experiences that they have already gone through.

Learning about the U.S. Constitution increases individual ownership of this country, from developing inquiry in young teens, to finding belonging in young adults through a history of disagreement and change, to adding context to the lived experiences of the more mature generations. Starting constitutional education young, in elementary and middle school, teaches children that they can, and should, have questions about the principles within the Constitution, and learn how to develop their own inquiry skills toward the most foundational document of our nation. Learning and refining that inquiry prepares them to benefit from the document's past as they learn the history of amending the Constitution according to the needs of the people. They learn that they belong in a country where they might not agree with every decision, and that there is a place and a history of disagreements like theirs. Finally, as adults who have lived through the blessing of freedom and threats to that freedom, relearning and refreshing the Constitution adds an enhanced depth of feeling to their own personal experiences, strengthening their feeling of ownership toward the country that they have grown to love. Throughout their entire lives, learning about the Constitution becomes more than the words on an archaic document, it becomes learning about liberty itself.

Works Cited

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