

Proud *And* Critical

And-thinking Applied to Critical Race Theory

By Barry Johnson – July, 2021

As a proud United States citizen, I pledge allegiance to the flag, of the United States of America. And to the republic, for which it stands, one nation under God. Indivisible, **with liberty and justice for all**.

Proud - I love this country and I love this pledge committed to liberty and justice for all. Many have died in the pursuit of and the protection of these ideals. I can remember saying our pledge in unison as a child in school with my hand on my heart and pride in my whole body as I stood straight and imitated a picture of my father at attention as a soldier in WWII. That pride remains in me today. It is affirmed in our Declaration of Independence that we "... are created equal." We have much to be proud of in this country.

And

Critical – Being proud and motivated by our country's ideals of "liberty, justice and equality for all" comes with it a constant vigilance to live up to those ideals. History - how have we lived up to *And* fallen short of these ideals in the past? Present - How are we doing now? Future - how might we move closer to our ideals going forward? These are critical questions. They are critical in terms of importance – we need to ask them. They are also critical in terms learning how to both love our country *And* be self-critical and honest about our shortcomings.

We Can Be Both Proud *And* Critical

A thriving democracy requires us to supplement Or-thinking with *And*-thinking.¹ When we assume that we must choose between being proud of our country *Or* critically comparing our actions to our words and addressing any disparities, we create a false choice in which our country loses regardless of the choice. If we choose to be Proud to the rejection of critically comparing our actions to our ideals, we undermine our ideals and let them flounder. When that happens, we lose a primary source of our pride in the first place. If we choose to critically compare our actions to our words to the rejection of our pride in the best of our country, we undermine our pride which is the source of our critical vigilance in the first place.

A democracy without critical thinking and monitoring by its citizens can easily slip into dictatorship in which "critical thinkers," "critical media," and freedom of speech are suppressed. A democracy without pride in the best of its self and its ideals, lacks a foundation and guidance for improvement and is vulnerable to self-loathing and the dictatorship of self-righteous critics.

One thing a democracy can take pride in which is less available in a dictatorship is self-criticism by its citizens. Being proud of our country's ideals supports critical attention to living them. Critical attention to living our country's ideals is a basis for maintaining and enhancing pride in

¹ Johnson, Barry. *And: Making a Difference by Leveraging Polarity Paradox or Dilemma. Volume One – Foundations*. HRD Press, 2020.

our country. We can have both. This is true of our history of race relations and critical race theory.

A critical look at teaching critical race theory

Two approaches to teaching our children our history and present realities as a country:

The Resume Approach (Proud)

When we submit our resume for a job application, it is understandable that we would “put our best foot forward.” We share our accomplishments and the many indicators that we would be a good person for the job. It is more of a self-affirming document than a self-critical document. This is understandable because we want to be seen in the most positive light possible to increase our chances to get the job.

When we introduce our children to our country and its history as a teacher, it is understandable that we would “put our country’s best foot forward.” We want our children to be proud of their country so we want it to be seen in the most positive light possible. “First impressions are important.”

And

The Witness Approach (Critical)

When swearing in a witness to a possible violation of the law, we ask them to “swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.” When we introduce our children to our country and its history as a teacher and a witness to our history, it is understandable that we would want them to know the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth as honestly as we know it.

There is a natural tension between these two desires for teaching the history of race relations in the United States. We need both. We need to appreciate our ideals as a source of pride *And* we need to critically acknowledge our shortcomings, past and present, and address them.

To See is to love

When we can see a person, group or country completely, love is a natural result. We often assume we need to hide our shortcomings in order to be loved and to belong. This is countered by most of our religious traditions in which all of us belong through unconditional love. We do not have to hide any part of our country’s past or present in order to love our country. Our country (any country) is more than its worst realities and more than its best realities. We can love our country, recognize the best of its ideals *And* humbly acknowledge our shortcomings. That combination provides a solid basis for affirming and vigilantly pursuing the ideals which make us proud. We have come a long way *And* there is plenty of work to be done.

Critical Race Theory is Tough Love for our County

Loving our country, like loving our children, sometimes requires some tough love. We love our children *And* we hold them accountable if they are doing something against our values like bullying another child. It is because we love them and other children that we step in and stop the bullying. Critically looking at their behavior in relation to our values is an act of tough love. They are getting a double message: I love you (Compassionate Love) *And* bullying other children is not ok (Tough Love).

I love my country *And* some of our systems, practices and policies as a country, past and present, are not ok. We need to understand the origins of racism and how it is being perpetuated in order to move our country continually toward our ideals of “liberty and justice for all” and the reaffirmation that we are all “created equal.” Critical Race Theory can help.

Criteria for Using Critical Race Theory

It is a legitimate question for parents to ask: “What are my children being taught about our country’s history and about racism as a part of that history?”

This is an opportunity for us as parents to learn something that we might not have learned in our United States history courses when we were in school. Some important questions that might be worth exploring include:

1. Are the sources of this history course both white and people of color?
2. Is the information the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth?
3. To what extent do our history lessons offer our children reasons to be proud of our country, its founding ideals and its many contributions?
4. To what extent do our history lessons recognize a discrepancy between our ideals and some of our institutional practices past and present.
5. Is there time allowed to explore these discrepancies and to understand what has been done throughout our history to bring our practices closer to our ideals?
6. Is there time allowed to explore what still needs to be done to bring our present practices closer to the ideals on which we were founded?

In order for our children to grow up as proud, responsible citizens pledging allegiance to our country with “liberty and justice for all” and the proposition that “all are created equal,” they need to be taught these ideals and cherish them. Pride in our country is a treasure they should all have. *And*, they need to know about how, throughout our history, there has been an ongoing challenge to do our best to move closer to those ideals. This challenge requires critical thinking in order to recognize when there is a discrepancy between our words and our deeds. It also requires guidance about what can be done, as a responsible citizen, to join others in moving our beloved country a little bit closer to our ideals.

If the curriculum incorporates these elements, regardless of what it is called, I think it will support us going forward with a next generation of Proud *And* Critical citizens bending the arch of history toward justice, diversity, equity and inclusion.