



Hi. My name is Ben Moorad. I'm 31 years old. I live in Southeast Portland. It's been sobering seeing such a split populace seemingly looking at two different worlds, two different realities, and it's hard for me at this point to really reconcile the two. But I think underneath all that and throughout whatever controversies of the moment, I think that what it means to be American is that there is this messy, active sense of possibility; that we have these ideals that we always can aspire to, that we have a process that at least theoretically is open to the advance of humanitarian goals and justice and so forth. For me, when I think of America, it's not war heroes or anyone like that. It's Walt Whitman and it's Mark Twain, people who can give voice to that big, messy sense of love and justice.

But this whole question of what it means to be an American gets played out in this very shallow way; like you won't do the Pledge of Allegiance, so you're not American. So I think that freedom to question is incredibly important. Also the freedom to make mistakes. I think people will naturally take what freedoms they have. I think that that is another American trait.

It's hard to restrict people's freedoms in this country. It's difficult. The Patriot Act was passed very quickly, but there's been an incredible push back against it. People don't want to give up their freedoms, and they usually only do so out of fear.

The freedom of speech is paramount for me. I think all the other freedoms stem from that, primarily because the way that we use language is largely the way that we think, and it's the way that the cultural dialogue determines the political discourse. So if you restrict who gets to speak, who gets to tell their story, then the political discourse is narrowed. I think if more people are given the space to express themselves, their fears, their desires, their fantasies, their histories, other freedoms come from it because it has an inherently humanizing effect. When you hear the

stories of someone very different from you, you have a greater capacity for empathy. You can put yourself in their shoes, so you are more likely to protect their freedoms in other realms.

The most direct civic engagement I've had over the last several years is with Write Around Portland. Having these writing workshops where they acted like mini-town halls, and then when the people from the groups came out into a public reading and presented their stories and poems, that was as close as I've felt to a community, I think, ever in my life. We had—we have 150 very diverse people in a room listening to each other, listening raptly to each other, and applauding them no matter if they agree with it or disagreed, but applauding the fact that they got up and said it.

It made me very sad when I started hearing people interviewed on the radio saying that they no longer talk politics with their neighbors because it's too controversial and they'll get into arguments. What a loss for America that you can't talk politics with your neighbor anymore, that you can't talk about something that affects our lives so profoundly because it might be offensive. And that's just a sign of how completely polarized our rhetoric has become on politics. But if we don't discuss that with each other and if we don't make those decisions on that level, those decisions will be made for us, and we won't have any say in it. We'll be read the decision on the news.

I mean, the whole fact that we devalue the idea of intellectualism, that's a cultural crime in my mind because it prevents us from talking about, you know, what does it mean to be a citizen, what does it mean to have justice, what does it mean to have a community. And I think we've lost this idea of a community. A community can't be, can't be conveyed through a television set. It can't be conveyed through radio waves. It's conveyed through personal interactions with people who you share things with and you have differences with. That's what a historical American strength is a community, and something that is needing of definite strengthening at this point.