BLOOD RITUAL IN THE LIBRARY:
reflection into praxis, or, how I started
to worry and stopped loving the flag

by Elaine Harger

But your flag decal won’t get you into heaven anymore,
They’re already overcrowded from your dirty little war.
Now Jesus don’t like killing, no matter what the reason for,
And your flag decal won’t get you into heaven anymore.

John Prine, singer & songwriter

Early in the morning on September 11, 2001, I sat alone in the library
at PS/IS 176, the W. Haywood Burns School, in upper Manhattan,
thumbing through a picture book edition of the story of Noah’s ark
– a tale of an angry god feeling justified in killing all but a few members of
the human race, many perfectly innocent of any sin or crime worthy (if any
ever is) of capital punishment. An old story of mass murder committed
by a god, condoned by his chosen human intermediaries – sacrifice and
slaughter of innocents made acceptable when done in the name of God.

The previous spring, middle school teachers and I had collaborated on an
interdisciplinary proposal for a collection development grant. Our proposal
had as its focusing theme the notion of catastrophes – natural and social.
The earth science and social studies classes would explore a variety of
phenomena – earthquakes, volcanoes, hurricanes, wars, genocide, torture
– which humans experience as low scale, local disruptions, or as national
or global catastrophes to daily routine, individual life and limb, social
relations and infrastructures. Units of study would explore mythology,
literature, history, current events, and the earth and applied sciences.

The teachers and I arrived at catastrophe as a unifying curricular theme
for several reasons. First, because middle school life is filled with the
sturm und drang of adolescent catastrophe. Life abounds with disruption.
Middle school students, by and large, have a natural affinity to catastrophe
– physiologically, their voices break, blood descends, hormones explode;
psychologically, the young adult rebels against the elder with a fury;
socially, relations are established and severed with an abandon the equal
of which can only be found in plate tectonics and volcanic eruptions.
Secondly, natural and social disasters are often in the news, students find the reports fascinating, and they can tie in conveniently to school curriculum. Lastly, our library was home to a mural, painted by New York City artist Ora Lerman, which depicted the aftermath of the great mythic flood and Noah’s ark. Vibrantly colored toy animals recreate the world with brushes and paints, scissors and pens after the divine destruction. A statement carved into a clay tablet by the artist draws parallels between the library and the ark – the former a repository of culture, designed to weather social and natural stress for the benefit of present and future generations.1

Many of our students had, literally, grown up beneath the mural, to which we occasionally made reference when students studied the mythologies of different cultures. Our art teachers also used the mural with their classes. It was familiar, and so the idea of exploring catastrophe and the human work of recovery would not be alien to our middle schoolers. We won the grant and purchased with half of the funds books on mythology, history, earth science, social studies, and novels, the later depicting the “social catastrophes” of slavery, genocide, apartheid, holocaust. For example, many of the new books, including the Noah story I was reading, would help students delve into the connections between ancient creation myths and geological and astronomical phenomena.

Over the summer, however, most of the teachers I’d worked with on the curriculum found other jobs (turnover was high at our young, struggling middle school). Now, here I was with lots of new books to support lessons designed by teachers who’d moved on to greener pastures. So, during 1st period on the second morning of the first full week of the new school year, I sat alone in the library, looking for angles to entice a veteran language arts teacher into using our new collection of “catastrophe literature.”

In the days and weeks following that fateful morning, we did make some use of the books and the mural with a few classes to discuss the work of rebuilding in the aftermath of the great human tragedy that was September 11, 2001. Unfortunately, for us at PS/IS 176, as for people throughout the country, the human solidarity sought by many in the days after Sept. 11, rapidly became overshadowed by divisions created by leaders who cast the traumatic events of that day in simplistic frameworks – “the terrorists hate our American way of life,” “you’re either with us or you’re with them” – and appealed to all to prove solidarity with the victims of the attacks by engaging in public acts of patriotism. On September 13th, Congress passed a resolution encouraging every U.S. citizen to fly the flag in a show of solidarity with the victims of the attacks.2 School districts required the daily recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance in public schools.
Flag rituals, encouraged by Congress, required by school districts, and demanded by administrators, became the litmus test of each individual’s patriotism and a symbolic wedge, separating those who supported “us” from those who, supposedly, supported “them.”

These symbols, the flag and pledge, and their presence in the library form the subject of this essay, in which I argue that the presence of either violates a fundamental philosophical tenet of librarianship, namely that the library embodies the ideal of free and open exchange of ideas in a democratic society. I will also argue that there can be no progressive, peaceful cooptation of the U.S. flag. I take these positions because my experience has shown me that symbols and rituals are used in schools, and within society in general, for patriotic indoctrination. Such indoctrination creates powerful emotional bonds that render individuals susceptible to manipulation, and also accustom the individual to prioritizing obedience to authority before all other considerations.

Flags at School

New York City blossomed with American flags after the destruction of the World Trade Center. Large and small, the stars-and-stripes adorned jacket lapels and skyscrapers. It became difficult to locate a post office. Every street looked dressed for a Fourth of July parade. Baseball stadiums brought in eagles to soar aloft to the strains of the national anthem. Every bus and subway car was adorned with a backward (i.e. flying) flag decal.

Such was happening across the country. Expressions of patriotism were expected in every venue – from the hotdog vendor on the street corner to the halls of Congress to the airwaves – and those who questioned, or refused to engage in displays of patriotism were branded as uncaring, at best, but more often as unpatriotic or even in league with terrorists. The NYC Board of Education resolution requiring the pledge ritual was passed at its meeting on October 17, 2001. It read:

WHEREAS, the Board of Education stands united with the City of New York and the United States of America following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001; and
WHEREAS, the Board of Education recognizes that patriotism, liberty, and justice are important values that should be imparted to students; and
WHEREAS, the Pledge of Allegiance to the United States of America and its flag embody those values; and
WHEREAS, many schools do not now fly United States flags outside their buildings, in student assembly rooms, and in classrooms; and
WHEREAS, Section 802 of the Education Law mandates that the Commissioner
of Education issue regulations concerning a daily pledge of allegiance to
the flag and other patriotic exercises in our schools, and pursuant thereto the
Commissioner has issued Part 108 of the Regulations of the Commissioner,
which provides Flag Regulations for all public schools; therefore be it
Resolved, That the Board of Education requires all schools to lead students in the
Pledge of Allegiance at the beginning of every school day, and at all school-
wide assemblies and school events; and be it further
Resolved, That the schools are encouraged to form color guards to present the
flags of our City, State, and Nation at assemblies; and be it further
Resolved, that the Board of Education shall make every reasonable effort to
provide flags to schools that do not have them, with the goal of placing flags
outside every school building and in as many classrooms as is practicable;
and be it further
Resolved, That no student or staff member may be compelled to recite the Pledge
of… [Author’s note: Ironically, the document on the NYC BoE website was
cut off at this point]¹

In early November, the staff of PS/IS 176 met and discussed the Board’s
mandate concerning the pledge. The spectrum of thought and feelings
expressed was very broad. Some thought the pledge was an appropriate
show of respect and unity. Some thought each class should hold a discussion
and decide as a group whether or not, or to what extent, it would participate
in the ritual. Others thought the mandate should be ignored, while others
thought it should be actively protested. Whichever stand was taken,
each teacher spoke from the heart, and at one point the exchange became
so heated, with one teacher shouting “If you don’t love it [the U.S.A.],
then leave!” that the principal moved to end the discussion. Fortunately,
calm was restored, we continued to talk, and ended by requesting that
the principal find out from other schools how they were dealing with the
mandate. Later that week the principal sent out a memo to the staff:

Dear Staff – On Tuesday we had a difficult but a most necessary
discussion about the pledge of allegiance. This open discussion was only
possible because you were willing to share your thoughts, feelings and
suggestions. I thank you for that…. Reflecting on all this, I decided not
to go outside our community with regards to alternatives to the pledge.
Instead, I have opted to move forward with faith, trusting that each
individual in our community can each hold onto their stands without
compromising the quality of our coexistence…. So I ask that you discuss
with your students the intent of the pledge, teach them the words and
review the symbol of the flag. In preparation for this exercise, which
will begin on Tuesday morning, please review with your students how
the pledge will be done every morning at 8:45 and Board of Education
American flags will be placed in every room by Tuesday morning, these
must remain on display.

Miriam Pedraja, memo November 7, 2001 ⁴
The principal declined to inquire from other schools what they were doing in response to the Board’s mandate, which troubled many of our teachers, and we all knew that, in spite of the seeming openness of the memo, the last paragraph contained our “marching orders.” The flag had not been a fixture on our building or in our classrooms. Our school was founded by politically progressive educators and parents, and served a large immigrant community. Many parents were citizens of countries other than the U.S., and all parents had their own, and widely differing, views on expressions of patriotism. Teachers were concerned with how students and parents would respond to the mandated recitation, and it seemed certain that the order to engage in the pledge would sow as much division as unity within our school community.

Flags in Libraries

While teachers at one small school in New York City discussed the flag ritual, libraries across the country were raising flags by the score. Central libraries hung enormous flags over entranceways, tiny flags popped up on reference desks, and in the weeks to come several members of the library community began to notice, and hear stories, of how these silent symbols were creating a climate of discomfort and intimidation within libraries.

The question which arose in the minds of many in the U.S. in the wake of the September attacks was, “Why?” Some traveled to libraries for answers to that simple, and yet so complex question.

Tragically, our leaders were not seeking to help answer that most important of questions. In their view, there was no time to waste in trying to understand, the important thing was to act, to retaliate. Any questioning was treasonous – “You’re either with us, or you’re with the terrorists.” – and a politically volatile atmosphere hovered about the newly erected flags, uplifting or comforting to some, stifling or ominous to others. The volatility, of course, arose from the fact that the flag, as the primary symbol of the United States, represented the invasion of Afghanistan, the new Bush administration’s policies of “preemptive” war, “homeland security,” the USAPATRIOT Act, and the detention of “terrorist suspects” without charge or access to legal counsel. And, in some cases it was used to express racist, xenophobic sentiments.

The flag discussion amongst librarians began on the internet with Library Juice and the listservs of the Progressive Librarians Guild and the Social Responsibilities Round Table of the American Library Association, then moved into more mainstream forums like American Libraries and the ALA Council listserv. The following excerpt from a posting to PLGnet
is representative of the core concern raised by the sudden and widespread display of flags in the library.

The administration of the library where I work (Multnomah County Public Library, in Portland, Oregon) has just announced to the branch supervisors that there will soon be American flags displayed in each neighborhood library. The flags will be inside the branches, in a spot designated by the branch supervisor.

In addition, in the last month or so I have been dismayed to see a few of my colleagues wearing American flag pins or “patriotic” t-shirts while in public areas of the library.

Oregon law requires that public employees refrain from supporting or opposing political candidates, initiative petitions, or voter referendums. Multnomah County Library encourages staff to interpret this rather broadly, and we are asked to refrain from saying or wearing pretty much anything, while at work, that might make a patron think we’ve got a particular view on an issue that is sort of vaguely politically related. The example used in the required intellectual freedom training I attended was that a t-shirt with the slogan “Free Tibet” could well make folks using the library less comfortable asking certain kinds of reference questions, or checking out certain materials.

To my mind, staff wearing patriotic gear, or flags suddenly appearing in the branches is far worse than a staff member wearing a “Free Tibet” t-shirt – flags are being used as symbols of absolute and blind support of the United States’ war in Afghanistan, and by some, as a display of racism and hate against people of Middle-Eastern descent and Muslims. In this context, I worry about the comfort level and safety of our patrons – patrons who don’t support the war, but especially patrons who are or might appear to be Muslim or of Middle Eastern descent.

Are any of your libraries or library administrators suddenly getting patriotic? If you have ideas about how to fight this, please let me know. I am really going to hate coming to work if there is suddenly a big American flag behind the circulation desk.

Another librarian on the same listserv took offense that anyone would feel negatively toward the sight of the flag:

I love what my country symbolizes, and that it’s embodied in the flag. I think that the Bush administration is doing us all a disfavor and the U.S. foreign policy has not lived up to the symbol of the flag, but to be distraught at the sight of such a beautiful symbol to me is a sign that some folks have forgotten just what it means…I have a flag on my desk [from long before Sept. 11]…INSIDE my car…I cry during fireworks at the 4th of July, but my patriotism does not mean I blindly support what
our government is doing. I support and believe in the ideals upon which
our country was founded, and I would like to see them upheld.  

Encapsulated in these two postings are sentiments, which to this very
day echo throughout the U.S. It seems there are three basic categories
of emotion people feel for the flag: those who love it and support the
government with little or no question; those who love it in spite of serious
questions they have toward government; and those who have no love for
the flag, who see it simply as the symbolic expression of nationalistic
chauvinism.

Teardrops, goosebumps and the flag

Where do our strong emotions toward the flag come from? On July 4, 1989,
the Washington Post reported on some recently published psychological
studies on patriotism.

Patriots are made, not born. The process begins in childhood, when the
seeds of national devotion are sown with simple acts such as pledging
allegiance to the flag and singing “God Bless America” long before they
ever understand the words… In children as young as 7 or 8, patriotism
can first be detected. Preliminary studies of patriotism in schoolchildren
conducted by UCLA’s Feshback found that “kids experience a great deal
of patriotic feeling.” For children, patriotism is pure devotion. There is
no hint of nationalism until adolescence, when teen-agers suddenly begin
to be drawn to feelings of national supremacy.

The article goes on to say “Why patriotism may be linked to early [parent-
child] relationships is not completely understood.”

My own experience, however, shows that this matter is actually quite
easily understood.

My father was in the military until near the end of my 7th grade in school.
I grew up reciting the Pledge of Allegiance daily with my classmates, from
kindergarten on – eight years of this ritual, on the majority of days in any
given year. Additionally, in movie theaters on military bases, the very first
film shown would be of the flag, billowing in the wind, blue sky in the
background, accompanied by a stirring rendition of the national anthem.
All movie goers would stand at attention for the duration, then settle down
with popcorn and soda for Armed Forces newsreels, previews and – finally
– the featured film (often, for us kids, a Saturday matinee double feature).

Dad left the service in the spring of 1969 while I was attending junior high
school in Wiesbaden, Germany. I finished the 7th grade in Mountain Home,
Arkansas, where the family stayed with New Grandpa while Dad, who’d resigned his commission in protest of the Vietnam War, went in search of a job. At my new school in Mountain Home, I was scandalized that the Pledge of Allegiance was preceded by a prayer. My concern, at that time, had nothing to do with the appropriateness of a prayer being said in school, but at what to me was the audaciousness of giving pride of place to anything before the pledge. My youthful sense of protocol was greatly offended.

Later in college, I found it necessary to do some soul searching, some serious reflection on my experience of patriotic rituals. By that time in life, I’d learned enough about U.S. history to have long abandoned participating in patriotic rituals, and yet I was disturbed and confused by the powerful emotions that would sometimes course through my veins upon hearing the national anthem, or seeing a symbol of U.S. patriotism – the flag, the Statue of Liberty, a soaring eagle, and, yes, 4th of July fireworks. I could sit through “God Bless America” at rodeos and commencements without feeling a thing, ignoring raised eyebrows and hisses and accidentally spilled beers, but sometimes tears would well-up in my eyes, or I’d get that goosebump thrill or a palpitating heart when suddenly faced with some national symbol. Why? Why were my emotions at odds with what my mind knew? What was going on in my body that defied my brain? Where in my subconscious were those hair-triggered emotions? How did they get there? And, what allowed them to stay there with such strength?

I eventually arrived at the only explanation that makes any sense to me. As children, saluting the flag and singing the anthems are one of the only activities shared consistently with whole groups of other children and adults. Furthermore, we are told by teachers and parents to feel proud, to stand up straight, to recite or sing with feeling – and so we do. We feel proud together – together – a group, a community of Americans proud of our country. As children we might not know what the words we recite actually mean, we might not know what exactly we are to be proud of (or even if we should be proud), but the words spoken together, in unison, and the images seen establish powerful, emotional bonds to words, to musical notes, to other human bodies and voices, and to those stars-and-stripes. As children, we in the United States are indoctrinated to feel powerful emotions when patriotic cues are present. We are trained to thrill at the sight of the flag, in the same fashion as Pavlov trained his dogs to salivate at the sound of a bell.

For myself, the only similar emotional ties I have are to a few songs that became important to me at different times in my life. From my pre-school childhood, the songs “Jesus Loves the Little Children” and “This Little
Light of Mine” can still generate emotions as strong as those roused by “Solidarity Forever” and “Lift Every Voice and Sing” and “We Shall Overcome” – the songs I later learned as an adult in settings with groups of people with whom I identified, people I admired and sought to emulate, join, to be a proud, loyal member of the group.

The emotional bonds of patriotic fervor are rooted either in the natural, trusting, unquestioning ignorance of children, or develop at moments of personal crisis or openness in the life of an adult who desires to establish psychological, spiritual or political ties with a group – whether it be a baseball team, religious cult, congregation, or political party.

The same Washington Post article reports on some opinion polls inquiring about feelings of patriotism in several countries. One set of findings in particular strikes me as revealing:

81% of respondents in the United States – the highest percentage of any nation – said that they were “very proud” to be Americans. Next came Ireland, where 66 percent of respondents said that they were “very proud” to be Irish. Third ranked was England, where 55 percent polled reported feeling “very proud” to be British. At the bottom of the list were Japan and West Germany. Just 30 percent of Japanese reported being very proud of their nationality, and only 21 percent of West Germans said they were very proud to be Germans.

Although the article attempts no analysis of this survey, the low number of “very proud” Japanese (and probably the Germans as well) could have much to do with the fact that, after World War II, the Japanese were forbidden by the U.S. occupying forces from indoctrinating their school children with nationalistic symbols, songs, and images. The U.S. military command knew very well that the fervid patriotism instilled in young children establishes an emotional foundation for the training of soldiers willing to die for country. World War II certainly provided a display of the strength of the patriotism of Japanese soldiers.

When the war ended, it was the common intent of all the Allied Powers to render Japan incapable of ever returning to the field of battle. “Demilitarization” was thus the first policy of the Occupation authorities and was accompanied by abolishing Japan’s armed forces, dismantling its military industry, and eliminating the expression of patriotism from its schools and public life.

To this day I struggle, although with less frequency, with emotions triggered by patriotic cues, and in discussions with school and library colleagues in
late 2001 I argued strongly against flags in the library and pledges in the
school. As it turned out, no flag was ever mounted in the library at PS/IS
176. I don’t know why, perhaps the custodians weren’t given enough for
all classrooms. I was relieved, of course, whatever the reason, and happy
that the library was, as I phrased it, a “flag free zone.” The pledge ritual at
176 didn’t last long either. Not only was there some resistance, but it was
an inconvenient routine. During the period in which we did the pledge,
however, on one occasion a class was in the library when the recitation
came over the intercom. I was struck by the fact that the student who
stood tallest, recited most clearly, precisely, and enthusiastically – even
without a flag on which to focus – was the sole Middle Eastern student in
the class. A few of his classmates half-heartedly engaged in the recitation,
while the rest stayed seated on the floor in preparation for our story. Both
the teacher and I remained seated. Freedom of expression at work? Would
the Middle Eastern student have recited with equal fervor under different
political circumstances?

The discussion on the internet between librarians resulted in the passage of
the following statement by the Social Responsibilities Round Table at its
Action Council’s midwinter meeting in January 2002:

**Statement of Concern on the Use of Flags in Libraries’ Public Areas**

SRRT recognizes that the US flag ordinarily is appropriately, proudly
and respectfully displayed according to custom and law in libraries and
public institutions. The display of the colors is a formal matter which is
meant to represent the sovereignty and unity of the nation.

However the aggressive display of flags in unusual places, in unusual
numbers, and in an unusual manner might be taken to imply, among other
things, institutional endorsement of current US governmental policies.

Privileging symbolic speech in possible support of current US
governmental policies tends to undermine the library as a place of
free thought and compromises the neutrality of the library space. Such
unusual displays may create an intimidating atmosphere for some library
users who may be deterred in their requests for materials and assistance.
SRRT urges libraries to be sensitive to these concerns.

**Flags in the school library**

Three years after September 11, 2001, I found myself on the other side of
the country, the new librarian at a high school, when all of a sudden (to
me), at the beginning of 2nd period on the first day of school, the cheerful
voice of a female student came over the public address system – “Good
morning, Mount Si. Please stand for the pledge of allegiance.”
I can’t recall if there were students in the library at that moment, but the two other adults promptly stood, faced the flag, hands over hearts and began the recitation. I, meanwhile, filled with a surprised shock, which almost immediately turned to silent, internal rage – knowing full well what was expected of me, and resenting it powerfully – slowly rose from my chair, but refused to turn my body to face the flag. Instead I bowed my head slightly, subjecting my body and spirit to this authority. I did not remain seated, as I normally would, out of fear – fear of offending my new colleagues, fear of giving anyone cause to question my moral capacity, my worthiness as a new, untenured employee of the school, as an educator of young people, fear of jeopardizing my job. I felt shame and fury.

In the following weeks, I responded to the 2nd period instruction in the same fashion, minus the charged emotions of the first day, but with an ever-growing sense of resentment and an equally blossoming knowledge that this couldn’t continue. Something had to give – and it wasn’t going to be me.

What came to my rescue, in a moment of reflection while writing in my new work journal, was action research, a method used in the education community to structure reflective practice and which I’d experienced as a truly empowering form of professional development. [See Doherty, p.15] I would explore this problem systematically, smartly, trying to set emotions aside, I would collect data, analyze it and try to arrive at some meaningful way to deal with the situation. Central to action research is the development and fine-tuning of the research question, and by early January I had finally articulated the question behind my quandary:

How can I address positively the “imbalance of respect” inherent in my school’s daily flag ritual?

I was able to arrive at this question because:

(1) I’d gotten to the root of why I found the ritual offensive;
(2) I’d arrived at what I thought was a satisfactory solution to the problem; and
(3) I’d finally worked up the courage to share my concerns with a couple of my new colleagues and the principal.

Robert Jensen, in a speech on November 10, 2001, which was posted the next day on the internet by CommonDreams, calls patriotism “perhaps the single most morally and intellectually bankrupt concept in human history.” He goes on to express best why I have come to find patriotic rituals offensive when he quotes Emma Goldman:

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**page 56**

**Progressive Librarian #26**
Patriotism assumes that our globe is divided into little spots, each one surrounded by an iron gate. Those who had the fortune of being born on some particular spot, consider themselves better, nobler, grander, more intelligent than the living beings inhabiting any other spot. It is, therefore, the duty of everyone living on that chosen spot to fight, kill, and die in the attempt to impose his superiority upon all others.11

If patriotic rituals are exclusive, they especially do not belong in a library, which strives to be inclusive. However, as I learned, Washington state law mandates the pledge in public schools, and I was in no position (at the time) to take on the state legislature. I could, however, “temper” the ritual symbolically, and decided that hanging an Earth flag, preferably above, but eventually (in a compromise) at a height even with the U.S. flag, would let all who came into the library know that this was a space which acknowledges the views and beliefs of everyone.

With my Earth flag “solution” finally arrived at, I decided to broach the issue with someone else. Until then, I’d been silent, not knowing how to approach this volatile subject with people I didn’t know. Fortunately, just about the time I was feeling very much in need of someone to talk to, one of my new colleagues offered that if there was anything I ever wanted to know about the “politics” of the school, I should just ask – and I did.

I learned that, as regards the pledge, every classroom teacher deals with it in his or her own fashion. Some require their 2nd period students to participate or quietly stand, others allow students to follow their conscience, meaning they can sit it out, stand quietly or fully participate.

Later, my conversation with the school principal led me to the realization that central to the problem is what I call the “imbalance of respect.” The principal told me that those who did not wish to participate in the pledge, must stand quietly during it to show their respect to those who did participate. The notion of this show of “respect” grated on my mind, until I finally realized why – the respect is always one-sided. Those who don’t want to pledge must show their respect for those who do, but never does the reverse happen. There is never an occasion when the people who choose to engage in the pledge of allegiance stand up to show their respect for those of us who don’t. Not on a daily basis, not on a weekly or monthly basis, but never.

And, more importantly, the suggestion that standing is simply a way of showing respect is a falsehood. It is a falsehood, a euphemism, a facade for what in truth is a demand that one subject oneself to the authority of the flag, and of the person requiring that one stand, whether it be a teacher, principal, or president. In a democratic, secular nation, this is the
equivalent of requiring an atheist to bow before god, for a rebel to bow before the king, for an early Christian to bow before the graven image of a Roman deity. The realization of this brute, albeit symbolic, subjugation was confirmed when I discovered the book *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Totem Rituals and the American Flag*, by Carolyn Marvin and David W. Ingle (Cambridge University Press, 1999). In the introduction to their book, they write:

How does the flag operate in American life? Religiously, in a word… In American civil religion, the flag is the ritual instrument of group cohesion. It transforms the bodies of insiders and outsiders who meet at a border of violence. This is the kernel of the totem myth, endlessly re-enacted in patriotic life and ritual, and always most powerfully in the presence of the flag. Though the structure of totem myth is as familiar to Americans as anything can be, it remains largely unacknowledged. Though it governs our political culture, we do not recognize it. When it threatens to surface, it is vigorously denied. What it conceals is that blood sacrifice preserves the nation. Nor is the sacrifice that counts that of our enemy. The totem secret, the collective group taboo, is the knowledge that society depends on the death of its own members at the hands of the group. [emphasis in the original]

…The claim that Americans are devotees of a powerful civil religion is deeply suspect. Americans generally see their nation as a secular culture possessed of few myths, or with weak myths everywhere, but none central and organizing. We [Marvin and Ingle] see American nationalism as a ritual system organized around a core myth of violently sacrificed divinity manifest in the highest patriotic ceremony and the most accessible popular culture. Though it uses a Christian vocabulary, its themes are common to many belief systems. Our failure to acknowledge the religiosity of this system obeys the ancient command never to speak the true name of God. It is said that so-called primitive societies fail to recognize distinctions between their religion and their culture. This is the first of many resemblances between ourselves and cultures we consider to be different from us by virtue of a special condition of savagery or villainy or both. A feature of our modernity is projecting on other cultures impulses we believe we do not possess and deeds for which we claim no capacity. By remaining displaced observers of our most important acts, we define ourselves as a nation. 

*Totem in the Gym*

Imagine a school gymnasium, shining basketball court, bleachers out and filled with 1,300 high school students and another 100+ staff members. On the best of occasions, assembly emcees call for quiet, scold the chatterers, denounce disrespectful behaviors, and frequently give vent to exasperation.
at the assembled crowd’s inattentiveness. On this occasion, however, a dropped pin would have shattered the silence after the Veteran’s Day color guard marched, shoe taps clicking, across the gleaming wood floor up to the podium. Absolute silence reigned, not a cough, certainly not a giggle.

Leading the guard, the stars-and-stripes, next came the flags of the State of Washington and the United States Army, one guard shouldering a rifle and, bringing up the rear, another guard bearing a staff from which hung long, heavy ribbons, a colorful array, each embossed or embroidered with the name of a battle in which the guard’s regiment had participated. The ribbons hung thick, and had the staff been ornamented, not with pretty ribbons, but with the skulls of lives lost in all those battles, the gymnasium would have looked like the French World War I memorial at Verdun, the walls of its cellar rooms lined with the bones of the unknown dead. Death and fear were in the gym; one could feel it in the utter silence of all assembled.

A speech was made by one of the guards, a flag was ceremoniously folded, and a recitation made of a text which, we were told, described the “meaning” of each fold:

The first fold of our flag is the symbol of life.
The second fold is a symbol of our belief in the eternal life.
The third fold is made in honor and remembrance of the veteran departing our ranks who gave a portion of life for the defense of our country to attain peace throughout the world.
The fourth fold represents our weaker nature, for peace as American citizens trusting in god, it is to him we turn in times of peace as well as in times of war for his divine guidance.
The fifth fold is a tribute to our country, for in the words of Steven Decatur… “Our country, in dealing with the other countries, may she always be right, but it is still our country right or wrong.”
The sixth fold is for where our hearts lie. It is with our hearts that we 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.
The seventh fold is a tribute to our armed forces, for it is through the armed forces that we protect our country and our flag against all her enemies, whether they be found within or without the boundaries of our republic.
The eighth fold is a tribute to the one who entered into the valley of the shadow of death, that we might see the light of day.
The ninth fold is a tribute to womanhood, for it has been through their faith, love, loyalty and devotion that the character of the men and women who have made this country great has been molded.
The tenth fold is a tribute to the father, for he too, has given of his sons and daughters for the defense of our country since she was first born.
The eleventh fold, in the eyes of the Hebrew citizen, represents the lower
portion of the seal of King David and King Solomon and glorifies, in their eyes, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.
The twelfth fold, in the eyes of the Christian citizen represents an emblem of eternity and glorifies, in their eyes, god the father, the son, and the holy spirit.
The thirteenth and final fold signifies the original 13 colonies upon which this great nation was founded.\textsuperscript{13}

We were led to believe by the presenter that this text was a traditional part of the flag folding ceremony. As one who has been present at many such events, I was surprised that I was hearing this “traditional” reading for the very first time. I even became suspicious as to its authenticity.

I searched the internet for a few hours seeking information regarding the origin of the text. I spent a full day at the University of Washington library pouring through histories of the U.S. flag. Nothing, \textit{nada}. In desperation, I sought the assistance of fellow librarians, first from Radical Reference, then from the reference librarian at the U.S. Air Force Academy. The later confirmed what I suspected – this text had simply appeared on the internet (the Air Force placed it on its website at the request of veterans) with no attribution, no history, but wide distribution – an instant “historical” text. A new “tradition” of indeterminate age, certainly less than ten years, probably less than five.

I present the full text here, along with the description of the Veteran’s Day assembly, as anecdotal evidence of the insights of Marvin and Ingle into the religious role of the flag in U.S. life.

\textit{Old Glory – aglow with goodness?}

Debates continue over whether or not the flag, as a symbol of love for country, can or should be claimed to represent what is good, truly good, about the United States of America. And, there is much that is good about this country.

I have come to the conclusion, however, that there can be no positive or progressive use of the flag that can make it mean anything other than the blood sacrifice it actually and historically permits, commits, and justifies. Were you to hand a flag to a pacifist and another to a warmonger, there is nothing, absolutely nothing, laying deep in the hearts and minds of either individual that can endow that inanimate, red-white-and-blue object with any meaning other than the actual, complex, neither all-good nor all-bad history embodied in those stars and stripes.

…the flag does NOT mean “whatever you want it to mean,”…it
unavoidably DOES express support for our present government policies, and DOES express a membership in that famous 90% of Americans who are happy with president Bush, support the war, and implicitly support John Ashcroft and the administration’s stated position that to express dissent is to side with the enemy. In other words, on the inside of a library, a flag is a political statement, and a very strong one at that.

While the thirteen stripes, themselves, do represent a historic moment of rebellion against a colonial power, and the lofty ideals articulated in the Declaration of Independence, they also represent the dispossession of native peoples of their lands, lives and cultures, and of the kidnapping and enslavement of countless Africans by many of those same rebellious colonists and their allies. Like the notches on the butt of a rifle, or the scalps in the belt of a bounty hunter, each of the fifty white stars on field of blue represents the violent seizure of land from people who made that land their home long before the arrival of Europeans.

In response to one librarian’s listserv comment describing his love of flag in spite of his knowledge of America’s bloody past and his present opposition to U.S. foreign policy in the fall of 2001, Mark Rosenzweig wrote,

…Fred’s attitude towards the flag is a matter of conscience: he didn’t suddenly bedeck himself in red-white-and-blue in this outbreak of flag mania 2 months ago. I would assume that for him the flag represents the nation as it is, for better and worse, and is a sign of his appreciation of the luck of the draw that he was born here, of his realization that the bounty he enjoys is also the systematic material product of the want, need, disease, death squads, elsewhere (and of poverty, discrimination, social injustice within) and his commitment to doing whatever he can to getting rid of the flip side of American “prosperity” and the freedom it affords, which is the beggaring of other peoples, the use of disproportionate mass violence to solve conflicts, the degradation of a large part of the planet and the despoliation of the natural environment of the biosphere, to all of which we as a nation make more than our share of a contribution.

Some people “parse” the flag in ways that try to make it mean something more than what it means in its official form.

I don’t fly a flag or wear the flag because to the person on the street it appears to mean I support Bush and his cronies. But I do wear a peace sign over the flag button on my backpack instead (I also have a “peace is patriotic” button…)

Coupling the U.S. flag with other symbols does, in my view, alter it in ways that visually and symbolically acknowledge that the wearer or bearer wants to communicate some modification to the usual meaning of the flag.

Progressive Librarian #26 page 61
I believe such images are a worthy transition, a “weaning” if you will, away from our emotional attachments to the official flag.

Without such parsing, however, the only complete, historically faithful understanding of the meaning of the U.S. flag can be found through the eyes of those who suffered and died beneath its folds. We can be guided in this quest for understanding by considering the general attitude held in the U.S. today toward the flag of the Civil War-era Confederacy to understand this. While the stars-and-bars elicits nostalgic feelings among some people for the grandeur of the Old South, and to others has been “appropriated” as a symbol of rebellion against any number of entities, for most people in the U.S. today the Confederate flag is the symbol of a society rooted in slavery, a society not to be held in memory with any fondness or longing or pride. The presence in recent years of this symbol of the slave states over statehouses and public spaces has been powerfully challenged on the grounds that, as a vestige of social structures which no longer have approval in the civilized world, it should not be given place of pride in any public sphere.

One day, the same could be true of the stars-and-stripes. As a society, we might one day come to see this flag as it has been seen for centuries through the eyes of those forcefully removed from their homes, family members slain, women raped, children burned by forces bearing, or trained or paid by that flag and the nation it represents. We might some day see the flag through the eyes of young American men and women who have been lured into the war machine, by dreams of glory or need of a paycheck, only to have their souls brutalized, their bodies maimed, their young, promising lives snuffed out – all for what? For another white star on a field of blue? For access to oil fields, rubber plantations, copper mines? Will we ever see in the flag the selfish sacrifice of our own children to the maws of wars of greed and power? Remember Abraham ready to slit the throat of his son to prove his own allegiance. Remember Noah’s god drowning innocents. Remembrance. We in the U.S. are in grave need of remembering our past.

In a recent Nation article, Naomi Klein writes about the “amnesia” suffered in the U.S. when it comes to responding to recent revelations of U.S. use of torture. In “‘Never Before!’ Our Amnesiac Torture Debate,” Klein points out that President Bush’s press announcement from Panama City that “we do not torture” was made at a location an hour and a half drive from where “the US military ran the notorious School of the Americas from 1946 to 1984, a sinister educational institution that, if it had a motto, might have been ‘We do torture.’” She asks why so few people are willing in the context of the current use of torture by U.S. forces to remember the actual and known history of our country’s use of torture.17
The same sort of “amnesia” seems to veil our sentiments in regard to the flag. We remember “what it stands for” selectively, we suffer “amnesia” at will, when it serves our most tender of feelings.

Could the U.S. flag ever embody any level of goodness, could it ever be washed clean of all the blood in which it is so thoroughly drenched?

It depends.

It depends on whether or not the people and leaders of the United States are willing, first, to ask forgiveness from all those whom we have wronged. Some “truth and reconciliation” is in order in the U.S. Secondly, we must be willing to begin the task of acting in accordance with the ideals we claim to hold dear. Ideals, such as democracy, justice, equality – which are not exclusively “American” ideals, but human ideals, shared by peoples of many lands, throughout human history. Plato, after all, wasn’t a U.S. citizen. Neither was Jesus, or Spartacus, or Robin Hood, or any other people who have struggled against oppression.

We in the United States of America would also have to admit in our hearts and minds that our comforts are largely rooted in the misery of others. The bright yellow, delicious bananas we feed our babies, for instance, are picked by mothers and fathers who have no choice but to raise their children in poverty, because of unjust economic relations between producing and consuming nations. The pretty, shiny patent leather shoes worn by our toddlers are made by women whose own children have no shoes.

We would have to learn enough about of our own country’s history in order to know from whom we must ask forgiveness.

We would have to humble ourselves – we big, arrogant Americans – before the hungry of the world’s population and actually have the courage to ask “Can you forgive me for contributing to your suffering? What can I do to atone for my country’s crimes against humanity?”

We would have to listen to their answers. And then we would have to act, to transform words into deeds. We would have to harness our wonderful, American – no, human – creativity, technology, knowledge and “can do” spirit to meet the task of proving ourselves worthy of forgiveness. Only then might the broad stripes and bright stars be filled with the broad spirit that is a real characteristic of Americans, with the bright promise of the ideals we claim to hold dear. By then, of course, we’d probably want a flag that represented all humanity, not just one nation. At that point, the stars-and-stripes might be placed in a museum, alongside the stars-and-bars and
countless other banners of cultures no longer considered civilized, societies in which people clubbed each other over the heads, disemboweled their heretics, dropped napalm on the brows of children, and poisoned their own soldiers and scientists with Agent Orange, dirty bombs and minds filled with the horrors of war.

What are the chances of such a transformation? Well, today we are led by the son of a man who “In 1988, after the U.S. Navy warship Vincennes shot down an Iranian commercial airliner in a commercial corridor, killing 290 civilians…said, ‘I will never apologize for the United States of America. I don’t care what the facts are.’”

We in the United States must begin to care what the facts are, and we librarians are in a position to help that happen. After all, we are the keepers of the facts and so it is our responsibility to actively nurture communities as places where the facts are desired and sought out and acted on. When we see that our communities are being lied to, we need to promote the facts, the truth.

My first years in college were spent at Jackson State University, a historically black college in Mississippi. JSU’s motto was from the Bible, a quote attributed to a peacemaker – “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” Perhaps we could start with the truth of the American flag.

**Conclusion**

In my library an Earth flag hangs level to the U.S. flag, and there will soon be a poster placed nearby with a photo of the planet captioned with the words of Pablo Casals: “Love for one’s country is a splendid thing. Why stop at the border?”

I no longer stand when the pledge is recited, but go about whatever work is at hand. The fulltime library tech with whom I work pledges with ardor. One of our student aides ignores the pledge, another sometimes responds, sometimes doesn’t. Our attitudes and behavior toward the ritual co-exist. Am I satisfied with this arrangement? No. My hope is that one day our daily blood ritual at Mount Si High School will be replaced with a bloodless moment of silent contemplation on the state of the world and on one’s place in it. Until then, however, a little progress has been made and will be continued.
Notes

1. See website with Ora Lerman’s work at http://www.lermantrust.org/tour.html
2. See House resolution at http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/C?r107:./temp/~r107KGFHTw
5. Emily-Jane Dawson, PLGnet-L, 28 October 2001
8. ditto