

What It Means To Be An American

by William Yale

When I was a just a school boy, I was told by my teachers that when you visit foreign lands you will not be able to blend in with the people who live there. You may attempt to dress as they do and even take the time to learn their language, but you will still stick out like a sore thumb. After being told this more than once I asked the big question, "Why?" Different people had different answers, but most of them said, "We're different because of the way we walk down the street, or we're different because we hold our heads high, or we're different because of the way we look people in the eye." While many of these things may be true, it is not the real reason that Americans are different. Like everything in life there is no simple answer and it may take some time to find THE answer. I found the answer in the writings of a man who lived a long time ago, who had a powerful grip on what it really means to be an American. In a speech that he gave to the Harvard graduation class, he talked about something that is uniquely American. He talked about how men need to be true to themselves and in his speech, he encouraged all (Americans) to trust in their own ideas and encouraged them to believe in their own future.

Later in his speech, he told them, "Believe in our own thoughts and believe what is in your own thoughts is true for all men." This is what makes us different from other people. When our founding fathers told King George, "We have a better idea," and "We no longer need your approval or help," we were actually declaring ourselves free men. We were, as Ralph Waldo Emerson put it, respecting "our own genius." It is worth remembering that this is the kind of fire that created the world's first democracy and it is the fire that makes all men free. So, why DO Americans walk with their heads up? Why, it's obvious isn't it? Only free men square off their shoulders like this and walk this way. So, if you are stopped by a stranger in a foreign land and asked if you are an American, be proud of your country and its genius. And, don't be ashamed you were so easily spotted.