

Oh, Canada

By Paul Voakes

Tuesday, April 30, 1963: What a day. I played hooky from 6th grade *with the blessing of my parents*, who drove me the 35 miles from Menlo Park to downtown San Francisco, where we had lunch in a “real” restaurant. What a day.

Also, I became an American citizen.

I didn’t quite appreciate the gravitas of the day when it began. I wondered why my dad was supervising my getting dressed: church clothes (on a Tuesday ?!??), and a generous sprinkling of Vitalis into my hair – “for the picture.” At the office of the Commission of Immigration and Naturalization, the officiousness of the official assigned to my case was making me really nervous, which meant, in those days, that I started grinning and looking away. This made my mom furious. As I stood and raised my right hand to repeat what amounted to my pledge of allegiance, she elbowed me and whispered, “Stop that! Look at the man!” Quickly I “straightened up” (another of Mom’s favorite commands), I got through it, and the next day at school I announced to the class that I was an American citizen. Neither before nor since have I had such a blank non-response from an audience.

My parents were born and raised in Canada. After medical school, my dad won a two-year fellowship (for OB-GYN) in California, in the late 1940s. Mom and Dad fell in love with the Golden State: other-worldly fresh produce, AND a baby-booming population, AND it hardly ever rained! After returning to Vancouver in 1950, they decided Dad would launch his practice in California. Before they left Canada, I popped into the family picture.

My parents held off on applying for U.S. citizenship for five years, just to be sure California wasn’t just an infatuation. I recall their studying hard after dinners for the test on the U.S. Constitution -- a key milestone on the road to citizenship. When I turned 12, Mom and Dad decided it was my turn to apply. Imagine my relief upon learning there was no test for 6th-grade applicants.

As a family, we took special pride in our U.S. citizenship. My parents felt fortunate to have immigrated to a country they loved just as much as their native land. In subtle ways,



they shared their love for both countries with their four children. One example: I recall watching, in 1969, a televised baseball game from Montreal, between the Mets and the National League's brand-new club, the Expos. Before the requisite rendition of the Star-Spangled Banner, the stadium announcer said, "Please rise for our national anthem." When I heard the first few bars – "O Canada, our home and native land" – I felt suddenly flooded with a deep warmth and pride. But how could that be? I couldn't remember a single time I'd heard that anthem. I asked my parents if they'd ever sung "O Canada" around the house when we were tiny, and Mom said, "Oh sure. It's a beautiful melody, isn't it?"

And yet the U.S.A. has been my country, officially for 63 years now. In the early '70s, when I'd disclose to friends my low draft-lottery number, they'd ask whether I was going back to Canada to avoid Vietnam. I couldn't do that. I reported to the draft office, only to learn that I was classified IV-F, physically unfit for service. (My teen-age lungs had a habit of collapsing.)

Despite my opposition to the war, my 22-year-old self still felt a strong sense of duty to this country. So I volunteered for VISTA, a long-gone sort of domestic Peace Corps, and I served in South Texas for 18 months. Since then I've felt repeated challenges to my patriotism (especially lately), yet I still embrace that 6th-grader's proud proclamation to the class.

So why is it that I am now applying for Canadian citizenship?

At this point I want to acknowledge that mine is a tale born of privilege. For many millions, immigration to a country like Canada is an act of desperation; it offers them an escape from unspeakable violence, oppression or poverty. My journey is far different:

For as long as I can remember, I've been eager to explore cultures beyond U.S. borders. Between 7th and 12th grades, I took courses in Spanish, German, French, Italian and (because it was required) Latin for two years. We'd visit family in Canada on summer vacations, but I longed to travel overseas. During my "junior year abroad" in England, I worked in quick visits to Ireland, Sweden, Germany, France and the Netherlands. Since then, I've been lucky enough to have spent at least a week in Italy, Southeast Asia, New Zealand, Chile, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Mexico, and England and France again — and two months working in Uganda. In each place, I've marveled at the unique cultures that constitute our world's diversity, while also realizing how very much alike we humans are.

All of which has colored my view of citizenship. To me, a citizen is more than a loyal subject of one government. Citizenship starts with a sense of kinship, an affinity for a people -- its culture, its traditions, its institutions, and its shared values. I pay attention to those values. I would pledge a citizen's allegiance to any country whose people — especially their leaders — value democratic practices, basic human rights (equality, freedom, dignity) and the health of the planet.

In today's and tomorrow's world, does it even make sense to harness one's allegiance to just one country? Communication, commerce and culture recognize no borders. Nor do the effects of climate change, pandemics, migration patterns, hunger or poverty. We're all in this together, all 193 nations of us. We share problems that no nation can solve on its own.

Becoming a Canadian citizen wouldn't make me any less an American citizen. It could even expand, rather than degrade, my "Americanhood," by pushing me to understand the United States from another perspective. I can still love the U.S.A. without believing that it's the only nation worthy of my allegiance. And I'm sure my parents would have supported, and maybe even joined, my interest in reclaiming Canadian citizenship.

For decades I've pondered this step. Two recent events prompted action. When the Canadian government last year eased the requirements and streamlined the process for people of Canadian ancestry, my brother Brian and I decided to dive in. My birth in Vancouver qualifies me as a Canadian citizen in theory only. I'm applying for a Certificate of Citizenship, which is

the formal gateway to such practicalities as a Canadian passport, the ability to establish permanent residence, and the easing of immigration for my children or grandchildren, should they desire. Am I moving to Canada? Probably not, unless circumstances change drastically. I see this application as an intentional, and slightly public, declaration of my expanding notion of citizenship, and of this congenital allegiance toward Canada. I want to say I'm an American, and a Canadian, with honest and equal pride.

The second event was the change in American leadership in 2025. I hate watching my government abandon the values I mentioned above; I hate feeling my patriotism tested so often. I try to stay optimistic that the pendulum will swing back, but the damage wrought by the current leadership will take a long time to heal. Canada itself has been targeted by these reckless jingoists, with their unwarranted trade war and silly lake-naming.

Even if I hadn't been born there, why not Canada? Current provocations notwithstanding, we have so much in common: an educated, increasingly diverse populace, and generations of democratic rule by constitution – not to mention the same language (almost!) and a 3,000-mile border. And look how much Canada has given the world. I don't mean just Gordon Lightfoot, Joni Mitchell, hockey and maple syrup. Few, if any post-industrial societies have adhered so steadfastly to their commitments to civil discourse, to the rule of law, to honoring indigenous predecessors, to a multicultural future, and to just plain seeking the greater good. And yes, there's an attitude toward immigration that starts with a large welcome mat.

Are they willing to welcome back one of their own? When I checked my status a few weeks ago, I was told there are some 83,000 applications ahead of mine.

I should check back “in about 18 months.”