

Do This for 10 Minutes on the Fourth of July

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Four years ago, I wrote a column titled "America Needs a July Fourth Seder." In it, I explained that "national memory dies without national ritual. And without a national memory, a nation dies." Many readers and listeners to my radio show responded by creating their own rituals to make the day far more meaningful than watching fireworks and eating hot dogs.

I now present a simple 10-minute ceremony that every American can easily use on July Fourth. It is a product of the Internet-based Prager University that I founded nearly two years ago. We call it the Fourth of July Declaration, and here it is. (A paginated and printed version can be downloaded at the website www.prageruniversity.com).

It begins with a note to the individual leading the ritual, the "host."

NOTE TO HOST *

We hope this day finds you, your family and your friends in good health, enjoying another glorious Fourth together. We all love barbecues, parties and fireworks, but if that's all the Fourth of July is about, the day has lost its meaning and we lose a vital connection to our American past.

Welcome to our Fourth of July Declaration!

We have modeled this Declaration on the best-known commemoration of a historical event in the world — the Jewish Passover meal. It has successfully kept the memory of the Israelites' exodus from Egypt alive for over 3,000 years.

As Americans, we need to reconnect with our Founding. We need to rediscover the meaning of our country's creation. And we need to do it every year. That is the reason for ritual — to enable us to remember. Without ritual, the memory fades. And without memory, life — whether of the individual or of a nation — loses its meaning.

That's where this Fourth of July Declaration comes in.

In keeping with the philosophy of Prager University that profound concepts can be taught in five minutes, this Declaration is brief.

If you follow this simple ceremony, this holiday will not just be another barbecue. It will be the meaningful day it was meant to be: a celebration of the birth of our exceptional country, the United States of America.

You are encouraged to add more to your Fourth of July Declaration. This ceremony is only a starting point. But even doing this minimum will mean a lot — to you, to your family and friends, and to the nation.

** Feel free to read this "note to host" to those assembled at your celebration of the day.*

MATERIALS AND FOOD NEEDED FOR THE CEREMONY

— Iced Tea

— Salty pretzels

— Strawberries and blueberries and whipped cream. (But any goodie colored red, white and blue will do.)

— A small bell

The ringer on your cell phone will do in a pinch

— An American coin

The bigger, the better. A half-dollar is ideal, but a quarter will do.

— A printed (unsigned) Declaration of Independence.

— Lyrics to “God Bless America” for all your guests. Download the lyrics. (www.scoutsongs.com/lyrics/godblessamerica.html)

THE CEREMONY BEGINS

DIRECTION: *Everyone gathers around the table.*

HOST SPEAKS: Today, we take a few minutes to remember what the Fourth of July is about and to remind ourselves how fortunate we are to be Americans.

Before America was a nation, it was a dream — a dream shared by many people, from many nations, over many generations.

It began with the Pilgrims in 1620, who fled Europe so that they could be free to practice their religion. It continued through the 17th century, as more and more people arrived in a place that came to be known as the New World. In this new world, where you were from didn’t matter; what mattered was where you were headed.

As more and more people settled, they started to see themselves as new people — Americans.

They felt blessed: The land was spacious. The opportunities limitless.

By 1776, a century and a half after the first Pilgrims landed, this new liberty-loving people was ready to create a new nation.

And on July 4 of that year, they did just that. They pronounced themselves to be free of the rule of the English king. We know this statement as the Declaration of Independence.

DIRECTION: *Host invites the young people (generally ages 7 and older) present to read and to answer the following:*

YOUNG READERS:

Q: Why do we celebrate the Fourth of July?

A: Because the Fourth of July is the birthday of the American people — the day we chose to become the United States of America, a free nation.

Q: Why was America different from all other countries?

A: Because in 1776, all countries were based on nationality, religion, ethnicity or geography. But America was created on the basis of a set of ideas. This is still true today.

Q: What are those ideas?

A: Three ideas summarize what America is all about. They are engraved on every American coin. They are “Liberty,” “In God We Trust” and “E Pluribus Unum.”

DIRECTION: *Host passes around an American coin and chooses readers from the group to read the following:*

READER No. 1: “*Liberty*” means that we are free to pursue our dreams and to go as far in life as hard work and good luck will take us.

READER No. 2: “*In God We Trust*” means that America was founded on the belief that our rights and liberties have been granted to us by the Creator. Therefore they cannot be taken away by people.

READER No. 3: “*E Pluribus Unum*” is a Latin phrase meaning “From Many, One.” Unlike other countries, America is composed of people of every religious, racial, ethnic, cultural and national origin — and regards every one of them as equally American. Therefore, “out of many (people we become) one” — Americans.

HOST: We have on our table items that symbolize the Declaration of Independence and the Revolutionary War that won our freedom.

DIRECTION: *Host holds up each symbolic item as he explains its symbolic meaning.*

— We drink iced tea to remember the Boston Tea Party. “No taxation without representation” was the patriots’ chant as they dumped British tea into the Boston Harbor.

— We eat a salty pretzel to remember the tears shed by the families who lost loved ones in the struggle for freedom in The Revolutionary War and all the wars of freedom that followed.

— We ring a bell to recall the Liberty Bell, which was rung to announce the surrender of the King's army. On the bell are inscribed these words from the Book of Leviticus: "Proclaim Liberty throughout all the Land unto all the Inhabitants thereof."

— We eat strawberries and blueberries dipped in whipped cream to celebrate the red, white and blue of our flag.

HOST: We celebrate America's greatness without denying its flaws. There are no perfect individuals, so there can certainly be no perfect country. Our national history has its share of shame. The greatest of these is the shame of slavery, which existed at our founding, as it existed throughout the world at that time.

But let it never be forgotten that we fought a terrible civil war in which hundreds of thousands of American died. And the reason for that war was slavery.

Let it also not be forgotten that America has fought in more wars for the freedom of other peoples than any nation in history.

America's history is one that we can be proud of.

DIRECTION: Host holds up a copy of the Declaration of Independence.

We now close with one more ritual. Let each of us sign our names to the Declaration of Independence. While it is a replica of the one our founders signed, the words and sentiments are eternal.

DIRECTION: Everyone present signs their name to the Declaration of Independence. As each one signs, the host hands each person the lyrics to "God Bless America."

HOST: Everyone sing with me.

DIRECTION: Everyone sings (hopefully).

HOST: Happy Birthday, America. Happy Fourth of July. Now let's eat.

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