

# I Pledge Allegiance To No One

*by Stephen DeVoy*

Every morning Elizabeth joined her classmates in reciting the Pledge of Allegiance. She never thought about what it meant, she just followed through with the other students repeating the words which came out like one very long run-on sentence. It was a mechanical exercise.

Today was different. A new girl, Amy, had transferred to her school from a school in another city. When the time came for the Pledge of Allegiance, she remained sitting, drawing on her notebook. No one ever gave much thought to the process before, until that day, but it was as if someone had scraped their fingernails on the chalkboard. Everyone felt very uncomfortable and they knew it was because one student was not reciting the pledge but they did not know why this bothered them.

The students began scanning each other, looking out the corners of their eyes, with an expression of incredulity. Never, in all their years, had they seen someone sit down and draw during the pledge. Amy seemed completely unaware of the tension and happily drew upon her notebook.

As they finished, the teacher looked over towards the class and was shocked to see Amy sitting there, drawing, rather than joining in the ritual.

"Amy!" said the teacher. "Why didn't you stand up with the rest of us and say the pledge?"

Amy's head raised up from the notebook. She looked at the teacher and said, "I don't say the Pledge of Allegiance. I never have and I never will."

"Amy, you are required to say the Pledge of Allegiance in this school," the teacher stressed sternly with an intense glare.

"Actually," said Amy, very calm and content, "this school is within the United States and I am not required to say anything."

Amy had done nothing. It was her doing nothing that was in question. Nevertheless, the teacher became angry and took Amy's true and sincere statement as a challenge to her authority.

"Amy, you will stay after school," she ordered.

This incident made Elizabeth feel very torn. On the one hand, Amy seemed disruptive by not saying the pledge but on the other hand, she had done nothing - literally. How could one be punished for doing nothing?

Elizabeth decided to wait in the playground after school. She wanted to talk with Amy when Amy got out of detention. She sat on a swing and recited the Pledge of Allegiance, only this time she took the time to notice what the words were and what they meant. She found the words strange and it left her with some questions.

At about 3:30, the side door of the school opened and Amy came walking out. She turned towards the road and continued walking, not noticing Elizabeth on the swings. Elizabeth ran to catch up to Amy. A few yards before reaching her, she slowed down and then stopped.

"Hi," she said. "I'm Elizabeth. I'm in your class."

Amy turned and smiled. "Hi, Elizabeth. I'm Amy. Did you wait here for me to come out of detention?"

Elizabeth blushed, "Well, um, yeah, I was, well I was wondering about, you know, the pledge and why you didn't say it."

Amy looked down and then raised her head to Elizabeth and replied, "I'm happy to meet you and everything, but really I don't think it is anyone's business why I choose not to say the Pledge of Allegiance. It's my own business and I don't need to explain it to anyone."

"You don't have to explain it to me," said Elizabeth. "I was just hoping you would because I never met anyone before who wouldn't say it. I don't even really understand the Pledge of Allegiance. I was hoping that talking with you about it would help me learn something."

The two were silent. They began walking down the street. It was fall and the leaves were turning gold and red. A dog started following them from a distance. No one knew who he belonged to, he just showed up now and then and tagged along.

"Elizabeth," said Amy. "Do you know what flags are for?"

"I haven't really thought about it," she answered, "but I was really hoping you'd tell me about the pledge."

"I am telling you about the pledge. The pledge is a pledge to a flag and that's where we should start, with the flag." Amy became animated. She was beginning to enjoy the idea of talking about it. Her reluctance was not caused by shame, it was caused by her belief that she, as an individual, has the right to make her own personal decisions without anyone having the right to demand an explanation. In this case, she saw that it would benefit Elizabeth. Since there was a reason other than a demand for an explanation, she didn't mind sharing her thoughts.

"Flags are about war," she continued. "Flags are about blindly rallying to the call of murder. My father blindly rallied to the call of murder, behind that very flag, and now he's dead. I won't let them program me in to following like a lemming over the cliff."

She was silent for a time.

Elizabeth thought about what Amy had said. She had thought she was pledging allegiance to her country, but now that she thought about the words "I Pledge Allegiance to the Flag," she could see that Amy was right.

"What about 'to the Republic for which It Stands'," asked Elizabeth.

"Whose republic?" replied Amy? Do you vote?

"No, I'm too young, but one day I will," said Elizabeth.

"Let talk about that," Amy said with a heated voice. "First of all, they are forcing you to pledge allegiance to a republic and they don't let you vote. That smacks of slavery. Later you will vote, but for whom will you vote? Two political parties have a lock on the electoral process and both represent the same class - the rich. Are you rich, Elizabeth?"

"Well, now, I'm not rich, but I'm not poor," she replied.

"The difference between you and the rich is much bigger than the difference between you and the poor, Elizabeth. The rich don't have to worry about working. The rich have complete access to the legal system. The rich can get away with things that you cannot get away with. The rich do not go off and die in wars to protect their republic, they send the poor and they send you."

Elizabeth thought about Amy's words. She was right. Her parents were always worried about their jobs. They were stressed. They feared becoming poor but they had no expectation of ever become rich. Amy was onto something.

Amy continued, "Look at the President. Are his daughters fighting in the war? Have you heard of the son or daughter of any wealthy corporate man that has died in the war? Have you seen any soldiers living well and enjoying the things the rich enjoy? You haven't because they are not rich. The republic belongs to the rich and it is paid for with the blood of the poor. It is not your republic and pledging allegiance to it is like a slave pledging allegiance to her master or a rape victim pledging allegiance to her rapist.

"Have you ever wondered why they make you repeat that pledge, every day? When someone takes an oath of office, they do it once. They don't do it every day. Pledges are meant to be taken once. When someone has you recite something, over and over,

every day of your life, they seek to program you. I bet you never thought about the words of the Pledge of Allegiance before, have you?"

"No, I haven't. I say it like it's one long word..."

"Exactly. It is a program, not a pledge. The daily recital of that pledge is indoctrination. The Nazis used indoctrination. The Soviets used indoctrination. Cults use indoctrination. Do you want to be a robot, Elizabeth?"

"No, I don't want to be a robot," she replied.

"Then think about what you let them do to you. When the call to die for the republic of the rich goes out, do you want to march blindly off like a good little robot to die in the rich man's war or do you want to have the spine to stand up and say, 'No Way!'?"

A twig falling from a tree could have broken the silence, but none fell. The two walked in silence for twenty minutes. As they passed an apartment building Amy said, "This is where I get off. I'll see you tomorrow."

Elizabeth continued walking. She reached her housing track and looked at the rows of identical houses. Something had changed within her. She felt a sense of self.

The next day in class all of the children stood up to say the pledge, except for Elizabeth and Amy. The teacher glared at the two and said, "Do we have to go through this again?"

"Yes," Elizabeth replied, "I pledge allegiance to no one."

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