Pat Conroy Reflects on National Service

Description

Pat Conroy, a gifted writer, son of a Marine pilot, anti-Vietnam War protester has come out with a clear eyed letter on his decisions made in his youth, and how he views such actions now.

It takes some serious guts for a man to look back, his understanding of life tempered by years of experience, and grant that he made a bad decision. Most would prefer to ignore such choices to be forgotten, or try to rationalize them away, but Pat steps up tot he plate and admits he wasnâ€™t so wise when he was young, and what that decision means to him today.

I applaud him for his courage to say this in a web based and media forum. Titled harshly by himself, â€œAn Honest Confession by an American Cowardâ€• is worth taking about 5 minutes to read and reflect on his words, and how his college teammate, never questioned his views, yet in telling his story of captivity during the Vietnam War, and as a result of this relationship, cause Pat to look inside himself. Some would see this as the process of â€œiron sharpening iron.â€•

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> When I visited my old teammate Al Krobothâ€™s house in New Jersey, I spent the first hours quizzing him about his memories of games and practices and the screams of coaches that had echoed in field houses more than 30 years before. Al had been a splendid forward-center for the Citadel; at 6 feet 5 inches and carrying 220 pounds, he played with indefatigable energy and enthusiasm. For most of his senior year, he led the nation in field-goal percentage, with UCLA center Lew Alcindor hot on his trail. Al was a battler and a brawler and a scrapper from the day he first stepped in as a Green Weenie as a sophomore to the day he graduated. After we talked basketball, we came to a subject I dreaded to bring up with Al, but which lay between us and would not lie still.
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> â€œAl, you know I was a draft dodger and antiwar demonstrator.â€•
>
> â€œThatâ€™s what I heard, Conroy,â€• Al said. â€œI have nothing against what you did, but I did what I thought was right.â€•
>
> â€œTell me about Vietnam, big Al. Tell me what happened to you,â€• I said.
> [â€¦]
> It was that same long night, after listening to Alâ€™s story, that I began to make judgments about how I had conducted myself during the Vietnam War.
>
> In the darkness of the sleeping Kroboth household, lying in the third-floor guest bedroom, I began to assess my role as a citizen in the â€™60s, when my country called my name and I shot her the bird. Unlike the stupid boys who wrapped themselves in Viet Cong flags and burned the American one, I knew how to demonstrate against the war without flirting with treason or astonishingly bad taste. I had come directly from the warrior culture of this

country and I knew how to act.

But in the 25 years that have passed since South Vietnam fell, I have immersed myself in the study of totalitarianism during the unspeakable century we just left behind. I have questioned survivors of Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen, talked to Italians who told me tales of the Nazi occupation, French partisans who had counted German tanks in the forests of Normandy, and officers who survived the Bataan Death March. I quiz journalists returning from wars in Bosnia, the Sudan, the Congo, Angola, Indonesia, Guatemala, San Salvador, Chile, Northern Ireland, Algeria.

As I lay sleepless, I realized Iâ€™d done all this research to better understand my country. I now revere words like democracy, freedom, the right to vote, and the grandeur of the extraordinary vision of the founding fathers. Do I see Americaâ€™s flaws? Of course. But I now can honor her basic, incorruptible virtues, the ones that let me walk the streets screaming my ass off that my country had no idea what it was doing in South Vietnam. My country let me scream to my heartâ€™s content â€“ the same country that produced both Al Kroboth and me.

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It is in our relationships and getting to know each otherâ€™s life and stories, not in shouting down of one another, that we all grow. Many could take a lesson from the hard won wisdom of Pat Conroy.

H/T: Chapomatic

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