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Level III First Place Winner
Letter to Ralph Waldo Emerson concerning his poem, “A Nation’s Strength”

Dear Ralph Waldo Emerson:

Nearly every year, I inevitably find myself setting in a cold classroom, listening to my history teacher’s familiar lecture. He drones on and on about “taxation without representation” and maybe a few days later he is discussing the strategy of the “Battle of Bunker Hill” or “Saratoga.” He often ends his less than passionate lesson with a statement: “Students, this is why we are proud to be Americans.” We have heard the story of our nation’s independence from the time that we stepped into a classroom. I knew it was a war involving the British and the colonies who decided they wanted to attain independence. The colonies won and they formed the United States of America. My thoughts went no further than this. I may have known the facts, but I never asked myself why it was important to me. I never wondered why my country was great and why I should be proud of it. The Revolutionary War always just seemed like an ancient event in history that didn’t matter in the 21st century. I was much more interested in when the lunch bell was going to ring.

This year I am in U. S. History class and I thought things would follow the usual pattern. I braced myself for another dull unit on the Revolutionary War; another month of doodling on the margins of my notes while I pretended to listen. But it was the complete opposite. Maybe it was just the maturity and eagerness to learn that comes with growing up, but this year I actually began pondering the question, “Why should I be proud to be an American?” That is when I read your poem, “A Nation’s Strength.” It is true that most teenagers do not find answers and inspiration in short, hundred-year-old poems, but yours was so powerful that it didn’t matter what length it was or in what century it was written. This poem of yours did truly help to transfer me from an uninterested student to a proud American.

The first time I read “A Nation’s Strength,” it seemed so simple, but as I read it I could hear the pride and awe in your voice because you knew that your country was like no other, and you knew why. I wanted to discover the same thing that you had found. Even though your poem and my text book were written about the same event, I no longer just saw America’s founding as a dead, irrelevant story. Your poem revealed a fresh new truth to my mind, yet referred to the truth that had been the same throughout all time, every nation. As I read it, so many things I had thought boring and useless in History class flooded back to my mind and began to make sense.

I knew that I didn’t need to look much further than out my own window to see that America is a wealthy country. Could wealth and riches be what makes a country great? But no, you are right. Will it help our nation prosper? You showed me that my nation was not treasured because of its riches. Our country has been penniless, yet it was still treasured.

I recalled hearing of the countless victories of the American military, and seeing the monuments and medals made in their honor. I might think that a country with such a military would be better than any other. But what will become of a wicked country with a fighting sword? You showed me that my country was not strong because of its military. America once only had farmers and young boys for an army, and it was still strong.

I thought of how before every football game and spelling bee Americans place their hands over their hearts and proudly gaze at the flag while our anthem plays. It always seemed to me that a nation that appears to be bursting with pride must have something to be proud of. No,

this cannot be what makes a nation great, your poem proves. You showed me that my country did not always have hope because of its pride. America, too, has made poor decisions, such as our years of the tolerance of slavery, and had suffered much disgrace. Yet, it still has Hope.

“If these three qualities which practically seem to make up a nation are not what makes my nation great, what else is left?” I had to ask myself. The next stanza is where you really hit me with the answer. The quality that my country had that made it stand out from any other nation was a foundation of morality and truth. I was founded by men and women who thought of others and made sacrifices and worked hard for our country. For decades that foundation has not crumbled. I realized that this is why America was able to push through even what seemed like the roughest times.

I wondered, “Why had I never noticed this before?”

I think it is because it is hard to see people making the right choices. They do not boast about it. They do it because it is the right thing. As society has grown more evil, it has become more clear who is standing for truth and who is not drifting away from morality.

You did not mention any specific sacrifice or events in your poem, but you didn't need to. To me, it was so clear. Now when I look at George Washington on the dollar bill, I do not see his features as cold and lifeless. I recognize humanity and kindness on his face. I can hear him pleading with weary soldiers to not give up and reminding them what they are fighting for. George Washington was not great because of his military skills alone: he was great because he inspired soldiers to fight on. He made choices to help his country, not himself. He did not let power corrupt him.

Thank you, Mr. Emerson, for revealing the truth to me. Every time the anthem plays and every time that same lecture comes around again, I will remember your poem and I will be proud. I hope and pray that I will always have a reason to be proud.

Sincerely,

Caroline Clauson