What Does Freedom Mean to You?

Growing up with American ideals of patriotism seemed simple and clear during my childhood. Even during the growing fear induced times following 9/11, the reflection of red white stripes flapped with the stars always overhead. Alas, in these restless days embodying divisions of commoners simplified by their subtle yet noticeable differences, with emotions reaching all-time peaks in all members of society, the question I began to ask myself while attempting to avoid the endless distractions from anti-social media outlets was simply: What does it mean to be an American?  
  
A quick back-story: I was born in Hawaii, moved to California during childhood, and felt a strong sense of alienation throughout each stage of life. Wearing strong emotions on the sleeves for all to see, I found it difficult to immerse with most peers as the norm for most was to be ‘nice’ at all times with strangers, and complain about them if they were out of earshot. Standing at attention, facing the familiar pattern of stars and stripes sewn onto strips of cloth (made in China), and making sure to remove any head coverings traditionally mandated by governmental officials to be followed and implemented by schools and venues throughout the nation of the free.

While incurring a college degree amassing to a 300% higher tuition rate than the most expensive universities in Europe, fortune came my way as a one way trip to Spain to study alongside other exchange-students in a foreign land. What created separation before was now the norm: the allowance to be real and express opinions freely. Yet something new stood out in its place: Popular music and television painted a recognizable facade over extreme prices for health-care and education, institutional racism, and militarized force abroad for corrupt ends.

Following two-years of hitchhiking in Portugal, to the U.K., from Amsterdam to southern France, through 10 countries on the Eastern European Balkan peninsula, down and up the boot of Italy, to finally sitting on a plane over the Pacific Ocean back to the islands in the middle of the big Blue, anticipation included all but the impending cultural shock that would hit home yet again.

To talk with those who are without the life-experience to comprehend can feel like attempting to connect with a brick wall. At least, those were my initial sentiments. I wanted so badly for the ones I cared about dearly to see the world as I’ve seen, through the eyes of others outside of the bubble that is the U.S.A. All I got in return was more of what I was already somewhat used to, alienation. Even after adventures abroad, working and living in others’ homes, sharing ideas and becoming a new version of myself on a day-to-day basis, the comfort of familiarity held on by those who spent their entire lives until that point with perspectives held with an iron grip so tightly that if anyone began to nudge it in a different direction, the internal reaction resulted in defensive mechanisms risen up.