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COMMENTARY

Hanks: Saluting our freedom to celebrate summer

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The Fourth of July is our most patriotic holiday. It's a time of nationwide flag flying, backyard barbecuing and fireworks. June's pallid Flag Day hardly makes a dent in comparison.

On this 230th anniversary of the holiday, you may wonder why we celebrate patriotism on this particular date. While it commemorates the arrival of the Declaration of Independence (1776), plenty of other dates were equally vital in America's birth. We could celebrate Gen. George Washington crossing the Delaware (December 1776), or the signing of The Treaty of Paris, officially ending the Revolutionary War (September 1783).

Yet, I have a strong suspicion that on the Fourth of July we're celebrating the primitive holiday of midsummer, the longest day of the year. We're just a tad tardy.

If the Fourth of July was really about patriotism, wouldn't traditional Independence Day activities be tied to the actual founding of this country? Perhaps passionate re-enactments of British and American battles? Interpretative dances symbolically recreating debates in the Continental Congress? Constitutional trivia games? Founding Father costume contests? Sew-your-own-flag booths?

Yet, this isn't the case. What we celebrate on the Fourth of July is sun and pleasure, and the freedom to celebrate sun and pleasure.

As Americans, it is hard for us to acknowledge our primitive roots. This country was founded by Puritans, and openly celebrating a primitive holiday wouldn't feel right.

In America, the summer equinox (June 21) goes mostly unheeded except for newscasters noting it at the end of broadcasts, often followed by a photomontage of children swimming. Yet, less than two weeks later, we can't stand the repression any longer, and we celebrate the Fourth of July in all its bare-skinned, bathing-suited glory.

One clear link tying the Fourth of July to early midsummer celebrations is the importance of fire on the Fourth. Equinox bonfires were vital in primitive cultures. According to the Internet encyclopedia, the Wikipedia, the Catholic Church recast those traditional midsummer traditions as "The Feast of Saint John the Baptist." Villagers were told to keep their bonfires. The bonfires were now celebrating the birth of Saint John.

The bonfires of midsummer are still important in many cultures. In several northern European lands, St. John's Day — traditionally celebrated on June 24 — is the highlight of the year, possibly even surpassing Christmas in importance, festivity and alcohol consumption. In the small, once-Soviet nation of Estonia, where I briefly lived, St. John's Day is known as Jaanipäev. Cities are eerily deserted while everyone retreats to the country for an all-night party of building a bonfire, then leaping over it for good luck. Perhaps because of my Estonian experience, I see a link that most Americans wouldn't between midsummer and July the Fourth.

In our country, the link is evident in the traditional backyard bonfire, er, barbecue. Isn't it a re-creation of the tribe searing and sucking-down a big beast after a successful hunt?

After the coals burn down, it's time to congregate en masse for fireworks. This is basically a postmodern gathering around the campfire, when we collectively struggle to see shapes and symbols in the scattered embers in the sky.

The importance of fireworks on the Fourth of July underscores the ties between this holiday and traditional midsummer celebrations. Isn't one line in our national anthem about "the rocket's red glare," a flimsy justification for thousands and thousands of dollars of fireworks?

This desire for the loud noises and fire in the sky may also hearken back to the primitive belief that midsummer is associated with fairies and ghosts, (like the fairies in Shakespeare's play "A Midsummer Night's Dream") and the necessity of making noises to frighten them off. This may also explain the now ubiquitous firing of cannons during the 1812 overture. The cannons became commonplace in every hamlet in the country after The Boston Pops began the tradition in 1974. Never mind that Russian composer Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky wrote the overture to commemorate Russia's victory over Napoleon in 1812.

Although this argument that America's Independence Day celebrations are a primitive holiday in disguise might seem farfetched, consider that America is not the only country to dovetail celebrations of midsummer and patriotism. France's patriotic Bastille Day (July 14) falls a scant two weeks after our Independence Day. Canada celebrates Canada Day on July 1.

In the end, none of that really matters. Get outside and enjoy yourself! Just realize that you are participating in a ritual far older than the American Revolution.

But don't forget to save me a spot on the grass at Zilker. I never miss a year.

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