

“Daddy, What’s a Citizen?”

Our family nighttime routine includes watching a show or two together before going to bed. One of the Netflix series we are enjoying is “One Day at a Time”, which showcases a Cuban-American family of 4 (single mother, 2 teenagers, a grandma) and their goofy Canadian landlord.

Last night’s episode touched on the idea of obtaining American citizenship and the “importance” of voting. Typical mainstream thought, but the grandma had always resisted obtaining American citizenship because it meant renouncing her Cuban citizenship, and she’s not yet ready to do that. She still has hope that she’ll be able to return one day to see the country following better political leadership. The irony in the critical implication of Cuban government to an episode dedicated to promoting voting was not lost on me.

As is my children’s wont when encountering ideas they are unfamiliar with, my daughter asked me, “What’s a citizen?”

My wife became (allegedly) an American citizen 9 years ago this month. I became (allegedly) an American citizen the moment I was born, in Salt Lake City.

This question is not as easy to answer for me as it once was. Before understanding the facts about government, I would have answered to the effect of , “A citizen is someone who is a recognized subject of the government.” *almost vomits* (My apologies, but that was very difficult to write.)

Or rather, in a way understandable to an 8-year-old. Today, that’s not the answer that I can honestly give. So at first, I resisted, and made a few jokes. I needed to time to think on it. While we were brushing our teeth, the following ensued:

Me: Rosie, let me help you understand what a citizen is.

Rosie: Okay.

Me: Let’s say that I didn’t like pink hair and I told you that I was making a rule that nobody could dye their hair pink who lived around here, including you. If you did, then I would put you in jail. Would that make me a good guy, or a bad guy?

Rosie: That would make you a bad guy.

Me: That’s right. Because you can dye your hair pink if you want and it’s nobody else’s business.

Rosie: Right.

Me: That's sort of like what being a citizen, or not, means. It means that somebody else's rules interfere with how you want to live your life. And if you don't follow their rules, they will put you in jail.

Rosie: Hmm... okay.

I have no doubt this or related questions will come my way in the future. I want to be very careful not to teach my kids to believe in either lies, myths, or things that are not true. It's not easy. The above is the best way I could think of, using her language, and I'm sure very little of what I conveyed really stuck.

Laws regarding citizenship are like any other laws: arbitrary opinions by busybodies backed up by violence. If these laws don't apply, and there's not a single shred of evidence that they do, then nobody is, factually, a citizen. Some people just think they are, and are willing to use violence in support of their belief.

That's absolutely terrible, in my opinion.