What Does America Mean to You?

I was standing by myself in the back room of a food pantry one morning, peeling the outer leaves off heads of cabbage. Nobody asked me to do it. Nobody was watching. But the leaves were starting to turn brown, and I kept thinking about the family that would bring this cabbage home, who trusted that whoever handled it before them had paid attention. So I paid attention. That's what America means to me, in that room, with nobody watching.

America, to me, feels like a promise we keep. It's the promise that this country belongs to the people who take care of it, and that taking care of it means looking out for the people beside you. The promise lives in small acts of careful attention. It always has. Those who feel its weight keep it alive. That responsibility belongs to all of us.

A food pantry asks a special kind of attention. It's the attention of someone who treats the food on that shelf as if it were going home to their own family. That is when it stops being something you read about and starts being something you have to answer for. I realized that paying attention to small things is how a place stays trustworthy, and that in America even a teenager stocking food shelves is trusted to help carry that responsibility.

Ohio has been part of that promise since the earliest days of America. The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 declared Ohio free soil, meaning people who came here could belong by the work they did. Ohioans have been quietly keeping that promise for years. In places like the Hanby House, ordinary families once hid freedom seekers on their way north. Later, a young Cincinnati lawyer named Salmon Chase understood that the promise was never really about land. It was about people. He stood in Ohio courtrooms defending the freedom of people the law had abandoned. He treated it as something he owed them. He showed up. He paid attention. He kept the promise when the easier choice was silence.

America is 250 years old and the promise is still being kept, imperfectly, but genuinely, by people who feel accountable to it. Every generation decides whether to keep that promise or let it fade. Salmon Chase answered in a Cincinnati courtroom. Ohio families answered it in quiet houses along the Underground Railroad. Now it's my generation's turn to decide what we will do with it.

I went back to that same pantry again and again. The work is still there and nobody is watching. But I know what I'm doing there. Every generation since this country began has faced the same question: What will you do with what you were handed? I keep showing up, paying attention to something small because someone else's day depends on it being done right. That's what America means to me. That promise is still alive because someone is paying attention when nobody is watching.