

Title: Thoughts About America

My papá stood erect, proud, holding his small American flag. He looked somewhat uncomfortable in his borrowed brown suit on this hot summer day. His noticeably scarred hands reflected the hard life of a farmworker - picking cotton in Texas as a bracero, harvesting fruit in California as migrant worker, and now, holding the small plastic flag given to him by the immigration officials. His was now a naturalized U.S. Citizen with a beaming smile!

In my view, it is not only about the outward symbolism associated with being an American such as giant flags on monster trucks or wearing a lapel flag. It is about what it means to be an American. My younger sister and writer Magdalena vividly captured this deeper understanding in her contributions to the book *Of Thee We Sing* profiling the immigrant experiences of the Latino, Chinese, Irish, and Jewish communities.

As a university researcher, author, and now Superintendent, I have traveled extensively - from the dusty back roads of Mississippi to the barrios of Los Angeles and Oakland. My life's work has taken me to the pacific islands of Micronesia for the purpose of immersing myself in the jungles that inflicted so much suffering on our Marines during WWII. I have reflected on the work of Viktor Frankl and his book *Man's Search for Meaning* as he shared the unspeakable horrors of Nazi death camps.

During my interviews for Yuba County Superintendent of Schools, I was asked about why I was interested in the position. I responded that my interest was deeply personal, not simply a career move. I shared that I first arrived in Marysville as a young boy at the local Greyhound bus station with my mother and two sisters from Texas. We were homeless, nearly destitute, and searching for our father. He had come ahead in search of a better life but we had lost contact with him. To this day, the aging cinderblock bus station stands as my own personal Ellis Island.

Truthfully, I wake up every morning with a strong sense of spiritual faith, optimism and gratitude for being a part of this great nation. I cannot accept that we would be so self-centered and self-absorbed in our ideologies to believe that our current challenges are somehow a malignant or dangerous threat to America.

There is an old saying in the Latino culture that states "Only children tell the truth". In these troubling times, I urge all my American brothers and sisters from all linguistic, cultural, and economic backgrounds to look to our children for their wisdom and innocence. Like the Canary in the mineshaft, they will be the first to feel the societal toxicity that many of us have cynically come to expect and accept. In their innocence, they remind us of what is good and possible.

In closing, I am reminded of the true story of a grandfather who was a WWII veteran and avid sports fan. On Saturdays he would sit alone in his living room to watch his favorite baseball team on television. Undetected, his grandson one day observed him suddenly rise from his chair and stand respectfully at attention as the national anthem was being played before the game. Apparently he did this every time before all the televised baseball games whenever the national anthem was played – and all by himself in the living room. Like the grandfather, we too are being called upon during these challenging times to stand up, without all the hoopla, shrill slogans, and extreme partisanship, to model and affirm our respect and love for our great and diverse country.

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