

Guest column: From many places, one strong nation

Luis G. Pedraja

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I remember America not as the place I've come to know or as a nostalgic ideal of past times. I remember America as I imagined it as a child in Cuba. Although a mere 90 miles separated me from its shores, in my childhood it seemed a million miles away — a fantastical land that dared to pierce the vast reaches of space to land on the moon. I remember sitting with my family on our balcony on hot steamy nights listening to the Voice of America broadcasts on our transistor radios. America was a land of freedom, miracles and opportunities that was just beyond our grasp. It was an ideal that we longed to embrace.

Celebrating Independence Day, I could not help remembering my childhood memories of what I imagined America would be. And it begs the question... What is America? Maybe there is no single answer. I would venture to say that there might be numerous conflicting answers to this question, but that it is still an important question for us to consider.

Our country is complex and diverse. It is hard for us to coalesce the ideals upon which this country was founded into a shared narrative, maybe because our stories are as different as our experiences. As most nations do, we face multiple challenges. Are there injustices, inequalities and disparities? Absolutely. But we are also resilient, inventive and daring. We are a land of opportunity, but not always for all. Yet the ideal perseveres at the core of my memories — that we dare to dream, that we strive to be a beacon of hope and freedom and, do I dare to say, to do so despite our imperfections. We are in flux, ever changing as a country, but drawn together by our shared pursuit of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Among the vast narratives that form the history of our country is the story of immigrants. Many of us who call this country home are immigrants. Like my family and me, we came to this country drawn by the ideals for which it stood, for the hope it represented, to seek a better life. As we left the security of our home, we were filled with dreams and trepidation. What would this land bring? Opportunities or misfortune? We left behind our home, produce store, possessions and family as we launched into the unknown.

Like most immigrants, it was not an easy choice. My father's business was confiscated, and he endured months in forced labor camps in the sugar cane fields, crammed into barracks with dirt floors and tin roofs. I left with just a suitcase of clothes and my teddy bear. We struggled for years, endured hardships, lived in poverty, faced language barriers, discrimination and many obstacles along the way. My father and mother worked two jobs in factories and cleaned floors. Like most immigrants, we did not come here to live off the government or take anything away from others. We left our home out of desperation and endured the hardships in the pursuit of liberty and a better life — the ideals upon which this country was founded.

My story is not the exception, it is the story of most immigrants. The immigrants that we see at our borders are fleeing violence, hunger, persecution and death. They come out of desperation drawn by the hope of the ideals upon which this nation was built. It is the same story of the Irish, Italians and others who now call this country home. There are, of course, other stories, but those are not mine to share.

Our differences make us fragile, prone to fractures and division. They pull us in different directions, threatening to tear us apart. But our differences are also our strength when they integrate into a rich tapestry woven together from the best each of us has to offer. The hardships we endure make us stronger, more resilient, creative and astute.

One of the many things that I love about Worcester is that we are a gateway city that has embraced many immigrants throughout its history. It is what makes us thrive, what makes us strong as a city. As we face lower birth rates and population declines in our region, it is our immigrant population that keeps us vibrant and brings new life to our economy, along with new businesses, workers and an entrepreneurial spirit.

As an educator, I know the power of education to transform lives, bringing new opportunities and helping us to write our own story. At QCC, I see the faces of our students, many immigrants themselves, each with their own stories — stories of hardship and hope, but with a common dream of making a better life for themselves and their families. Each in their own way contributing a new chapter to the story of America.

Our narratives shape us and our future, if only we listen to the stories that each of us can share with one another. I remember America, as I imagined it as a child. I also remember America as I have come to know it. But most of all, I long for the America I know it can be.

Luis G. Pedraja is the president of Quinsigamond Community College.