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Being An Immigrant to the United States

by Ana Bagtas

The program "Talk of the Nation" on NPR recently tackled the issue of immigration and the loss of native languages by immigrants assimilating into this country. Vicky Que recalled her own battle with language, having been raised in a dual Hispanic-Chinese home. She reminisced about the Spanish lullabies sung to her by her mother and the Cantonese conversations she had with her father. Upon her entrance into primary school, her parents decided that the only language that would be spoken in their household would be English, so as not to confuse their children. Her parents tried to eradicate the native languages they had used in early childhood to help their children succeed in the outside world. As an adult, Que laughed at her difficulty in announcing the time during her morning on-air programs. She attributes this difficulty to her early lessons from her grandmother telling time in Spanish, claiming that there are certain things she associates exclusively to one culture only. Despite the digital technology that makes time-keeping as easy as reading numbers on a screen, in Que's mind the only way to tell time is the Spanish way. Son las once menos quarto.

Grappling to fit into a culture far different from one's own requires an infantile process that must be re-learned. Menial tasks such as telling time, learning the currency, and riding the bus become substantial challenges. At seven years old, when my family migrated to this country, my brother Noe could not speak a word of English. He had to carry a note tucked away in his shirt pocket which gave detailed instructions to bus drivers about where to drop him off. One day, we realized that he had missed his bus. My poor brother had approached every driver and handed over the note but received no assistance until a parent noticed this frightened boy and finally volunteered to drive him home.

Immigrants to the United States from third world countries may feel like foreign invaders from another planet beamed down to earth. Ironically, we are catalogued as precisely that — Aliens — a label that not only dehumanizes but also isolates us from the rest of society. More offensive is the treatment by people around us because of our perceived difference. Heated debates on affirmative action policies and the approval of Proposition 187 (a law which would ban provision of health and education services to undocumented individuals, including children) by California voters last November signal our lack of acceptance by other Americans and the distrust we experience. Assimilation into American society is probably the most difficult impediment we must face. Minorities like myself continue to struggle to adjust to a new country's values, norms, and prejudices — which may sometimes contradict the world view of our native upbringing.

As an immigrant of ten years, I can attest to the difficulties of being raised in a bipolar culture and to the cognitive dissonance associated with adhering to societal values far different from my early childhood enculturation. There is no panacea for the problems faced in becoming a part of a new society and in learning to feel American. Obtaining American citizenship did not change who I am or my roots. I am an American only in legal terms. My native culture is rooted in my veins and the blood that flows through them. When filling out an employment application, a "Yes" on the question, "Are you an American citizen?" suffices without having to provide further verification.

Gone are the days when my identity was reduced to a set of numbers starting with the letter A — signifying my Alien status with legal permission to inhabit this country. Nevertheless, becoming a citizen is but a mere identification move from the dehumanizing label of an Alien to the more legitimate affiliation of American. Integration into this country still requires a process of gradual evolution. Feeling integrated is not a matter of duration of stay or of obtaining citizenship. It is a matter of success in coping with the changes in one's life. Taking pride in one's heritage by integrating cultural values and emphasizing the importance of family and support systems are powerful tools to ameliorate the challenging issues immigrants must confront.

First of all, immigration does not mean elimination of the native culture and adoption of the new one. Having lived in two or more cultures should be viewed as a virtue rather than a vice. Prior to migrating to the United States at fifteen, I had a clear awareness of the Filipino culture in my family. We address each other in the traditional way. "Nanay," meaning "mother," remains the appellation we give to her. I take pride in the term "Ate" preceding my name, signifying my status as big sister to my siblings. These titles, indigenous to our native tongue, convey the kind of respect bestowed to family members that is uncommon in the English language. My early exposure to Eastern culture has provided me with a better appreciation of my origins — not only in language but also in tradition.

Secondly, fusion of different cultures in the formation of personal values works better than an ethnocentric view of the world. College campuses are one of the many diverse communities where young people can educate themselves about other cultures. Students from all over the world have

so much to share about their cultures. Conversations I've had with foreign students are more stimulating than reading about their way of life in books. My two Malaysian study mates gave me a whole different perspective on Islam which was contrary to the stereotypical notions I had held about their religion. Differences must be viewed neither as inferior nor superior characteristics between groups. Educating individuals about racism is not an issue of teaching tolerance; rather it is a matter of inculcating acceptance. Tolerance means to put up with something; acceptance means embracing it.

Most importantly, keeping the family system together and finding social support groups can provide important outlets for immigrants to cope with the psychological and emotional traumas of immigration. I am fortunate enough to have moved to this country with my immediate family. Immigration has brought our us closer together, at the cost of separating from my huge extended family back in the Philippines. I hope to raise my children in the same enriched environment, surrounded by a large extended family. I cannot imagine how, without my family, I would have survived or endured the emotional pain of being separated from my culture. Migrating to this country alone would have been tremendously devastating. Many immigrants leave their country alone and often without knowing anyone in this unfamiliar land. As resilient social beings, people find ways to cope. People instinctively recognize their own kind, even in a melting pot society like the United States. I met my best friend, another Filipina, when she said to me over the produce section of a grocery store, "It takes one to know one." I know an Asian student who has made numerous friends and joined support groups through E-mail.

Education is probably the most powerful weapon an individual can possess. Immigration must be viewed as a learning process that is both stimulating and enlightening. Newly acquired knowledge can serve to complement one's native cultural knowledge, resulting in a better grasp of the richness of cultural diversity. When I am not learning from others about this country, I take an active part in educating them about my culture. I do not believe in turning my back on my origins in order to adapt to my new surroundings. Individual differences can produce pervasive, systematic societal prejudices in a melting pot society, prejudices that may be diminished by awareness and acceptance of these conditions. Despite the hardships associated with adjusting to a new culture, positive attitudes towards change can make immigration a rewarding experience.

Adapting to a new life is hard, but without risk and change there can be no growth. An eagerness to learn and broaden opportunities may be worth the challenges. The global reality of the next century is that we must all learn to be multicultural, balancing the stability of our ancestral foundations with the adaptability that lets us grow in the midst of change and diversity.

Ana Bagtas is a graduate student in psychology at Dominican College. She serves as a volunteer for Pact, An Adoption Alliance and plans to study abroad this coming year in England.