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The Value of Citizenship

by ***Sig Unander***
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It has often been said that the United States is a country of immigrants. But it is much more. It is a country mostly free of the class barriers and corruption that prevent upward mobility and restrict wealth to a hereditary or political elite in many other countries; a country where any newcomer or native with a dream, a plan and perseverance, can ascend from the bottom to the top of the socioeconomic ladder in less than a generation. Among the things that help make this opportunity possible are the rights and privileges conferred by citizenship.

Citizenship is a time-honored tradition, especially important in a country without an ancient history or culture, comprised of many ethnicities and religious traditions. It is not just a privilege that that most of us have in common; but part of our heritage as Americans – newly-arrived or native-born - that binds us together, defines our nationality and determines our allegiance. It is a guarantor of rights, along with our Constitution and judicial system, that helps to level the playing field. Whether you are a first-generation immigrant from El Salvador or your ancestors arrived on the Mayflower, as citizens you have identical civil rights, privileges and responsibilities.

My great-grandfather came to this country many years ago. Like countless immigrants before and since, he came with little money and big dreams. He worked hard, leaned English, became a successful entrepreneur, made a fortune, sent five children to college, served as a public official and gave most of his wealth back to the community. But one of the things he valued most highly had nothing to do with his achievements or wealth. It was his United States citizenship. He was proud to be an American.

In a era when it is popular to proclaim the individuality and uniqueness of one's ethnicity and national origin, such unabashed pride in one's adopted country seems outmoded, even naive. But in the great tradition of American immigration, the key to the opportunities this new country offered lay in becoming a part of the so-called "melting pot" of cultures and ethnicities, and that meant being an American at heart and accepting the responsibilities of citizenship - voting, serving on a jury, participating in public life, wisely using the benefits and privileges, upholding the law and learning the language. This integration of new residents from all over the world though naturalization and citizenship was an essential part of the process in which our nation of immigrants became a strong and united country.

The integration wasn't always easy.

Three massive waves of immigration, each very different, have broken on the American shoreline over the past two hundred years.

The first wave came in the mid-Nineteenth Century; refugees from the great Irish Famine and immigrants from the Scandinavia, Germany and North-Central Europe. They spread out across the rich farmland and forests of the Midwest and the Great Plains, homesteading and settling the new territories. In the West, Chinese came to work the goldfields and build railroads.

The second wave, mostly Eastern and Southern Europeans – Czechs, Greeks, Italians, Russians and Hungarians – came in the early Twentieth Century to the great industrial cities of the East and Midwest to provide labor for the factories and build highways, bridges, skyscrapers and other infrastructure of the growing nation.

The current wave began in the mid-Twentieth Century with the *bracero* farm labor program in the 1940's and accelerated in the early 1980's, when the collapse of the Mexican banking sector and soaring oil prices ended three decades of economic growth and sent millions of displaced workers to urban areas. Many of these jobless poor then migrated to the United States to labor on farms, construction sites and in factories, restaurants and shops. These Mexicans, joined by other Latin American migrants and refugees, constitute the third great wave of American immigration; one that promises to be the largest and most sustained of all.

At the peak of the last great wave in the early Twentieth Century, one could walk for miles through the tenements of New York or the foreign enclaves of Chicago or Cleveland and hear nothing but Polish, Italian or German spoken, as if one were in the Old World. It probably seemed that these masses of immigrants could never be assimilated, but most eventually found work in the factories, leaned English and became citizens. When the greatest war in history threatened the nation, their children joined the military and defended it.

The same is true today. Stroll though the *barrios* of East Los Angeles or parts of San Antonio and Houston and you can easily imagine that you are in a Latin-American country. Though this wave may be the largest of all, our nation has the capacity to absorb and assimilate these immigrants as it has in the past. However, the high numbers of illegal entrants may make the process more problematic and protracted than it was for previous generations.

Every great influx of immigrants experienced discrimination and nativist anger; Blacks, Irish, Chinese and Latinos in particular, were the ethnicities that bore the worst of the bigotry that is a dark and unfortunate side of the American character. Yet this is not the dominant face of the culture of America, a country that has sheltered more refugees, given more humanitarian aid, offered more hope and provided more opportunities than any other nation. Emilio Estefan, himself an immigrant, said recently, "This country is about dreams." Our history is one of gradual progress toward the full implementation of the dream of inalienable rights codified in the Constitution, toward the equality of every citizen, without discrimination by race, religion or national origin. As long as we continue to honor that document by exercising our privileges and duties as citizens, respecting the right of others and participating actively in civic affairs, there is every reason to believe that this progress will continue.

We should also encourage those who are not yet citizens to become so. A large number of legal permanent residents in the United States qualify for citizenship but for a variety of reasons have not pursued it. They constitute a great disenfranchised minority, paying taxes but unable to participate fully in politics and society, a situation that is hardly democratic. Latinos, though they are now the largest ethnic minority, have the lowest percentage of voter registration and voting participation of any major population group and they have a smaller percentage of elected officials than other ethnicities. For these and other reasons, Latinos lack a voice in local, state and federal government proportionate to their numbers.

In Oregon, there are presently about 90,000 permanent residents and visa holders – many of them Latino - who could qualify for citizenship, yet only a small fraction, about 4,000, have applied for naturalization. Why? The answer is complex, involving many factors: lack of information, fear of the federal bureaucracy, the cost and perceived difficulty of the application and testing process, an unwillingness to give up foreign citizenship and weak English skills. Yet these are not insurmountable barriers. There are a number of nonprofit service agencies, educational institutions and civic groups that provide citizenship classes or information and English instruction at a reasonable cost.

Every year hundreds of thousands of immigrants from every part of the world meet to take the Oath of Allegiance and are sworn in as citizens at public naturalization ceremonies held in cities across the country. Many people bring their families and celebrate after the ceremony. Perhaps one day you, or someone you know, will become one of these proud new Americans.

The general requirements for naturalization are:

1. Live in the U.S. as a permanent resident.
2. Be present in the U.S. for specific time periods
3. Spend specific amounts of time in your state or district
4. Behave in a legal and acceptable manner (good moral character)
5. Know English and information about U.S. history and government.
6. Understand and accept the principles of the U.S. Constitution.

What are some of the specific rights, benefits and privileges of citizenship?

- Becoming a citizen is a way to demonstrate your commitment to your new country.
- Only citizens can vote in Federal and in State elections in Oregon.
- Only U.S. Citizens can serve on a jury, an important responsibility of citizenship.
- A U.S. passport enables you to get assistance from the U.S. government overseas, if necessary.
- U.S. citizens generally get priority when petitioning to bring family members to this country.
- In most cases, a child born abroad to a U.S. citizen is automatically a U.S. citizen.
- Certain jobs with government agencies require U.S. citizenship.
- Many elected offices in this country require U.S. citizenship.
- Tax requirements may be different for U.S. citizens and permanent residents.
- A U.S. citizen's right to remain in the United States cannot be taken away.
- Many financial aid grants, including college scholarships and funds given by the government for specific purposes are available only to U.S. citizens.
- Some government benefits are available only to U.S. citizens.