Why the World Comes Here

By Peggy Noonan

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AMERICA IS EXPERIENCING the biggest influx of immigrants since the great wave that ended in the 1920s, the one that brought the grandparents and great-grandparents of the baby boomers who are now, demographically, America. Here in New York these new immigrants, many of them shopkeepers, run a whole level of the economy. It is the level that works. It is the level that drives the economy. It is the level that moves the country, and leaves the land of their birth to come and spend their lives with us. The kids of the grandchildren of the old New Zealander I know.

We need to replace the melting pot. People don't know what it means anymore — it's poetry from another age, technology has passed it by — and anyway, it no longer applies. To the extent we ever really melted together, we do so less now.

Allow me to offer a new metaphor from an old family custom. Let's call it "the Sunday stew" — rich, various, and roiling, and all of it held together by a good strong broth. The broth, I say, is what we used to call Americanism — a word I haven't thought of in so long it almost stops me cold. It stops my friend, too: we're surprised to arrive at such an old idea.

This conversation reflects, I think, the growing interest America's long-time in America's newcomers. Most of us see their coming as good news — immigration is affirmation, proof that we are still what we used to be, a haven for the bold and striving dispossessed. But we're concerned, too, about whether we are absorbing them into the country as successfully as we've done in the past. Which brings us to the old-fashioned idea of Americanism, and how to communicate it.

In many ways, immigrants know what Americanism is better than we do. They've paid us the profoundest compliment by leaving the land of their birth to come and spend their lives with us. And they didn't come here to join nothing, they came to join something — us at our best, us as they imagined us after a million movies and books and reports from relatives. They wanted to be part of our raucous drama, and they wanted the three m's — money, mobility, meritorcity.

Take John Lam, who left Hong Kong when he was seventeen, to come to this city. Morning by morning he attended high school, afternoons he worked in a factory, and at night he waited tables to help support his parents, brother, and five sisters. The bet paid off. Now Lam, thirty-nine, is one of New York's leading silk importers. He owns factories, warehouses, and restaurants, but his garment businesses alone are worth some $80 million.

Nicholas Barsan grew up in Brasov, Romania, where land ownership was illegal. But in America he made property his trade. In 1986 he earned $1.1 million by closing nearly ninety deals worth $27 million. Roberto Arguello fled Nicaragua in 1979 when Marxist revolutionaries overthrew the government and shut down his newspaper. Where could he go? He came to America, found a partner, brought a supermarket in the Bronx and then a grocery store in Brooklyn. Today, the two stores gross $22 million a year.

Nationalize, the small shops the immigrants run create thousands of jobs and contribute billions to the economy. In return, the newcomers get the possibility of dreams. But these dreams aren't free. There is a price to pay: once you're here, you have to become Americanized.

We need to communicate to these newcomers the moral and philosophical underpinnings of what they've joined, the things that hold us together. These include the reasons we fought the Revolutionary War and the Civil War, the meaning of the civil rights movement, and the reasons we have sent armies across oceans to liberate other nations. To know what we were is to know who we are.

This is why we must not permit school texts to imply, as some do, that "America was founded by white male Euros who broke from Britain over taxes but retained slaves, and two centuries later the liberation is not complete because racism is still rampant." Such sour revisionism is not helpful. And it omits a salient truth: those seeking justice over the years were lucky enough to be operating in a country that had not only a Constitution, but a conscience, to which an appeal could be made. This is a triumph of idealism that is forever a tribute to the human spirit.

Our laudable eagerness to show openness to other cultures should not become a reason to reject our own culture. Recent immigrants themselves worry about this. An Englishman who has been in America for ten years now summed it up: "It's good to be open, but you don't want diversity to become destruction."

Earlier immigrants arrived in an America that was sure of itself and proud of its great achievements. It spoke one language. The immigrants who came at the turn of the century knew that to join the club, they had to learn the language.

Today's immigrants have joined a country that is less sure of its right to impose its language. The result will likely prove not to be ethnic liberation but ethnic segregation. The fact is, America is an English-speaking country, and it won't help us to communicate with one another if, in the twenty-first century, we became a Tower of Babel.

Immigrants can longtimers alike must realize that America is a special place, something new in history. Margaret Thatcher referred to this in her first major speech after leaving Downing Street. "Americans and Europeans sometimes forget how unique the United States is," said Mrs. Thatcher. "It is built upon one idea — the idea of liberty. Whether in flight from persecution or poverty, [immigrants] have welcomed American values and opportunities. And America herself has bound them to her with powerful bonds of patriotism and pride."

We are in profound economic transition, from a nation of car makers and steelworkers to a nation of communications and service workers. We are trying to make a transition from being a great nation to being a different kind of great nation. No other country has asked itself to do that. To succeed, we must draw from our newcomers the toughness and resilience of spirit that have nurtured our America since its birth.

Immigrants have always paid us such a compliment by throwing their lot with us. It might be nice, and a surprise, if now and then longtimers took a moment to say what we ought to say after being complimented: thank you. We might even say, Pull up a seat, you're welcome at the table, there's room and abundance for all.