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What Am I?

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“What are you?” is a question I am often asked. I have also been asked many similar questions: “What country are you from?” “Are you part black?” and “Are you part Egyptian?” People have started speaking Spanish to me, assuming that I am Hispanic, and therefore speak Spanish. I do not take offense at any of these questions; but rather, I find it amusing to listen to people’s guesses. I am not from any particular country other than the United States, and I am neither black nor Egyptian. I am part Hispanic and do speak some Spanish, but only because I learned it in school, not because I am a native speaker. So what am I really? Sometimes, I like to think that I am the essence of America’s “melting pot.” I am one-fourth Irish, one-fourth Italian, one-eighth German, one-eighth Spanish/Mexican/French, one-eighth Filipino, and one-eighth Yaqui Native American. Many people are surprised when I tell them that I am a combination of all of the above, which I find funny because it always seemed pretty normal to me. But although I like to think that I am the epitome of the American melting pot, I cannot identify with any one race in particular, as many other people can. I have felt a little out of place going to multicultural clubs, and judged when trying to hold a conversation with native Spanish speakers. The only nationality I have always been able to identify with is American. In this essay, I have decided to dive deeper into my many family ancestries to define what makes up my American identity, and I have found certain resonant and distinctly American themes that have had an impact upon my family’s life, and in turn, my own life.

To start, I will take a look at my father’s side of the family. My grandfather is full Irish, and moved to California from Buffalo, New York, when he was five years old. I have heard many stories about his life, but our easily accessible knowledge about our ancestors is very limited. What I have gathered is that his grandparents emigrated from Ireland in the early 1900’s, most likely in the search of that American dream in the “land of opportunity.” They went through Ellis Island and settled in Buffalo, where his parents met and got married. This is a representation of the American dream in my family, and how it called to my ancestors to start a “new life” here in hopes of better opportunities. My grandfather does not have many memories of New York as he was very young, but there was one that stuck out to him: When his older brother, James, was about five years old, he went to a birthday party across the street and got into a fight with another little boy. When running back home, he turned around and yelled, “You German spies!” at his “opponents.” Even though they lived on an all Irish block, people were paranoid because of the war, and soon, the FBI came to investigate the situation. It was luckily only a day-long ordeal, but I thought it was interesting to see one way in which WWII had impacted my family. Little did he know, my grandfather would end up marrying a woman who was half German. Due to their decision to marry, my family is an example of the racial pluralism aspect of the American identity. Going back to his childhood, I have learned that

when my grandfather was five, he and his father moved to California on a WWII troop train, and his mother and five siblings followed later on a Greyhound bus. They moved to California because the Buffalo winters were too cold, and California seemed like a promising place. Over the years, my great-grandfather worked many different jobs at a variety of institutions, including BelAir, Southern Pacific Railroad, different chemistry plants, and C&H sugar refinery; his last job was as a plumber. He worked hard at a variety of jobs to do his best to support his large family of eight. This family is yet another example of hard working people doing whatever they can for their family. My grandfather and father later followed his footsteps and have worked for the same union.

My paternal grandmother is half Filipino and half German. Her father, Apolonio “Tony” Marzo, emigrated from the Philippines when he was seventeen years old in 1926, because a man had promised to send him to school. When he got to America, however, he was met by “another” man at the Port of Stockton who said that he could not send him to school, but could put him to work. This was his first and unfortunate introduction to American capitalism. Although he was an immigrant hoping to achieve an education to help him gain an advantage in the meritocracy, he found out the hard way that perhaps, America did not always provide the opportunities people expected it to provide them. Although he did not get what he desired, he ultimately was able to find work and eventually marry a Canadian German, my great-grandmother Wilhelmina or “Willie” for short. Willie’s grandparents emigrated from Germany to Canada in the late 1800’s, and she was born in Saskatchewan, Canada, in 1921. She moved to the U.S. when she was about a year old, and her mother unfortunately passed away around that time. Willie went to Catholic school for most of her childhood, but when she was around sixteen years old, her father was diagnosed with tuberculosis, and she and her sisters were separated. To support herself, she went to work as a nanny and housekeeper in Chicago. While working, she tried to improve herself by studying the dictionary whenever she could. Later in her life, she met Tony, my grandfather. And because interracial marriages were prohibited in California, they had to get married in Washington state. Tony’s work included a job at a shipyard for WWII and the head steward at The Women’s Athletic Club. Willie was a housewife, and according to my great-aunt Marion, “Grandma Willie was a very independent minded woman who believed that people should do “what’s right.” She had a difficult childhood, so that facet of her personality probably stems from her childhood. My great-grandparents were a perfect example of the American meritocracy at play, as through their hard work, they raised three children and did what they could to get them a good education, music lessons, summer camp, and scout troop membership, even though they themselves had not had those opportunities available to them as children. It amazes me how my great-grandparents put in such tremendous efforts to allow their children to

gain more opportunities. My grandmother was able to achieve an esteemed career in our local credit union along with my great-aunt. Following the examples of their parents, my grandparents worked hard for their children, and I admire my father as he follows my grandfather's and great-grandfather's footsteps, continuing to work hard in hopes of achieving a better life for his children.

My mother's side of the family has a much different story, but there are still similarities in regards to the development of our American identity. For example, her father's grandparents also immigrated to New York through Ellis Island, but came from Italy and settled in New Jersey. My great-grandfather Albino was from Molinella, Italy, and was released by the king to immigrate in August 1913. My great-grandmother, Mary Canzari, came to America at eighteen, after her mother and sister had already been here for a few years. They were from Giulianova, but Mary was placed in a convent until her family had the money to bring her to America. Like most of my other ancestors, Italians came to America because they wanted to live in a free country and have a better life. My grandfather moved to California when he was eleven or twelve years old, and met my grandmother a while later.

My mother's maternal side, on the other hand, is native to North America. My grandmother Rita's father was born in Arizona into the Yaqui tribe, which belongs to the Ubo-Aztec family. It is traditionally native to the Sonoran Desert of Mexico. More recently, many moved to an area near modern-day Tucson, Arizona, but there are still many who reside in Mexico. Anyhow, my great-grandfather moved to California for unknown reasons and settled in San Gabriel. Rita's maternal grandfather of Spanish, French, and Mexican descent was born into the wealthy class in Aguas Calientes, Mexico. During the Mexican Revolution of 1910-1920, he fled with his wife, two children, and brother to the United States around 1919, as the lower classes were threatening to kill the rich and take their land. My great-grandmother was supposedly born in Mexicali, and lived in California for the rest of her life. She and my Yaqui great-grandfather got married and had eight children, the oldest of whom is my grandmother. They were migrant workers, living in San Gabriel for part of the year, and Kingsburg during the harvesting seasons. Around 1950, my grandmother's family settled more permanently in Kingsburg. She was able to attend school only until her sophomore year of high school. After that, she had to stay home and help her family until she found a husband. She married my Italian grandfather at a young age. This was yet another interracial marriage in my family, one that created more diversity. Although it was legal at the time, it was still frowned upon by some. For example, my grandmother's mother-in-law disapproved of her son marrying a Mexican woman, and thought he should have married another Italian. This demonstrates how along with the diversity often came difficulty, as many still did not accept interracial marriages. Despite this problem, my grandparents had five

children, the youngest of whom is my mother. My mother grew up moving around often, living in Los Angeles, Oregon, and San Jose throughout her childhood. After she graduated from high school, her parents got divorced, leaving the mother and children with nothing. At the time, my mom was only a few months from turning eighteen. Despite their circumstances, all of the children were fortunate to find jobs, and find their way from there. My mother, in turn, was able to become a strong individual capable of supporting herself and help her family as well. I am very fortunate in that she is such a diligent and responsible woman who managed to overcome a difficult situation.

My mother and father met in San Jose, California, and married in 1995. I was born a year later, and my brothers were born in 1999 and 2006. My parents and I believe that our family is a beneficiary of the American dream and the American meritocracy, and we are very grateful for this. When I asked my father about his experience with the American dream and American meritocracy, he had a positive response:

America provided me with the freedom to choose. I made my choices right or wrong and was able to seek out a living and have a wonderful family in a fairly comfortable environment . . . Through much hard work we have been able to have a good, comfortable life considering my job. I even have a terrific daughter attending University!

My mother's response to the question, however, is a bit different:

I am just here. . . Living life and taking care of my family, and trying to piece things together, still to this day. My parents never, ever gave us family history. All I know is what little information I have gathered as an adult and by trying to piece things together. It's sad, but true. My parents taught us to work hard for what we have because no one is going to give us anything. My father always told me to defend myself and to be strong willed, I don't know that I am but I try. My mother taught me how to be a good wife/mother, only by example. My parents never encouraged us to go to college. It was assumed that the boys would go to work or join the military and the girls would be housewives. I want my children to be well educated so they have more opportunities.

My mother has always done the best she can to move along in life and help her family, and although her story is much different and perhaps a bit less positive from that of my father, they had and still have many similarities. My parents, in the end, were in the same boat, trying to make the right decisions in order to improve their lives.

Thinking about all of my parents' hard work, I believe that they have been very successful in their endeavors, and have not only made the right decisions in their lives, but also do a great job guiding us in making our decisions. It is fascinating to me how my parents have never seemed hyper aware and have not

seemed to extensively theorize about the American dream or meritocracy, and yet they have, in some ways, conquered both. I also believe that my brothers and I continue to be beneficiaries of the American dream at work, as my parents have worked hard to be able to live in a nice area within the greater fortunate Bay Area where my brothers and I can get a good education and live safely. In a time when many people question the viability of the American dream, I see that my family is quietly achieving it.

Looking at my family's heritage, I can see that my brothers and I are, within ourselves, prime examples of the diverse ethnicities America is so famous for. It seems that in my family, ethnic boundaries have been erased, as my family is so diverse and loving at the same time. However, because my brothers and I are such a great mix, it is difficult for us to use race as a big part of our identity. For many people, race is the essence of their identity, but I do not exactly feel that it is mine. What am I supposed to check off when a survey or form asks what race I am? I hate when I can check only one box, because that does not do any of my ethnicities justice. I sometimes feel like I have too many races to identify with, so I simply must identify as American. Thinking to the future, I would presume that our children will be even more multi-ethnic, and will have an even more complex understanding of their ancestors' heritage, and the way America has shaped their identities. America and my family have shaped me personally in a number of ways. I was always raised to be a strong individual and to reach for the stars, taught these ideals by both my family and my community and schooling. I have always been encouraged to do my best and fully commit to whatever I pursue, whether in school or extracurricular activities. Throughout my entire education, I have always worked hard to achieve good grades and learn as much as I can. I was also dedicated to dance and pursuing more artistic and athletic endeavors. However, school and dance were not always smooth sailing. If I ever had any issues, such as not doing well on a test or not getting the role I desired, my family always encouraged me to try again and learn from my mistakes. They have helped me learn to deal with failure and know that you can always hope for a brighter future. My family's values have also been affected by our religion, Catholicism, which has taught me to always be kind and to others and sensitive to their needs, as you do not know what problems they have, and you try to help everyone you meet in their journey of life. I have found that by actively listening with compassion to other people, you can learn a lot about them so that you can assist them in any way possible. Overall, my family has allowed me to pursue the American dream even further, by granting me the privilege to further my education and open up more future opportunities.