

Preparation for Immigration

Comfort food. Dishes whose flavor and aroma take us back to home. For some of us, comfort food is tacos, sushi, or curry, or perhaps quintessentially American foods: apple pie, hot dogs, pizza, and hamburgers. All those “American” foods, however, were brought by immigrants. America’s diversity of food opens us up to thinking about the cultural richness that immigration creates.

Immigration is how we became a nation. The history of immigration is a history of the forces that caused us to leave our homes – poverty, slavery or servitude, natural disasters, war, violence, and oppression. Immigration first separates families and then rejoins them, as more generations arrive. Most of us have a history of immigration to the US, often within the last three generations.

US immigration is a history of economic forces as well. Early colonists sought economic opportunity, and slaves were forcibly brought for the plantations. Later, immigrants came to work on the railroads during westward expansion, or in factories during the rise of industrialism. In the 20th and 21st centuries, immigrants have come as farm and food processing workers, as employees in the restaurant and hospitality industries, and most recently in the technology sector. Immigration has provided the impetus for economic growth and the development of new economic sectors.

Even though there is strong evidence that our nation relies on immigration for our prosperity, it remains a controversial topic for many. The question is how many immigrants, and which ones, are allowed in. Historically, anti-immigrant sentiment has increased in the US during economic downturns or when people feel that the foreign-born population is increasing. Germans were the target of Ben Franklin’s ire. Irish and Italian immigrants followed, and Asians saw increasing resentment until their immigration was almost eliminated by the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In the later 20th and early 21st centuries, Vietnamese, Cuban, Hmong, Mexican, African, Caribbean and Central American migrants have been both the beneficiaries of increased immigration programs and also the targets of increased anti-immigrant sentiment and policies.

Immigration controversy has increased in our current political climate. Over the last two years we have seen disturbing images: families separated at our borders, unlawful actions by ICE (Immigrations and Customs Enforcement), and a rise in violence toward immigrant communities. At the same time, we have also seen a rise in community support, including sanctuary for immigrants facing deportation and an increased sense of pride in our immigrant roots.

Humans tend to group together by finding commonality. Many countries value common cultural traditions so much that they establish strict conditions for immigration: Israel and Hungary are examples. Yet the forces that drive migration are as old as humankind itself, as shown in our spiritual traditions that speak of both hospitality to strangers and the pain of leaving home – think of the Seder and the memories exemplified in each food. Immigration is universal.

The US has often described itself as a “melting pot.” The term, which originated in metallurgy, has come to take on a culinary sense, a sort of gumbo where we blend together. The analogy may no longer apply as immigration nudges us to build instead upon diversity. Foods are memories of home, but they can also remind us to welcome others and build a society with new commonalities.

I spent days and nights in the stomach of the truck; I did not come out the same. Sometimes it feels like someone else is wearing my body. *Warsan Shire, Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth*

Here's to the security guards who maybe had a degree in another land. Here's to the manicurist who had to leave her family to come here, painting the nails, scrubbing the feet of strangers. . . . Here's to the fast food workers who work hard to see their family smile. Here's to the laundry man at the Marriott who told me with the sparkle in his eyes how he was an engineer in Peru.

Ijeoma Umebinyu

Thirty-two percent of Americans believe legal immigration into the United States should increase, compared to twenty-four percent who believe it should decrease. *Pew Research, 2018*

He who forsakes his home in the cause of Allah, finds in the earth many a refuge, wide and spacious: Should he die as a refugee from home for Allah and His Messenger, His reward becomes due and sure with Allah. And Allah is Oft-forgiving, Most Merciful. *Surah An-Nisa', 100*

What's new is that we're deporting people who have been here for a long period of time. When they cross back to the north, they're coming home. They're coming to where their family is.

Kat Rodriguez, immigrant advocate

Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door! *Emma Lazarus, The Colossus*

Questions to Ponder

1. Consider what would make you leave your home.
2. Does your family have any traditional foods from past generations? What are some foods from other cultures that you enjoy here in the U.S.?
3. Many of us have an idea about our ancestors, whether from DNA testing, our appearance, genealogy, or family names. If you do have an idea about some ancestors, how did they probably start out in the American economy – farming, shopkeeping, a factory job, a profession?
4. If you have ever worked or lived closely with immigrants, how did your life differ from their lives?
5. If you were to become an immigrant to another country, what aspects of “American culture” would you hold dear, and what would you be willing to let go of to be accepted into that society?
6. Watch the video POV Behind the Lens Well-Founded Fear. Consider both sides shown. Would you be able to do the job of the INS agent? *To find the video on the internet, do this search: “YouTube POV Behind the Lens Well-Founded Fear” and select the 4-minute video.*

Words of the Day

Think of a few words, phrases, or metaphors about how immigration has affected your life. For the Gathering, bring a word or phrase to complete this sentence:

“Immigration has affected my life in”