Closing Remarks

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I would like to talk a little bit about the vocabulary of immigration. Not too long ago, I read that the most common name given to newborn boys in Los Angeles county was José. Given what we all know about the demographics of California in particular, that fact should come as no surprise. However, my reaction to that news may have been different from that of the so-called mainstream of society. I was quite happy that the parents of all the new José's born in Los Angeles county sought to record the name as José rather than as Joseph or Joe.

When I was born in a small, predominantly Mexican-American town in Arizona in 1949, my immigrant parents named me Billy — not William, or even Bill, but Billy. They chose this name because they had been told by doctors and others in the community that since they were in America they had to give their children American names and record our births with such names. They chose “Billy” for me because they had heard of other boys named Billy. They did not know that most Billys had birth certificates under the name of William. Growing up, I had Mexican-American friends whom I called Pancho, Pedro, Leonardo, María, and Reynaldo, whose birth certificates bore the names of Frank, Peter, Leonard, Mary and Ray.

We have come some distance, I think, in the fact that birth names of children in the United States might now more commonly be recorded as José or Tseming or Kwame. Yet unfortunately, as we have learned today, that distance traveled may have been in a circle in terms of the enforcement of immigration policy, particularly as it is directed at Latino communities. Compared to the practices of the past, today’s enforcement policies and priorities could be dubbed, “same play, different title.” It is the same wolf in sheep’s clothing. In the 1950’s hundreds of thousands of Braceros were rounded up by La Migra in what was called “Operation Wetback.” In the last decade, the INS spiffed up its image, still rounding up predominantly Latino families and workers in what they then called “Operation Jobs,” and “Operation Cooperation.”

In the past, the buzz words for immigration included the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Braceros, United Fruit, La Migra. Today, it is the Sandinistas, campesinos, the oligarchy and land reform, the interior and
roving border patrols, guest workers, employer sanctions, NAFTA, Zoe Baird and Kimba Wood. I actually find it quite ironic that the immigration service deports Latinos in California from places named Modesto, Salinas, San Francisco, San José, Los Angeles, and San Diego. When neo-nativists think of refugees and immigrants the words that come to their minds are economic drain, welfare recipients, public school displacement, non-English speakers, crime, separatism, conflict, and non-assimilation. But to those of us who know and work with, or who are ourselves immigrants and refugees, those of us who judge others by their character, rather than their skin color, refugees and immigrants mean to us family, hard work, pioneers, cultural enrichment, and innovation.

When I first started working in immigration as a legal services immigration attorney in 1974, most of my clients were either Mexican or Chinese. Their names were Cabral, Ayalde, Lau, Chan and occasionally an odd-ball like my Cuban-Chinese client, Jacinto Quan. But by the end of the 1970's and into the 1980's, the client list included Salvadorans, Guatemalans, Nigerians, Liberians, Iranians, Egyptians, Koreans, Vietnamese, Haitians and South Africans. The names were different. Pineda, Mattoto, Ibrahim, Patel, Balian. Keep in mind, however, that throughout all of this, in addition to the Cardoza-Fonsecas and the Wongs that I represented, I also represented the Walls and the McMullens and others from Europe including teenagers and young adults from places like Great Britain, France, Ireland and Scandinavian countries looking for a free deportation ticket back home after their money had run out here.

It is clear that throughout all of this the new arrivals have the same dream as those who arrived generations ago. They have the same goals, the same ambitions. Their goals are not to enter, sit on their hands and collect welfare. As always, they seek a better life, especially for their children — sacrificing, working hard, contributing, in short, being good citizens. Although my birth certificate reads “Billy,” my parents, like all Chinese immigrants, gave me a Chinese name. Sun Yuen. Chinese names, like Native American names, have a meaning. Stupidly, on my part, I never bothered learning the meaning of my Chinese name until I was in high school. I found out that it means “new source.” As corny or romantic as it may sound, this has deeply affected the way I look at things, and continue to look at things — in general, to be open-minded about change and difference and to consistently look at new ways and with new sources for looking at things. This had much to do with my own identity, much the same as my Chicano friends realized at about the same time in their lives, that rules against speaking Spanish in school, that a curriculum of United States history from a Eurocentric perspective, for example, were attacks on their Latino identities that they had to resist.
The trait that I share with those with whom I grew up is an openness to a new type of pluralism, one that acknowledges the following: Necesitamos reconocer que todos tenemos valor. It is time that we recognize that everyone has value. Es tiempo de hablar con palabras de unidad y no de división. It is time that we speak in terms of unity rather than divisiveness. Es tiempo que entiendamos que somos un país de muchas culturas y recordemos otra vez que somos una tierra de inmigrantes y refugiados. It is time that we realize that we are a nation of many cultures and remind ourselves, once again, that we are a land of immigrants and refugees.