

April 8, 1984

This morning, as the D train on which I was traveling to Meeting lumbered out of its tunnel and crossed the Manhattan Bridge, some people in the car began speaking excitedly in a foreign language, gesticulating out the window on the left side of the train. This caught the attention of other passengers, some of whom got up to look. What we saw was simply the noble span of next-door bridge, the Brooklyn Bridge. Underneath it was nestled the great-masted ships of the South Street Seaport, dwarfed by the Bridge itself, and behind all this, standing mute in the clear morning sunlight, were the majestic towers of lower Manhattan.

My fellow passengers, who had probably expected that the excitement was about a shipwreck or fire, quickly turned away from this scene and returned to their tabloids and snoozes, leaving the excited foreigners alone in their wonder.

I had been experiencing a reaction somewhat akin to the indifference of my fellow passengers on a somewhat deeper level during the week. My friend Manny Bulaclac from the Philippines, having spent five years as a resident alien, is now preparing to be accepted into citizenship of the United States of America. This involves filling out forms, waiting on lines, and various other bureaucratic procedures of the sort that I am inclined to dismiss with an impatient shrug of annoyance. Yet I was aware that it was necessary to let this attitude of mine fall away without expression, lest it sour what was for Manny the climax of a great ambition and a long wait. To him these procedures, forms and queues were not something to be resented, but were somewhat akin to the line upon which one might wait to meet the Pope, the Queen of England or the Dalai Lama, something which was necessarily and inevitably a part of any occasion of great moment; something which lent excitement and significance to a special event.

This entire disparity of attitude between us became most pointed when Manny asked me if I would please play the piano to accompany him in the learning of the Star Spangled Banner. He claimed that he might have to sing it at his screening interview with an official of the Bureau of Naturalization, that a friend of his who had been naturalized recently had had to sing it in such an interview.

This whole idea produced great agitation within me. I could scarcely believe that some bureaucrat at the Department of Immigration would require a poor Filipino to sing that most unsingable of anthems at him across a desk as a prerequisite for admission into American citizenship! I did not know whether to dismiss the whole idea as a mistaken rumor, or to launch a crusade of severe reprimand against the Department for adopting such a procedure.

But again I sensed the need to let my indignation fall away unvoiced, for I realized that Manny really wanted to learn the Star Spangled Banner, that for him knowing how to sing the Star Spangled Banner was part of the great adventure of being an American, practice for which is no more to be resented than is rehearsing for a wedding. And so I put away my pious outrage, searched through my music, found an arrangement of the Star Spangled Banner with a wonderful bass tremolo undergirding the "bombs bursting in air," and we spent half a morning rehearsing the National Anthem. And while we were doing that, I thought of the millions upon millions of people who might aspire to that condition of citi-

zanship in the United States of America which I take so much for granted because it has been given to me as a free gift.

What if we could experience each moment of life afresh, seeing everything as if for the first time—not only the bridges and buildings, but also the people—our friends, co-workers, and spouses—and also the underlying conditions of our existence, like citizenship, often invisible to the eye, but nevertheless a fundamental aspect of our situation?

And suppose we could see all this with the whole Creation in view as a backdrop, and with a mindfulness of the long march of time and of history which has brought us to where we are. Surely the justifiable awe and gratitude this panorama would inspire would not induce in us a complacency, an inclination to abandon our vocation as social change activists seeking to improve the lot of human-kind and the institutions of our own society. We would understand the paradox that we live in what are the worst of times as well as the best of times. But we would also have a keen awareness of how much we owe to everyone and to everything, and we would accept our vocations in time and in history with a different attitude, an attitude of joy, not the joy of escapism, but that particular variety of joy which is a function of attention and an aspect of knowledge.

Is it not possible that with such a perspective in place we could emerge from a dark tunnel into a world where we were constantly surprised and renewed by joy?