

A Rebirth of Interest in Heritage Identity

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NEVER before have such great numbers of Mexican Americans flocked to the golf courses of the United States. What is the cause of this phenomenon? Likewise, their television sets are flicking on every Saturday and Sunday to watch the heroics of their college and professional football heroes.

Yes, Lee Trevino, Homero Blancas, and Chi Chi Rodriguez have certainly made an impact on the golfing world, as have the two great Chicano quarterbacks, Jim Plunkett and Joe Kapp. The last two individuals mentioned picked up German last names somewhere along the line (probably grandfathers), but there is no question in their minds or in the hearts of their admirers that they are Chicanos, through and through.

We admire the unselfish decision of quarterback Jim Plunkett, son of blind parents, who postponed for one year a lucrative professional football career, in order that he might remain with his teammates and enhance their chances of playing in the Rose Bowl. What a year it was for him as well as his teammates!

What is the reason for this clamor in the use of adjectives in describing these young men as Mexicans or Chicanos? It seems that just a few years ago the word "Mexican" was coupled with being dirty, lazy, or greasy, and it was more often than not that all were used together. While the term "Mexican" has gained a degree of respectability, there are those (including a few Mexican Ameri-

cans) who shudder and tremble with *horror* at "Chicano." These are the people who equate "Chicano" with Brown Power and fear the militancy attached to that movement.

Yes, times are changing and feelings also. Sensitivity in allowing people to be what they are and what they wish to be certainly falls within these changes. It was not too many years ago that some of my best friends insisted that I must be "Spanish" instead of "Mexican." They did not realize that in encouraging me to deny my heredity, they were insulting me instead of complimenting me. (Still that thought about "Mexican" being a dirty word.)

Indeed, there was a time when we all insisted that black people were colored. (Did that mean the rest of us had a lack of color?)

It has taken many years for us to begin to tell the story of the American Indian in the way it really happened.

This desire for heritage identity is not something new for this melting pot called the United States of America. Many of the European ethnic groups, such as the Irish, German, Swedish, and Polish people, went through the same turmoil and difficulties that are now faced by blacks, Indians, and Mexicans. The only thing that made their "melting in" process a little smoother was

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the color of their skin. Having overcome their language problems, they were allowed to assume their roles as *real* Americans.

Pride in Group Identity

A few years back when these old Americans (remember Indians, Mexicans, and blacks have been around for some time) made their first moves toward establishing pride in their identity, it was members of these European ethnic groups who resisted their efforts by insisting that they forget their identity and become "just Americans" and "all Americans" immediately.

There is nothing wrong with this eventual goal of one nation and one people. However, to force people to lose their identity by giving up their cultures and especially their pride, even before it has been established, is despicable. Once a person has gained this pride in his group culture and his group identity, let it become an individual matter as to how he or she will navigate within the mainstream of the large current. However, to force people (as has been attempted) to lose their identity out of shame is deplorable and can only make the individual miserable within himself. Eventually he will really not be able to contribute his full and most worthwhile efforts to the fundamental goal of a strong nation.

Having hopefully established the validity of pride in heritage identity, let us discuss what the schools can do to help children gain it.

A Mexican, black, or Indian child's self-esteem must include pride in being what he is. He must know who he is and know that his cultural heritage is a noble one. Many minority children know little or nothing of their cultural heritage. In fact, some Mexican children are ashamed of being Mexican and try to hide this fact.

We must teach these children that being a Mexican is something of which to be proud. Teach them that Mexicans have contributed a great deal to the American Culture, especially in the Southwest. Mention the many cities with strong Mexican influence, such as Los Angeles, San Francisco, Nogales,



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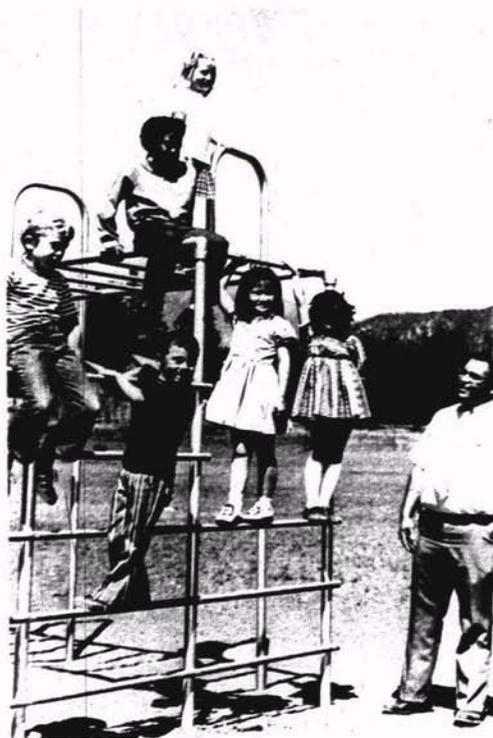
Santa Barbara, San Antonio, El Paso, San Jose, San Diego, and many others. Mention the many Mexican American political leaders, such as Dennis Chavez; U.S. Senator Joseph M. Montoya, from New Mexico; Edward R. Roybal, Congressman from California; Raul Castro, successful U.S. Ambassador to South America, a strong contender for governor of Arizona.

Point out that in the future many well-trained Mexican Americans, Indians, and blacks must be available if America is to be a successful plural society. Mention the rich historical background of Mexicans stemming from the colorful Spanish conquistadores, and other romantic figures such as the great Indian Emperor Montezuma.

Be sure to acquaint your minority children with people from their culture who are "successful" people. I am sure there are people in your community who fall in this category and would eagerly accept an invitation to visit your classroom and give your children a lift.

Acceptance and Support

These children must learn and be made aware that they are bearers of cultural heritages esteemed by their teachers and their classmates. They must see that they, as individuals, are well regarded and that they are accepted by their teachers and peers, and are important to the school life. Given



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this acceptance, along with a teacher's support when his "minority" ways need understanding, a boy or girl will learn in school despite the fact that, initially, he may have approached school with apprehension, distrust, and frequently insufficient ability to communicate with others.

Most parents of these children want them to learn all they can in our schools, but they also want them to remain Mexican, black, and Indian. They want them to hold on, whenever feasible, to their culture and to their way of life. They want an education which will help them to find a way to combine the best from two cultures. A number of European ethnic groups in our country have retained many of their traditions, celebrations, foods, religions, and other ways of life, yet they think of themselves as basically Americans. These ideas are commendable

and likewise should be accepted for our people who are now struggling to do the same thing.

The school which effectively mobilizes its resources to provide disadvantaged boys and girls with the education which will help them to realize their maximum potential will be distinguished by an administrator whose competence is manifested in vision and sensitivity combined with emotional security, intelligence, and drive.

Only in a school in which the teacher has this kind of administrative support can the teacher fulfill his or her role as the most influential part of a child's learning. Most of the child's school hours are spent in contact with his teacher. This contact is continuous in affecting the child's attitudes and responses to the learning situation. The teacher's personality, as much as the teacher's knowledge, will determine how the child learns.

The teacher not only represents the adult world, but is also the model for growth, a mirror in which the child sees himself reflected. A good teacher for disadvantaged boys and girls will view himself as an educator who defines education as the liberation of individuals into new levels of emotion as well as intellect—levels where they can achieve new capacities and insights. Teaching to him becomes a creative art, an example of humanity thinking and bringing ideas to life.

The wisest educators, as they work with these children, will conscientiously ponder the following questions: What strange ways must these children learn in order to live in today's society? How can they absorb the technical knowledge necessary for their survival without disrupting the whole fabric of their lives? How much of their old pattern of life can be preserved? How can the human values by which they live be conserved in the heritage of all humanity?

Certainly by doing this we will not only be fostering pluralism in our society, but also fostering a climate of humaneness in our schools which will endow our nation with the strength necessary to survive these troubled times. □

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