

ENOUGH IS ENOUGH

Peter Schwartzman

I love Mexicans



The xenophobia raging in our country right now needs a major antidote. History tells us that when times get tough, some people begin looking to blame others for their misfortune. Our current economic recession/depression has been no different.

For those that have lost their job and/or home, anger and frustration are understandable responses. However, categorically blaming one's troubles on people from other ethnicities or background isn't constructive and only intensifies misunderstanding and animosity.

Sadly, some in power, typically the true sources of the downfall and suffering by the masses (through poor economic policies or hoarding of resources), take advantage of active and latent hostility and do what they can to "fuel the fire"—so long as they are kept out of the flames. They often stoke these flames by promoting manipulative, sensationalized media stories or by funding opportunistic political candidates who feed off of the frenzy and direct people's anger towards those lower in the social and economic hierarchy. Given these circumstances, we, the everyday people, need to be expressive and outspoken about our love and appreciation for humankind. It will serve as part of the antidote to hatred and may actual help direct our collective frustrations and fears in positive directions.

My love of Mexicans stems largely from my direct contact with people of Mexican heritage. As a college student, I had the fortune to hear Cesar Chavez, the heroic figure profiled in Bill Knight's column last week, speak in person. In 2006, I spent the first five months of the year working as a volunteer for a Latino community organization in Little Village, Chicago. This neighborhood, consisting of over 100,000 people, most immigrants from Mexico, was a great place to be. Not only were the people I worked with industrious and committed to social justice and a healthy society, the restaurants were "out of this world"—where else can you eat delicious marinated sliced carrots, grilled nopales (cactus), and wash it all down with a fresh chilled fruit & vegetable juice combo (and all for less than \$10)? On several occasions, I witnessed thousands of beautiful Mexican-American children departing from their neighborhood school. The sense of familial connection that was visible on these children and their parents/guardians/siblings electrified the winter air with vitality and love. And on May 1st, 2006, I marched with 400,000+ immigrants from all over the world advocating for real immigration reform. It was so incredibly moving to witness the solidarity of so many energized and patriotic people—I've never seen more "stars and stripes" flying with conviction.

Closer to home, I have gained a great deal of inspiration from my Mexican neighbors. I've benefited from the hard work of a former migrant farm worker who now holds an esteemed city office. I've learned a great deal about the history of Galesburg and how it benefited from the labor of those living in the railroad camps (many of whom came here from Mexico) because several local researchers have been so generous to share their expertise and time in the community; a display of some of this history can be found currently at Taco Hideout. Additionally, a mother of a Mexican-American friend recently taught my wife and I the ways to cook a locally-growing (and abundant)

weed—purslane—into a delightful meal. I've also enjoyed doing gardening and practicing a little Spanish with one of my neighbors who spent much of his life in Mexico as well.

As you can see, I've been blessed by the people hailing from our neighbor country to the South. And, as expected, I get quite disturbed by all the anti-Mexican rhetoric that I hear spouted by "experts" in the media, in the Congress, and in the street. This vitriol wouldn't be so bad if it didn't result in more prejudice, the enactment of racist laws, and even violent hate crimes against innocent people. A closer look at what put us in this situation shows how misguided this sentiment and the acts that follow are.

Our current economic malaise is not the fault of immigrants or people of a certain "color." Rather it is due to the vicious economic policies that have been at work since the 1980's. Reckless derivative gambling, predatory lending (which led to mass foreclosures), exorbitant military spending, corporate-friendly taxes, and U.S. companies moving good paying union jobs overseas (exhibiting no national allegiance whatsoever), all led us to our current situation. These are the matters that we should be venting our frustration and demanding swift changes to ensure that none of these things continue.

But why are people so easily convinced that it is the Mexicans (or other immigrants) that are blameworthy? It is because it is an easy sell and what is "sold" is what is reported by our corporately-owned, highly-consolidated, media outlets. We are told by some that "illegals" are to blame for the lack of jobs. We are told that immigrants are a scourge on our social fabric. All of these are mistruths or deliberate lies. The thing that makes the United States a great country revolves around our diversity. It is this diversity, which came sometimes at great expense to those that were brought here or tried to get here, that weaved the wonderfully varied and intricate blanket that has brought us our finest accomplishments and moments in history. Now, at a time when we need to pull and work together the most, we are being fed distortions and lies. We must resist.

So, rather than foster and spread hate, let's go toe-to-toe with it and bring it to its knees. We definitely need immigration reform because it is very unhealthy to have an underclass in our society (one that picks and processes most of the vegetables, fruits and meats that we eat) who is being threatened with deportation or violence each and every day. We need to treat all humans with dignity and respect. We need to pay all laborers a living wage. We must stop passing legislation like the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) which caused millions of small farmers worldwide to lose their land or give up their professions while U.S. tax-payer-subsidized "cheap" corn flooded global markets. And we have to give up the idea that building walls and detention centers will bring us peace and security.

Where do we start? We can start by rejecting the rabid mouthpieces in our media who foment hatred (as well as the companies that support their shows) and, rather, elevate our voices—as did some fifty local marchers this May when they demonstrated against Arizona law SB 1070—so that our hard-working and peaceful neighbors will feel welcome here and together we can begin to address the true source of our problems.