

Chapel Talk  
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The waiting room is full of jitters, pride and excitement. People from all over the world sit with their families as they are about to end their status as aliens of this country and obtain the rights and privileges of a “naturalized” citizen. Among them, is me, along with Profe and Gabriel. Symbolically, I am about to cross a bridge to unite with my husband and child as an American. Yet, I sit there, feeling alienated from the anticipation that is so palpable in the room. Through my mind and heart, a mixed bag of emotions consumes me because of what I am about to commit to. As with many immigrants, obtaining US citizenship is an honor, a dream for a safer, freer and more prosperous future. Grateful to this country for my way of life- my husband, my child and you, my school, I was also feeling as if I was a fake and a traitor.

Unlike Blanco’s poem, I was not forced to leave my country. My American dream was a better education for myself at the college level. In Costa Rica,

I never felt unsafe or unprotected. On the contrary, growing up in a strong democratic country with no military and a fierce care of its people and the environment made me appreciate the responsibility, collaboration and work ethic that is required to live in relative peace, fighting for and maintaining human rights and harmony with our surroundings.

Ironically, I was becoming a US citizen so I could return to live for a year in Costa Rica during my sabbatical. Returning home for this precious time meant that I had to deny my alliances to my Costa Rican nationality, a big part of my identity, and promise loyalty to the US only. To become a naturalized US citizen, you must swear to the Naturalization Oath of Allegiance to the United States, which begins like this, *“I hereby declare, on oath, that I absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty, of whom or which I have heretofore been a subject or citizen.”* Of course, going through this process was my choice, but was it worth the high cost of denying my previous nationality despite the love, admiration and belief in the ideals, principles and values of the US? Could I afford this cost or was I even prepared to pay for this cost?

To reach this part of the naturalization process means you have paid a substantial amount of money and passed an oral examination based on a hundred US history questions. So, I had already paid and learned what I needed to, but it was giving up my nationality of birth, “my mother country,” that I was having a hard time with, as well as a fear of not fully honoring my new nationality. As they called us into the official room where the conferring of citizenship was going to happen, I made a promise to myself, that despite the oath of loyalty which I was going to honor wholeheartedly, I couldn’t emotionally renounce my original nationality which makes me much of who I am- my culture, my language, my memories. Caught in between these two countries that I love, I quickly realized that this ceremony to celebrate a “new” me, in part was simply a legal status, but more importantly, this new me was not new at all, I had already been in the process of “citizen” development in my American land and home- St. Andrew’s- for the last 21 years. At that moment, I was no longer afraid of my commitment because I was not losing a country, instead, I had chosen to become a U.S. citizen, a citizenship that had allowed to be myself- an American and and Costa Rican, without having to make a choice. As if a

hybrid person, I am interdependent on both countries, languages, cultures, as well as educational, economic and political systems. I am a symbiotic result of two lands that coexist, navigating and converging their differences and realities. Like Blanco's poem suggests, to love a country is to be yourself, your past and present and to make a future worthwhile for you and your country. It is to appreciate what you have fought for, lost and gained.

I tell you part of my journey of becoming an American citizen, and more importantly what St. Andrews has meant to me and have chosen Richard Blanco's poem "Mother Country" to illustrate the concepts of citizenship and interdependence, concepts that have been in my mind, as I see this country ripped apart at its core, away from its values for respect for human rights and dignity. Many immigrants come and live in this country for its principles and opportunities, thus the sacrifice made to physically leave native lands behind makes people hold high standards and ideals in the US. My journey, the journey of Blanco's mother, and the journey of many immigrants, legal or not, makes us examine our relation to our mother nation and this nation.

In his poem, Blanco gives us an assignment- yes to Americans, but even if you are not a US citizen, the exercise equally applies to you. After describing the relationship of his mother to Cuba, Blanco turns to Americans and says,

“To love a country as if you’ve lost one: as if it were *you* on a plane departing from America forever, clouds closing like curtains on your country, the last scene in which you’re a madman scribbling the names of your favorite flowers, trees, and birds you’d never see again, your address and phone number you’d never use again, the color of your father’s eyes, your mother’s hair, terrified you could forget these.”

Blanco pushed us to the edge and have us imagine leaving the United States, or your birth country to never return. If such terrifying action happened, what do you hold most dear, what might you fight for, what do you appreciate?

Having gone through the process of citizenship and understanding my interdependence, responsibility and obligation, I hold “human rights” most dear and valuable.

In 1916, President Woodrow Wilson said the following words to a group of new citizens in Philadelphia,

“This is the only country in the world which experiences this constant and repeated rebirth. Other countries depend upon multiplication of their own native people. This country is constantly drinking strength out of new sources by the voluntary association with it of great bodies of strong men and forward looking women out of other lands. And so, by the gift of the free will of independent people it is being constantly renewed from generation to generation by the same process by which it was originally created. It is as if humanity had determined to see to it that this great Nation, founded for the benefit of humanity, should not lack for the allegiance of the people of the world.”

President Wilson spoke about the process of mutual exchange and benefits between immigrants and the people born in the country for the “benefit of humanity”. In his words, he beautifully defined the idea of interdependence. Interdependence means a co-relation of two or more individuals or different groups that mutually rely on, collaborate, understand and be responsible for one another. Interdependence can happen on many levels, intellectual, emotional, economic, political, etc. However, in the last few months and weeks, this country has acted against interdependence between humanity, declaring independence for many immigrants, in particular children.

On June 15, 2012, the Obama administration announced that certain people who came to the United States as children and met several guidelines might request consideration of deferred action for a period of two years, subject to renewal. These almost one million young people, called Dreamers, were allowed to study and work, paying taxes and thus contributing to the intellectual and economic make-up of the country. In September of 2017, the US government acted to eliminate this protection act, revoking work authorization and protection from deportation. It took several demands until this summer when the judicial system demanded

that the executive branch reinstate Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA, and continue to accept new application for the program. The US Citizenship and Immigration Services has renewed DACA, but as of today, is not accepting new applications.

DACA had not been reinstated when over the late spring and over this summer, we saw immigrants, individuals and families, who had come to this country seeking asylum, being prosecuted and charged as criminals. Among these immigrants, many coming from Central America, running away from violence, hunger and political prosecution, are thousands of innocent children, who upon arrival have faced separation from their parents, left in cages, at least one has died, as if dangerous animals to avoid. After a US court demanded that children be reunited with their families, still today more than 500 children, after the more than 2 thousand children were separated in June, remain under custody, many of them under 5 years of age.

Creating real change requires continued movement and partnership building. It requires a deeper examination of who we are and who we want



to be as a nation. It implores interdependence on each other's views and beliefs so we can sew back together the rupture in our shared humanity that the country is experiencing. It demands from us, leaders and citizens, greater emotional intelligence, listening, collaboration and understanding in all levels of discourse and action.

Although the road we must build will take time, creativity and effort, I am hopeful of schools like St. Andrew's, the fruitful grounds where interdependency is learned, developed and practiced. As for many of you, coming to SAS for the first time is like coming to a new country- with its own culture, values and language. One has emigrated from home to this new land of opportunity, in search of education, friendships and new experiences. One arrives with an sense of self, with individuality, developed at home and your previous school. As immigrants, one first walks the hallways, dorm and classrooms of St. Andrew's attentive to the "citizens" of the school, returning students, faculty and staff. Unlike the lack of choice for new citizens, who must be faithful to only one country, SAS honors your process of acculturation, relationship and citizenship. You learn the ways of SAS, its values, culture and practices, while the school learns from your

own individual gifts. In this sense, you experience interdependence, as SAS becomes part of you, just as you make SAS by who you are. In the classrooms, halls, fields and dorms, you grant each other respect, learn from one another through listening and dialogue, show responsibility toward one another, piecing together the fabric for leadership necessary today. In this process, you become a St. Andrew's citizen. Ultimately, being a St. Andrew's citizen is to practice interdependence between ourselves, the country and world.

Luckily, you are not on that plane leaving the country and your school to never return.

Like me, you are lucky to become a citizen of this school. Yet, you do not have to wait until you receive your "diploma," your "legal change of status" to enact your citizenship. The country and the world is in urgent need of humanity. Think about the ways in which you and your surroundings are interdependent, what you care for the most, what leadership qualities and behaviors suit you best, develop them and in doing so be loyal and faithful to the country you "love" and have not lost yet.

I chose the song that we will sing because it is about human rights for children. I hope you will all join in singing it.