



Eduardo Padrón

UPFRONT

THE TOPIC WAS MOTIVATION, BUT THE SPEAKER suddenly veered into a discussion of food. He described a very complex process: growers, land replenishment, distribution and transportation, packaging, marketing, retailing and more. But then he rounded back to motivation: “What factor is the real driver of the food industry?”

The audience offered a reasonable array of factors: weather, economic conditions, cultural preference and more. “Good effort, but you’re forgetting the most basic factor,” said the speaker. “Hunger. No hunger, no food industry.”

As *Hispanic* celebrates an enduring milestone, it’s fitting to observe the evolution of our Hispanic-American heritage. Back in 1980, the U.S. was home to just 14.6 million Hispanics. By the turn of the new century, the total had jumped to 35.3 million, an increase of 141.7 percent. The appetite

plenty exist to explain what is fast becoming this nation’s most sustained and historic era of immigration. Better jobs, educational opportunity, geographical proximity, a stable political environment and family connections are just a few of the rationales cited by researchers. All good reasons, but what is the real driver? Perhaps, our motivational/food expert had it right.

Ironically, to understand what drives Hispanics northward, we would do well to explore the driving force of the American experience. Historians refer to the “American experiment,” one that grew from a different sort of hunger. In his wonderful essay, “Two Dreams of America,” philosopher Jacob Needleman suggests that one of the great purposes of this experiment in nationhood was to “shelter and guard the rights of all men and women to seek the conditions and the companions necessary for the inner search.”

What grand hopes these people embraced, men we have come to know as the “framers.” Fortune placed them at an epic moment and they responded by affirming “inalienable rights” as the heart and soul of the entire experiment. Wouldn’t you want to live in such a place?

Hispanics throughout Central and South America and beyond continue to answer “yes.” And the decision to come to the U.S. runs deeper than rationality. It is an aspirational choice, responding to the undercurrent of possibility that endures in this country, no matter what.

Much is expected of this nation, at home and abroad. Falling short, we leave people everywhere disappointed, even resentful. These days, a nation weary with criticism has embraced the message of change, hope and renewal like a lost lover.

The presidential candidates are, indeed, courting Hispanics as never before. Hispanic Americans would be more accurate, at 44.3 million, an ascendant influence in the national conversation. This is

a new marriage with children on both sides, so to speak. A lot of work remains to form a more perfect union.

Half of all Hispanics in the U.S. earn less than \$20,000 annually, with only 11 percent earning more than \$50,000. Nearly 30 percent of Hispanic children under 18 live in poverty. One quarter of all Hispanics have less than a ninth grade education, only 27 percent have earned a high school diploma and just 12 percent are college graduates. Worse, the numbers haven’t moved much for several years.

Though not in the least encouraging, let us affirm the more fundamental truth: We have arrived. We are at home in America and privy to the “necessary conditions and companions” to enrich the journey. If it’s a time of challenge, then it’s also a time of hope and possibility. Hispanics across the nation can gather inspiration as the next great era of this grand American experiment. **H**

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THE HUNGER TO COME TO AMERICA IS A CHOICE SPURRED BY THE UNDERCURRENT OF POSSIBILITY.



for America has persisted. By 2006, 44.3 million Hispanics were living in the U.S., the largest minority in the country and easily the fastest growing segment of the population.

So, the question is why? Why have we come here? Like our food riddle, reasons