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Deepening the American dream

The American dream's energy of possibility is alive and well among the nation's immigrants.

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There are those who tell us that faith in the American dream is dying; that the dream is now more an illusion of material success at the expense of deeper traditions.

The philosopher Jacob Needleman, in his essay "Two Dreams of America," offers radically divergent notions of the word dream. The first is a vision of what can be, even what ought to be. It stands as a beacon in directing the course of a life well lived. The second dream, as Professor Needleman puts it, is a deception – a counterfeit bearing the same name and colors. He suggests that in order to deepen the authentic American dream, it is necessary to awaken from the other.

The lure of the material dream is too strong to dismiss, yet underneath it may lurk the deeper, visionary dream. Israel Sanchez, who emigrated to the United States from Mexico at age 17 with his migrant-farmer family, bought his first house this year at age 25. He clawed his way up through a GED program to an associate's degree at Miami Dade College, but his success story had to begin with a change of mind-set.

"I didn't think I could do it," he recalls of being the first in his family to graduate from high school. "I didn't believe in myself." Now he does.

There are other novices who speak with the wisdom of the ages, kindred spirits, no doubt, whom Needleman would admire. Luisel Pena, an impoverished Cuban immigrant at age 20, advanced from Miami Dade College to Yale University by his mid-20s. He says directly: "I came to America in search of a dream." Abandoning his homeland was "like dying a little, to be born again into a different life and, eventually, a different me," he says.

What is it about America that inspires such hope? The framers of the Constitution challenged generations far into the future. With the phrase "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," they set the bar well beyond a political or economic system.

The great purpose of the American nation, Needleman suggests, was to form a sheltering environment that would allow men and women to pursue the inner search: America the womb, the incubator of great human understanding. Another guardian of the republic called it "government of the people, by the people and for the people."

Needleman recounts a conversation with another immigrant, a professor of technological engineering, who left Afghanistan with his family just after the Soviet invasion in 1981. Ghulam Taymuree remembered his astonishment at the freedom of movement he discovered in America. "You could go anyplace, night or

day. Of course, these are things that every American takes for granted. Americans take it all for granted."

Then, he connected America's freedom of movement with the mind, with an energy of possibility that he had not experienced anywhere else. He called it the "uncaptured; the mind, the thinking, the searching that is not yet captured ... before it becomes something defined." He was in love with the "pure movement" that he felt here, an openness to know and understand and simply become what is possible.

America is a nation of great momentum. The American dream is too often defined by what one owns and attains – no longer the dream of being, but a dream of consumption. Well beyond the immigration debate, perhaps Americans need the spirit of their immigrants more than they know. They need those searching individuals who sense what, too often, Americans themselves have forgotten.

Mr. Pena is taking nothing for granted. He still remembers the daily struggle to put food on the table and the extended blackouts, through which he read the great authors by candlelight – and his parents' sacrifices. "I will never forget my mother's heartening smile and my father's dirty, beautiful hands. They have silently deposited their trust in me, and I am ready to thrive, to make meaningful their sacrifices in the name of a future that now belongs to me."

Can America still remind us of the extraordinary potential of our lives? Of the utterly human possibility to touch that dream that stirred people long before there was an America? Such is this nation's privilege, its great proprietorship. If we listen to the voices of Ghulam Taymuree, Luisel Pena, and Israel Sanchez, we will hear the answer.

• *Eduardo J. Padrón is president of Miami Dade College.*

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