

THE HOPES AND PAINS THAT MADE ME

RICHARD SANTAMARIA

As I play with my toy car on the living room floor, my mother comes in with a poster to show. This woman was the one who had decided to leave home only a few years earlier, arriving with no money to her name and barely any support system to claim. She had only my grandmother, my father, and herself to rely on while raising me, working from dawn to dusk scrubbing the floors of people much richer than her. She was fairly young too, barely 30 and had already committed to the life of a housekeeper to raise me, with no governmental social safety net to catch us if she failed. I was not old enough yet to understand or appreciate any of this, of course, I just wanted to see what she had. Once she catches my attention, she flips the poster around, and I see it, a poster with all 43 (at the time) Presidents of the United States from Washington to Bush. She tells me she picked it up on the way home and jokes that I should try to memorize them from first to last. She was joking, but I decided to do it anyway. Truth be told, I am not really sure why I chose to do it, or why those old-looking white guys had piqued my interest. I certainly was not old enough yet to contemplate their legacies, or how some of them had directly shaped how the direction of my young life was going to go. But I knew there was some sort of spark in each of them, and it drew me toward them.

As I got older and went through elementary school, then through middle school, and finally early high school, my interest in history and the individuals who had made it only grew. My older brother arrived from El Salvador in 2008, and while he was completing the ninth grade, he got this one textbook for his history class. He read it because it was required, and it certainly helped him gain a grasp of the English language. I read it because I found it interesting. Every time I flipped through those pages I learned more about the

triumphs and the losses, what created this country, and the problems it has endured. From Bleeding Kansas to the Gilded Age to the Civil Rights Movement, this country's history was as bruised as it was impressive. Despite my fascination with this, however, whenever my teachers asked me what I wanted to do as an adult, I had no earthly idea. I remember putting everything from fireman to lawyer whenever our yearbooks asked us what our dream job was. I did not really see a clear direction for what I wanted to do once I got older yet. I was still young, but already at this point I had peers who had found passions and intended to see them through. I loved what I had learned thus far, but the thought of focusing my entire lifetime on the past did not seem to click for me. I revered the past, but with so much possible in the future it seemed only natural to want a more active job than one just reciting what we already knew.

As I went through high school, I looked at several options for myself. My parents above all else wanted me to do well enough to qualify for a full-ride scholarship at a university, our only hope of being able to afford college. Just as much, however, they wanted me to focus on a lucrative career. Trespassing into the upper-middle class was our ticket to the financial stability that they wished for, and we knew I was our best hope of achieving it. I took several STEM classes, the ones that my parents said would produce a higher paying job later on, to see if there was a fit for myself. AP Biology was interesting for the most part, but after a year, the mitochondria had worn out its welcome with me. Chemistry was a good time, but in hindsight that could have just as well been the Breaking Bad fan in myself more than anything else. AP Physics C: Mechanics left my head jumbled and frazzled after one year and left me assured that of all the paths I could take, that was certainly not one. I respected it for the course that it was, and indeed I highly respect people that go into it, but the second we stopped talking about Newton's Laws of Motion was the second I was doom-ed.

Therefore, I was left in a strange space where I wanted to choose a STEM major for college but found myself without the passion for any of them. My first semester of senior year had arrived, and I was still wholly uncertain what major I was going to apply to schools with. I knew, by and large, that it was quite common for college students to switch their majors if they found themselves unhappy. Knowing myself, however, I wanted to get it right on the first try before I could get the chance to convince myself I was happy in a major I was uninterested in.

While I was deliberating, I was simultaneously taking AP United States Government and Politics with our school's enthusiastic teacher, Mr. Latham. Mr. Latham was the kind of teacher who saw us as who we were: young adults with rapidly maturing and changing attitudes regarding the world and the country we lived in, and he spoke to us like such. Never one to talk down to a student but never afraid to tease us either, he created an engaging atmosphere in the classroom and combined it with a deep knowledge on the subject. When he spoke about the deliberations of a Supreme Court decision from three lifetimes ago, or pointed out the inconsistency of a former President's rhetoric and their foreign policy, there was a reverence for history in what he said. He reminded me of what it was to appreciate civics and the political engagement that makes government and politics possible. These were the things that made the American experiment work, and he reminded me of that. Not to mention, I can safely say I have not encountered another teacher before or since who proudly hung a "Teachers with Attitude: Straight Outta Homework" poster.

My favorite moment in the class was during the week he guided us through a week-long mock session of Congress. For five days, our two classes were split into the House and Senate, and my class had wound up as the House. We were each assigned to come up with a bill that we would be putting through committee, debating

on the floor, sending to the Senate to vote on, and finally passing to Mr. Latham as our President. I was a Democrat, which meant I was in the running to serve as Speaker for a day, and without a bit of hesitation, I went up to Mr. Latham to formally ask and he happily obliged. Mere days later, I was officially Speaker of the House of my high school's AP Government and Politics class of 2018-2019 (the most prestigious of titles truly). I would be lying if I said I did not find the concept supremely enjoyable, and I was very happy the moment he gave me instructions on how to communicate with all the jargon that goes into Congressional routine. My bill was meant to eliminate the penny from circulation since its buying power is outright pitiful and each costs 1.7 cents to make, and I was looking forward to putting it on the floor and arguing in favor of it. Well, I did just that, only for the entire Republican delegation to come out against the bill and successfully sway enough Democrats in the class to vote against the bill in order to kill it, under the vague notion of patriotism and my branding as an anti-Lincoln radical. It was a truly strange feeling to preside over the failure of your own bill, but I can say that it was extremely funny in the moment, too. For that unique experience, I can safely thank Mr. Latham for encouraging us to go all in our roles.

Later on in the year, Mr. Latham had us researching for a group project we would be doing at the library, spending the entire school day in the library giving presentations on our topic to rotating groups of freshman students. My topic was the Electoral College and the times in which it conflicted with the popular vote. In researching for this topic, however, I fell down a Wikipedia rabbit hole and before long stumbled across one quote from Abraham Lincoln. At the time merely an Illinois state politician, he said this when asked about the role of government: "The legitimate object of government, is to do for a community of people, whatever they need to have done, but cannot do, at all, or cannot, so well do, for themselves — in their separate, and individual capacities" (Lincoln

1). Not as flashy or influential as his Gettysburg Address, to be sure. But this admittedly long-winded statement from future President Lincoln argued that the point of government is to accomplish what an individual would not be able to do effectively, or at all, without its existence. That it is the responsibility and obligation of government to undertake endeavors that a single individual cannot do alone. That a government of the people working together was objectively stronger and more capable of something than anything they could possibly hope to achieve alone. It captivated me, and it felt right, because to me it felt that this philosophy was right for the country then, and that we might need it more than ever now.

After this class reminded me of how much I loved the story of American government, and how important it had been throughout history for individuals to be active in the pursuit of progress, I committed to political science and I submitted my college applications. I still would not quite be able to tell anyone what I intended to do once I graduated, but I knew that what I wanted more than anything was to be in the position to make a difference. As I had grown up, I had begun to realize the world my parents had been inhabiting since arriving. To be frank, it was an America that had the odds stacked against their favor. They, like the vast majority of undocumented immigrants in this country, did not qualify for any governmental assistance for themselves. This was in spite of the fact that our household income was absolutely low enough to qualify for EBT or TANF or some form of federal assistance and had been since I was little. My father worked in hard labor jobs until I was seven years old, at which point he had to receive back surgery and was effectively left unable to work. He was a third-grade dropout. There was no chance of him getting a low-intensity office job. To not be able to work in manual labor essentially meant he could not work at all. By some stroke of luck, my parents were able to secure Social Security numbers for

themselves, and he has thus been collecting disability payments from what he had paid into the economy in payroll taxes. But other undocumented immigrants do not have such a luxury. They pay taxes into the American economy with no hope of ever collecting benefits in their old age or in need of an emergency. All in all, the life of an undocumented immigrant in this country can be one of exploitative labor conditions, an absolute lack of a social safety net, and a situation where they pay into an economy that has no intention of paying them back.

And yet, they were supremely hopeful when they heard me tell them I had come back with an acceptance letter from Northeastern. At this point, I had made my learning aspirations clear to them, and after a mild sadness caused from the fact that I was not intending to become a lawyer, doctor, or physicist, they came to believe in what I wanted to do. Since coming to Northeastern, I did my first co-op working for the Massachusetts State Government. Even from just my short foray working within government, it was very apparent that there was a massive hole in the services that we were providing. Within my department, which oversaw licensing, we were months behind where we needed to be for sending people the paperwork they needed to work in the midst of a pandemic. Repeat callers were a common occurrence, with them often calling every couple hours for weeks on end. Despite this, it only reinforced my belief in a compassionate and proactive approach to governance. I believe that if the department I worked with hired more, many of its issues would be resolved right there. Even with the current inflammatory nature of our nation's politics, I still believe there is nothing more powerful than people united in a quest to help each other. For every person that becomes apathetic towards improving the lives of themselves and of other people, it becomes that much harder to improve the world.

It took a bit of time to settle on that as the philosophy that encourages my current discipline. It took exploring my options and looking at possibilities that did not sustain my interests, leaving me briefly but genuinely uncertain. It certainly took the right teacher at the right place and time. However, I have chosen my discipline, and I have yet to stray from it. I certainly have no intention of doing so, either. I get hopeful thinking of what I can do after graduation to help the lives of working people, fight for the rights of the undocumented, and encourage a more active government. I have found a niche for myself, and I intend to see it through.

Works Cited

Lincoln, Abraham. "Fragment on Government (July 1, 1854)." *Lincoln's Writings: The Multi-Media Edition*, <https://housedivided.dickinson.edu/sites/lincoln/fragment-on-government-july-1-1854/>.