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America means equality, freedom and opportunity

By Lamees Hanna

Being an American ... it's the closest thing to determining my own destiny. I am blessed to live in an environment that encourages me to question everything and to try anything. To pursue knowledge, opportunity, talents and interests until the day I die.

America, unlike numerous countries without personal freedoms and constitutions, means the right to read what I like, to wear what I like, and to vote the way I like without it ever meaning a death sentence. America, unlike impoverished countries with a high degree of government corruption and the need to grease the palms of the well connected, means that if you're willing to work hard, you'll be successful.

America means that when I sign a legitimate contract, I have legal recourse that does not require bribing anyone. America means that I have the right to pursue any legal line of work and hold the expectation that, irrespective of my faith, gender and political viewpoint, I will be paid the same as those with similar qualifications. America means that despite all the differences among the groups of people living here, we are all equal under the law.

Do abuses to my descriptions of American ideals happen daily? I am not naive. But as I study people suffering human rights abuses the world over, I note that equality and freedom are what they yearn for more than any other ideal.

The youngest of three, I was born in 1973 in Baghdad to an Iraqi father and an American mother. My mother ensured that the appropriate paperwork was processed so that I could retain my American citizenship.

At the time, Iraq was a very different place. It was an open society with a long history, a rich culture and an ever-growing educated populace. My mother's American heritage was embraced by many of our Iraqi friends and relatives.

In the late 1970s when Saddam Hussein took power, Iraqi society began to weaken. Dinner tables where once passionate discussions had taken place were now places where fear fostered innocuous and low-key conversations lest families endanger themselves and their friends. Fearing that I, my brother Selim and my sister Yasamin might inadvertently divulge information at school about our parents, our family was losing the trust that underlies any worthwhile conversation. It was not unusual that children came home from school to find their parents slaughtered or missing.

In 1981, after the Iran-Iraq War had begun, my mother packed our lives into five suitcases, and we fled under the facade that we were just going on a summer vacation to America. Like many immigrants, the first few years were tough. We faced a lot of humiliations and needed to learn and improve our English. My mother taught me that my value to the world has nothing to do with what I was wearing or not wearing, who I chose to socialize with, nor where I chose to worship. She taught me that my value to the world is based on what I contribute — to the community. This was her American ideal and now mine.

My mother taught me that our human duty is to take care of someone else even if they aren't related to us or paying us. This ideal is not as widely held in other countries. I don't believe

that there are many countries in the world that encourage volunteerism as much as the United States.

In America, we take meals to the elderly, we set up funds for neighbors who lose their homes to fires, we read books to the blind, we teach others to read and even knit hats for newborn children — all without expected compensation. Perhaps, it is our country's wealth that allows the luxury of donating time or money. I would counter, though, that I have witnessed those with little means making sacrifices for others.

Am I blind to our pitfalls? Not when I witness our youth becoming self-absorbed and setting their goals for another weekend of alcohol binging. Not when we don't care for our elderly. Not when we lose sight of our wastefulness as millions suffer in our world. Alas, Americans are not perfect and sometimes we lack that sense of urgency that is the birthright of this nation.

Are we done improving ourselves? I think not — after all, isn't that what life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness is all about? Have a happy Independence Day, choose your own destiny, and take on a pitfall with some urgency.

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