

PARADE!



AMERICA'S TABLE[®]

A THANKSGIVING READER
CELEBRATING OUR DIVERSE ROOTS AND SHARED VALUES

As America becomes more diverse, one of the nation's favorite holidays assumes added significance.

Thanksgiving remains a day that Americans, regardless of background, usually celebrate the same way, with warm gatherings that include family and friends, food and football.

It also becomes a day to reflect on how, in a world too often threatened by differences, we Americans see our differences as a source of vitality and strength.

America's Table® voices this reflection. It consists of a brief narrative about America's history and values, and profiles of eight diverse individuals who personify those values. The narrative is intended to be read aloud before or after the Thanksgiving meal. Simply go around the table and take turns or have a leader designate parts.

By adding the reading of *America's Table*® to our Thanksgiving customs, we become part of a national chorus affirming that in America, regardless of who we are or where we came from, each of us is entitled to a place at the table.

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Adams Costa Spencer Lind Tanaka Carney Schultz Pucinski
Leibowitz McLaren Gonzales Szymankiewicz Giannini Humphreys
Zimmer Poulos Finley Kahn Trugglio Singh Sandburg
Jackson Kogovsek Smith Rivera Acosta Demetrios Nemeš Schwartz
Sousa Garrahan Yamaura Hansen Romano Farrell

We are each on a journey.

These are the names of the generations that came to America.

They reveal individual lives that represent the story of our nation.

These are the names of the generations that built America.

They recall our parents and grandparents and mirror ourselves.

These are the names of the generations that will care for America.

They remind us why we gather at this Thanksgiving table.

Nwaguru Rosenbaum Kimura Beck Teters Foulks Koproški
Calderon Lew Durley Branovan Sharma Hassan Montalto Paterson
Jordan Cheng Gioia Noriega Ellison Josephs Kassab Phillips Puri
Letona Linares Brooks Gilchrist Mineta Levine Patel Tsosie
Yoo Meghani Verdeja Aoun Parens Al-Suwajj Morris Rangel

Grace E. Yoo calls herself “1.5.”

She feels neither fully first generation, in the sense of her parents, who speak Korean at home, nor second generation, for whom assimilation often is the highest aspiration.

Born in Incheon, South Korea, Yoo arrived in the United States at age three. Her family settled first in the Koreatown section of Los Angeles, then moved into an apartment in a nearby neighborhood before buying a house in the suburbs.

A high achiever, as her parents wished, Yoo attended law school and provided legal services for children before moving to Washington, D.C., as executive director of the National Asian Pacific American Bar Association.

When her father suffered a stroke, Yoo returned to California and faced a major decision: to take a job in the mainstream or to serve the Korean community, despite the limitations of her Korean language skills and her outspokenness as a woman in a male-dominated society. She chose to become head of the Korean American Coalition—Los Angeles.

Proud of their daughter, Yoo’s parents also are concerned. “The usual worry,” says Yoo, “their daughter isn’t married, and works until ten or eleven o’clock every night.”

She is producing results, however. Her organization recently persuaded the L.A. police to consolidate Koreatown into one jurisdiction, making it easier for individuals with limited English to navigate the city bureaucracy. Part of the challenge was convincing community people to sign a petition.

“Let’s not use language as the reason that we can’t do this. You need to be engaged.”



The insightful questions of our children, innocently asked, compel us to reconnect with our past.

When our families came to America.

How they got here.

What they found.

Why they came.

At every table the answers are different, but much the same.

Many of us were immigrants and refugees from all regions of the world, fleeing the afflictions of poverty and oppression.

Drawn by the promise of a better life, we chose America and she took us into safe harbor.





Not every journey was easy.

The first arrivals sometimes shunned those who followed.

Not every journey was voluntary.

The first African slaves landed in Jamestown a year before the Pilgrims settled in Plymouth.

Not every journey was righteous.

Native Americans were devastated by a new nation's need to conquer, cultivate, and build.



Mihir Meghani formed the Hindu American Foundation in 2003, when he was thirty-one.

The group attempts to provide the nation's approximately two million Hindus with a voice for advancing their communal and political concerns.

"It is recognition that we've come of age in the United States."

The foundation advocates for human rights in areas of the world where Hindu minorities feel threatened. In America, it promotes educational programs and legislation.

"We have a resolution in front of the U.S. Congress to recognize the cultural, spiritual, and religious significance of Diwali," a festival of lights for Hindus, Jains, and Sikhs.

Meghani was born in Philadelphia to immigrants who traveled back to India often during his childhood. "My parents tried to expose me to the best of American, Indian, and Hindu culture and philosophy, and to tolerance and respect for things from other parts of the world."

During his visits to India, Meghani absorbed his Indian and Hindu identity from the stories and parables of his grandparents, and gained a sense of proportion from the contrast to the abundance of the United States.

Traveling to India, reading Mahatma Gandhi, and spending the summer at a Hindu camp at age nine focused Meghani on a life of service. He combines his presidency of the Hindu American Foundation with his work as an emergency room doctor in San Francisco, and draws inspiration from the example of his paternal grandfather:

"He won't eat mangoes until every person in India can afford a mango."



Octavio F. Verdeja Sr. At an age when many contemplate retirement, Octavio Verdeja mentors young people, relying on a lifetime of contacts with Florida government officials and business leaders to help them.

He learned about the power of connections while attempting to leave Cuba as a young father, soon after Castro assumed power, in 1959. Recognizing the Verdeja name, an official at the Havana airport asked if Octavio was related to a former minister in the deposed Batista government.

Verdeja explained that the minister, an obstetrician by profession, was his grandfather's brother. "He took care of my wife," said the airport official, allowing Verdeja to pass.

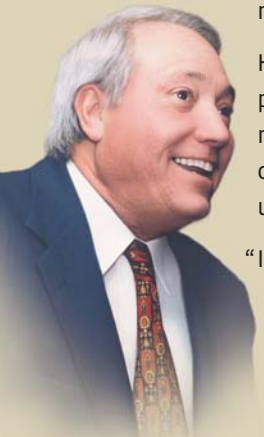
Verdeja began life in America sweeping out a grocery store, before becoming a CPA and opening his own accounting firm. Eventually, he joined the boards of community groups. When his oldest son was eight, he began coaching baseball. His son is now forty-eight and Verdeja still coaches.

**"I was sick of sitting on boards arguing.
I want to feel the people, talk to people."**

Coaching brought him to the impoverished Miami neighborhood of Allapatha. "I have seen a kind of life that I never knew existed, and that life has touched me. At this point, I need to help people."

Helping sometimes requires speaking to a contact in the public defender's office; other times it means asking a business friend for a favor. Recently, a young man Verdeja had coached as a defiant twelve-year-old prone to fighting graduated from college on a football scholarship.

"I'm calling everyone I know to try to get a job for him."



We are each part of America's journey.

We did not leave history behind, like unwanted baggage at immigration's door.

Our particular pasts and our shared present are wedded in hyphenated names:

African-American,
Irish-American,
Italian-American,
Korean-American,
Polish-American.

We are not always on a first-name basis with one another.

But we quickly become acquainted in playgrounds and classrooms, in college dorms and military barracks, and in offices and factories.

We feel at home.





In some parts of the world, our differences would be threatening.

We feel enriched.

In America, our differences resonate in our names, language, food, and music. They inspire art and produce champions and leaders.

We feel free to disagree.

We are a family, and what is a family gathering without debate?



Joseph E. Aoun finds the traditional view of higher education as a tower too confining. For the president of Northeastern University in Boston, college is a time for students to engage with the world in all its complexity and diversity.

Born to a Christian family in Beirut, Aoun grew up in the city's cosmopolitan atmosphere of the 1950's and '60's. The linguistic scholar collaborated on his first book with a Muslim and a Jew before leaving Lebanon to study and work in France, and then earn a Ph.D. at MIT.

“The United States is the only nation in the world where you can be hyphenated.”

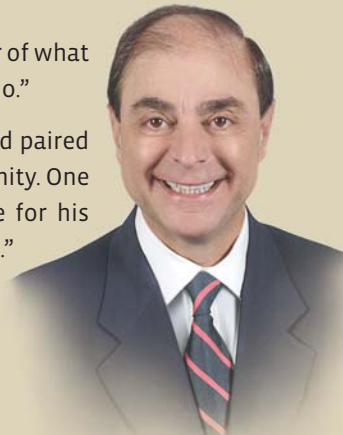
“In other places they want you to assimilate. Here they say, ‘We want you to bring your roots to play a role in the life of the city, the state, and the nation.’”

As a dean at the University of Southern California, Aoun brought the Shoah Foundation to campus, launched institutes for Korean studies and Armenian studies, and began work on African-American and Latino institutes.

Since arriving at Northeastern in August 2006, Aoun has expanded an existing program called Dialogue of Civilizations, which sends students and professors to universities abroad. Recently, one group studied in Israel and another in Cairo with plans to meet at Mt. Sinai.

“In many ways universities cannot simply be a mirror of what is. Universities should be a model of what you can do.”

Aoun recalls an incident in which the university had paired two students from nations divided by historical enmity. One father asked the school to find a new roommate for his daughter. She resisted, explaining, “I like the person.”



Henri Parens's mother was transported to Auschwitz on August 14, 1942.

He learned her fate soon after the war, while living in America with his adoptive family. Through a lifetime as a psychoanalyst, Parens has come to understand how the Holocaust has shaped his life and given him insights into the effects of childrearing and education on prejudice.

“I wanted to optimize relationships between children and parents because my relationship with my mother had been so good.”

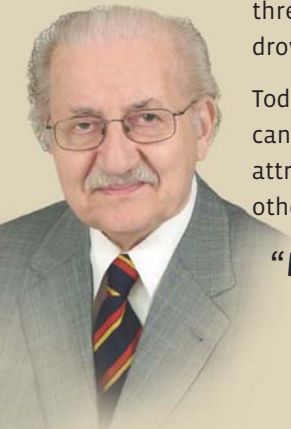
Born Aaron Pruszinowski, in Lodz, Poland, Parens moved to Brussels with his mother at age four, after his parents divorced. When the Nazis invaded, in 1940, he and his mother fled to southern France. After about a year in various camps, his mother urged him to escape. “She trusted me to be able to do it.” Parens was twelve.

He recalls crawling to the edge of the camp, running through a vineyard, and walking in the ditch alongside the road to Perpignan, where he boarded a train for Marseille and the protection of a Jewish agency that eventually arranged for him to sail to Casablanca and then on to New York.

A Pittsburgh couple, Fay and Harry Wagner, adopted Parens and another boy from the camp in France, although they had three young daughters and lived in a small house. “Harry drove a bread truck, yet they took two of us,” says Parens.

Today, schoolchildren hear his story. “I tell them these things can be prevented. We need to respect each other.” Parens attributes his resilience to the decency of the Wagners and others, and to his mother's love and confidence.

“My mother has been inside me all along.”



We believe in fairness.



In America, the loudest voice does not always have the last word, and every voice has a right to be heard.

We act with hope.

Not because life is perfect, but because we are free to face life, and all its imperfections, on our own terms.

We rely on faith.

In a sturdy and tested framework of law and government that works because of the confidence we place in it and in each other.





We are each responsible for keeping America on course.

“Are we there yet?” the children ask.

We know the answer.

We pursue justice.

But still have a way to go.

We celebrate freedom.

But endlessly debate what it means to be free.

Our table is brimming.

But not everyone receives a fair portion.



Zainab Al-Suwaij fled Iraq in 1991, at age twenty.

After a childhood witnessing critics of Saddam Hussein disappear, she became one of the only women to actively oppose the regime, and was shot when she fired at a soldier to protect a neighbor being threatened at gunpoint.

“I said if I can’t be free and live like a normal human being, then I don’t want to live.”

Raised in Basra, where her grandfather was an influential Shia imam, she rejected his advice to avoid politics. “I was a troublemaker,” she recalls. “In the fourth grade my teacher made the comment that Hitler was a great man because he put the Jews in a room and he burned them. I asked, ‘How can he be a great man if he does such a horrible thing?’ She asked me to shut up.”

After fleeing Iraq, Al-Suwaij eventually traveled to the United States and settled in Houston, where she met her husband, started a family, and attempted to live a normal life. She was teaching Arabic at Yale on 9/11, when her life again changed.

“I felt that the terror I left behind in Iraq was following me here and threatening my family, my people, and my country. I had to do something.”

Al-Suwaij founded the American Islamic Congress, in Washington, D.C., and returned to Iraq for extended visits to work on women’s issues, the reform of the Iraqi education system, and the refurbishment of schools.

“I wanted to have an organization established by American Muslims that would become the progressive and moderate voice for building tolerance and respect for human rights and social justice both here and everywhere else.”



Robert Corin Morris traces his father's family history to the English settlers who established Williamsburg, Virginia, more than three hundred years ago. The Scotch-Irish ancestors on his mother's side arrived in the Colonies a bit later, in the early 1700's.

"Those deep white Protestant roots have nothing to fear from integrating the gifts that all the other people have brought here as well as those of the Native Americans that we displaced," Morris asserts.

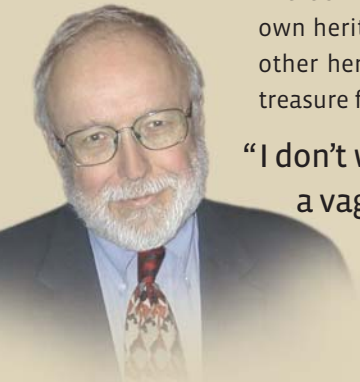
His English ancestors prospered as members the South's plantation-owning aristocracy, while his maternal relatives worked as farmers. By the 1920's and '30's, both families migrated north in search of economic opportunity.

Morris grew up in Detroit, joined the Episcopal Church during his undergraduate years at Yale, and subsequently became ordained as a priest. In 1981, he formed Interweave, an interreligious nonprofit organization.

Recently, Interweave partnered with the American Jewish Committee and other groups on a project called Abrahamic Kinship that convenes Christian, Muslim, and Jewish leaders in northern New Jersey to gain deeper knowledge and understanding for one another's faiths.

"There's no conflict between being deeply rooted in your own heritage and being open and respectful to people of other heritages," says Morris. "Each of our heritages is a treasure for the human race."

"I don't want mush. I don't want to go into a vague universalism where we're all alike."



Progress can be slow as we propose and protest, argue and advocate.

But we are grateful to be part of this vigorous democracy.

We enjoy its unparalleled privileges and accept its obligations:

To pursue our dreams while helping others.

To advance our convictions while respecting others.

To prepare our children for the gift of the American journey.



Charles B. Rangel returned to Harlem from Korea with a Purple Heart, the Bronze Star for Valor, and two career training options from the Veterans Administration—mortician or electrician.

“If they had come up with something just a notch above those two things, I think I could have accepted it,” says Rangel. “I’d seen my friends captured and killed. Not only were they insulting me, they were insulting everybody.”

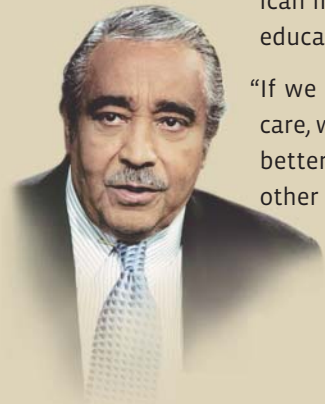
With little going for him but wits and determination, Rangel challenged the limitations set by the VA until a sympathetic counselor asked what he wanted to be. Rangel fixed on the one constant adult figure in his life, a cantankerous grandfather who operated an elevator in the criminal court building downtown, and decided to become a lawyer.

“I damn near missed the boat.”

“If they had told me, ‘Rangel, you don’t really have the intellect to become a lawyer; we just want to break it to you easy,’ I think I could have lived with that.”

Last year, Rangel capped a thirty-six-year career in the House of Representatives by becoming chair of the Ways and Means Committee. Recalling his own second chance at schooling, Rangel is engaging CEOs from one hundred American multinational companies in an effort to improve the education of American youth in math and science.

“If we can give Americans a decent education and health care, we would become a stronger country, treat each other better, and we can resist the temptation not to like each other because we don’t know each other.”



We are the stewards of America,



her ideals and institutions, her cities and natural beauty.

We are entrusted to understand America’s past and guide her future.

To create an ever more just America that is secure and free, abundant and caring for all her inhabitants.

We are thankful for the freedom to worship.

We are thankful for the freedom to speak our minds.

We are thankful for the freedom to change our minds.

We are thankful for the freedom to chart our lives.

We are thankful for the freedom to work for a better world.

We are thankful for the freedom to celebrate this day.

In America, each of us is entitled to a place at the table.



For additional copies of America’s Table®, to read more profiles, and to view the America’s Table® video, visit www.ajc.org or www.americastable.org. For more information about America’s Table®, contact Ken Schept at scheptk@ajc.org.

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