



By Valentina Cossio
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A Community Is The Home That You Choose

I am an immigrant even in my own country. I've lived in the United States for 10 years and in Bolivia for 9. When I go to La Paz, my birth city, I'm known as *la gringa*, "the American," and when I am in the States, I'm known as the *Latina*. I'll never be "Bolivian" enough there, yet I'm also not considered to be "American" enough here.

There are two Valentinas in this world who surprisingly coexist peacefully within the same body. A nomadic life is all they have known, yet I consider myself to be one of the luckiest immigrants here and there. It would have been impossible to acclimate so quickly had it not been for the communities that embraced me with open arms. Communities, by nature, are like families: diverse, accepting, supportive, and most importantly, tolerant. In his memoir, Jose Antonio Vargas inspires us to be more open and truthful, letting others truly see us to create stronger, more diverse communities.

The kindness of strangers brings together people who might otherwise have nothing else in common, even if it is only a single, random act of kindness. Vargas revealed his immigration status to people who could've easily turned him in to the authorities. Only they will know why they didn't, but their compassion was a major contributing factor. Pat, Rich, Jim, and Mary helped Vargas go to college, become a writer, get his driver's license, and welcomed, loved, and

supported him despite all the complications that came with it, not once doubting whether they were doing the right thing.

Compassion strengthens a community and is essential for it to thrive. Vargas put himself in danger of being deported when he went to McAllen, Texas, to attend a vigil for refugee children who had crossed the border, despite not knowing them or even being directly affected by them. When he was detained, his friends rushed to get him released, contacting the consul general of the Philippine Embassy, authorities in the DHS, and even the White House. Vargas created a community, Define American, to support and cater to the needs of undocumented people to show them they are not alone, they matter, and they, too, have a place in the U.S.

Society is tightly wrapped around a master narrative that divides America and the world. Some Americans have to earn their citizenship while others have to live up to it. Since whiteness is viewed as desirable, minorities – including immigrants – are underrepresented and erroneously represented in the media. Communities foster tolerance within themselves that lead to more inclusivity, but because of those misconceptions, even within a community, people are constantly competing to be better than one another. Vargas is daring individuals to question the how and why of this power construct so communities can change the master narrative.

One can be part of multiple communities simultaneously; they are not mutually exclusive. Vargas feared his Filipino family wouldn't get along with his American family, but why shouldn't they? Vargas is their common ground, and the love they share for him bind the two communities together. To be more "American" Vargas thought he could no longer act Filipino, such as when he replied to his Lolo in English rather than Tagalog. When Vargas came out as gay to his traditional, Catholic, Filipino family, they eventually accepted him, showing that being part of one community did not exclude him from another.

People today are lonelier, despite having access to more communities physically and virtually due to the advancement of transportation and technology. Vargas isolated himself from

the communities that welcomed him because he thought he was a burden, as well the communities he suddenly represented after publishing his “coming out” story. Isolation is something every immigrant faces. Communities bring humanity where it is lacking, and support its members with compassion. You are never alone; you are part of a community even if you don’t realize it. I’ve gone back and forth between countries all my life, living with one foot here and one foot there, but I’m lucky because I have two wonderful communities I call home.

(Valentina is a business major from Seminole, Florida.)