CONCLUSION: EXTENDING THE DREAM

IT IS A STORY as singular, and as old and familiar, as America itself:

Renu Pidurutagala[1] was born in Columbo, the largest city in the island nation of Sri Lanka, in 1950. Actually, her native land only *became* an island nation two years before: reputedly settled by Hindus from northeastern India circa 500 B.C., but largely Buddhist after 300 B.C., the island was successively colonized by a series of invaders, culminating in the Portuguese (who named it "Ceylon"), the Dutch, and finally the British, who ultimately granted the Singhalese their independence. Renu was the third of nine children and the eldest daughter. Her father, a technical engineer who trained himself via British correspondence courses, owned a business in the radio industry and was a great believer in education. That's why he paid to have his children educated in schools run by Catholic missionaries rather than in what were then considered inferior public schools. And that's why he allowed his daughter to earn a degree from a Montessori school in Columbo, where she was trained to practice early childhood education in the mid-1970s.

[1] I have changed some names and places to respect a desire for anonymity on the part of my subjects.

But daughters, of course, had to be married off. Sri Lankan society was changing, but it still had a caste system comparable to neighboring India's, and Renu's boyfriend of the time came from a lower stratum of society. This would not do, for arranged marriages were still the order of the day. Renu's brother was marrying into a local family, and her father hoped she could marry into the same one—a doubleheader, as it were. Renu would have none of it. She pleaded with her mother, who then turned to her father's aunt, who convinced him not to insist. Perhaps the girl was not ready.

She never would be. "I wanted to be an independent person," she said simply. So when she learned that a friend had gone to New York and would help her if she, too, made the trip, Renu applied for and received a visiting visa. Her friend introduced her to an African-American couple in nearby Mount Vernon, and she became a nanny to their son. When the child was old enough to go to school, her patrons suggested she use their basement to open a day care center. Renu had begun taking courses that would lead to a bachelor's degree in business administration (training that would be useful in running her business) and was well on her way to acquiring a "green card," giving her legal alien status. She received the necessary permits and began operating her day care center in 1984.

This is where Sheela Galle entered the picture. She, too, was a native of Columbo, two years younger than her good friend Renu, whom she met at the Montessori school. Sheela was an only child, but her experiences and aspirations were not unlike Renu's, though at the time she was working as a bookkeeper in Columbo. It was on a vacation in London in 1984 that she decided to visit the United States.

Renu met her at the airport. It was a dank October day, and Sheela was repelled by the chilly climate. But it didn't take long for Renu to convince her to stay. Sheela got a student visa (she ultimately earned an undergraduate degree in computer science and a master's degree in educational computing) and began working with Renu, who incorporated her day care center in Yorktown Heights with a name suggested by her old patron: Open Vistas.

Open Vistas grew. The 1980s were a time of rapid expansion in the day care industry—American women, who traditionally had primary responsibility for their families, were becoming a permanent presence in the paid workforce, too—and Renu and Sheela were deluged by more requests for placements than they could handle. In 1994 they

bought a home in Yorktown Heights and converted the first floor into a new facility. Renu became an American citizen in 1992 and began following American politics as avidly as she did tennis. Sheela's path to citizenship has been slower, but she is on her way. There has been talk of opening a second facility, but the women are committed to keeping the business to a manageable size.

This is the kind of story we like to hear, a story where hard work pays off and aspirations are realized. And a story where the principals speak of their adopted land with accents of love and loyalty. "I'm so grateful to this country," Renu tells me over brunch at an Indian restaurant in the immigrant-rich city of Mamaroneck. "I got my dream to come true." What was that dream? I ask her. "To become an independent person," she replies. When I press her as to just what it means to be independent, she spells it out: "To own my own business and get an education. I live the way I want to live. I do my duty, but I have no boundaries." Besides paying taxes and following regulations, her "duty" includes tending to family affairs back in Sri Lanka, attending her temple in Queens, and making meals for the poor one weekend a month. Independence does not mean freedom from responsibility, but it does mean a degree of autonomy in meeting those responsibilities that was simply not possible where she came from.

Sheela expresses similar sentiments. Though one often hears horror stories about the notoriously overtaxed and inefficient Immigration and Naturalization Service, a circumspect Sheela refuses to rise to the bait. "The system is fair," she says flatly. Individual people, she notes, aren't always honest, but this is true everywhere.

Surely the women have some complaints. I query them about racism, and while they acknowledge its existence, they do not believe they have been personally subject to it, perhaps because they live in a fairly tight-knit community that includes nearby French immigrants as well as Latino natives. I continue to try to press them on what they believe to be the nation's shortcomings, on the ways they've been mistreated. But Renu, whose patience and placidity make her a marvel in interacting with children, finally tells me, with the earned serenity of a committed Buddhist, "Life is not easy, Jim. You've got to face those things."

There are, of course, other stories to be told. Stories of Salvadorean migrants driven out of their country amid a war on communism and prevented from entering this one amid a war on drugs. Stories of Pak-

istani fathers taken from their wives and children and held indefinitely without charges amid a war on terror. Stories of immigrants who do not speak or act toward the United States in terms of love or loyalty but rather in terms of hatred and destruction. The saga of what might be called the "Dream of the Immigrant"—a subset of the Dream of Upward Mobility—has long been marked by ambivalence and despair. For much of our history, we could never quite decide whether we finally regarded immigrants as a blessing or a burden. (Can we assimilate them? Will they drive down our wages? Will our children marry them?) Immigrants themselves have been unsure about whether to stay—and even how to navigate tensions between old-timers and newcomers.

So the saga of the Dream of the Immigrant is far from over. Indeed, it seems anything but static. Once the hopes and anxieties surrounded the Irish and Germans; then it was the Italians and Japanese. Now it's the Arabs and Mexicans. Once bias against Catholics was commonplace; then it was Jews. Now it's Muslims. But it isn't all a game of ethnic musical chairs; the overall trend has been toward greater acceptance and opportunity. For example, starting a business was always largely a male aspiration, for immigrants or anyone else. But as the case of Renu Pidurutagala shows, now women can do it, too, though it hardly seems a coincidence that professional opportunities open to women continue to cluster around caring for children, the sick, and the elderly. In these ways and others, the American Dream continues to be stretched, not always comfortably, by those from elsewhere—which, in the final analysis, is where every American, even those Native Americans who crossed the Bering Strait thousands of years ago, is from.

Not all of this stretching has come from without, however. Indeed, even without a huge surge in immigration, the closing decades of the twentieth century were a time of increased awareness of demographic differences in American society, in large measure because of the civil rights movement of the 1960s. One legacy of that movement has been a heightened awareness of the ways minority experiences have not corresponded to the presumptions or practices of "normal," "mainstream," or "traditional" Americans and of the ways in which a dominant American culture has overshadowed, even repressed, such alternative experiences. And one result of this heightened awareness has been an effort to recover and celebrate these alternatives, an ongo-

ing collective effort that has revitalized American society as a whole in ways that range from more eclectic restaurant cuisine to better legal protections.

Nowhere has this collective effort been more obvious than in the American academy, where for the last twenty-five years a large body of scholarship has explored the ways various Americans have struggled with—and, in happier cases, overcome—legacies of racial, ethnic, sexual, and other forms of discrimination. Taken as a whole, this work has not only sharpened our national awareness in ways that even the most dedicated conservative cannot ignore, but has also broadened the prospects for new generations of Americans who may enjoy a greater sense of possibility—what Renu calls "independence"—than their predecessors.

But for a variety of reasons that relate to these developments, as well as resistance to them, many Americans of all varieties believe themselves to be living in a time of social fragmentation. One can't help but wonder whether the nation can be infinitely elastic and can incorporate people and traditions that are not necessarily democratic, or even pluralistic. In such a time, it may be useful—actually, it may be essential—that the skeptic of diversity as well as the true believer identify, and seek to strengthen, any sense of truly shared ground.

In writing this book, I hoped to show that the American Dream has functioned as shared ground for a very long time, binding together people who may have otherwise little in common and may even be hostile to one another. Which is not to say that the Dream should be uncritically upheld as a kind of miracle glue. Indeed, I have also hoped to show that all too often it serves as a form of lazy shorthand, particularly on the part of those who use it to ignore, or even consciously obscure, real divisions in American society.

Instead, what I would hope is that the American Dream could serve as a rigorous standard that we can use to ask a series of searching questions. What does it really mean, for example, to leave no child behind? How have we defined equality in our everyday lives, and are widely accepted terms like "equality of opportunity" more than empty abstractions? What is the price of any given American Dream, and who pays it? Are some dreams better than others? To ask, and begin to answer, such questions can transform the Dream from a passive token of national identity to a powerful instrument of national reform and revitalization.

"What happens to a dream deferred?" asked the great American poet Langston Hughes in his oft-cited 1951 poem "Harlem." The problem, he suggests, is that when dreams deferred are perceived as dreams denied, an explosion may erupt, one that will blow away living as well as dead aspirations. In an age when the American Dream still seems alive, even well, his troubling question remains as insistent as ever. The survival of our society depends on addressing it seriously, and addressing it seriously requires a willingness to work with the energy of a Puritan. This is a job for all of us. Not even the best child care can spare us the exertion.