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## Uncle Anselm, Uncle Sam

Listening to all the controversy about multicultural education, the man realized how lucky he had been as an immigrant boy in America. He had his very own Uncle Sam.

Uncle Anselm, a cousin really, was born in this country but for him, foreign forebears were a source of pride. To the boy, Uncle Anselm personified America. He stalked the streets, tall, bald and correct. As a concession to summer, he sported a straw boater but wore a vest even on hot days. Though he seemed gruff, he talked easily of American wonders like scrimshaw, panning for gold and baseball.

Best of all, when the whole family gathered for July 4th, the boy knew Uncle Anselm could be cajoled into sitting down with him at the black upright piano to play from the big Yankee Doodle song book. When they got to "Put a feather in his cap and called it ma-ca-ro-ni," the boy roared in certifiably American delight.

His own Uncle Sam. That was how it felt after lunch, when Uncle Anselm took the boy to his first baseball game. What could be more American: sitting in the bleachers, gripping a heavy brown bottle of Orange Crush and giggling when the organ played "Three Blind Mice" as the umpires came out.

The thoughts came flooding back now, stirred by the angry commotion about "multiculturalism," the demand for respect and recognition from diverse groups once quick to shed their cultural identity. The agitation came to a new boil last week with the publication of a report urging that social studies in New York public schools be taught from multiple perspectives.

The outcry was eloquent. Champions of cultural unity rightly appealed for understanding: Com-

mon values must transcend racial and ethnic differences. Otherwise, there's no melting pot; indeed, there's no pot at all, only antagonism. Still, there's a danger of overreacting to a sometimes-exaggerated desire for recognition and thus forgetting that for many people of racial and ethnic minorities there's a deeper yearning: to find the mainstream.

That was true a half-century ago when the immigration tide swept in refugees from Hitler. It is true now, when the tide carries thousands of Hmong mountain people from Laos to places like Eau Claire, Wis., and when the largest group of new citizens sworn in at New York City's 1991 naturalization ceremony is from Guyana.

Of course minorities do not want to be punished for their background the way Mexican children were in Southwest schools for speaking the only language they knew. Of course immigrants wish to preserve their heritage. Of course blacks want recognition of their long oppression and its effects on the present.

But Hispanic parents know what language their children need to succeed — and press for them to become proficient in English. Korean grocers want Ivy League educations for their children. David Dinkins and Douglas Wilder triumphed as majority, not minority, candidates.

Assimilate is not a dirty word; not a denial of diversity; not a synonym for the arrogant dominion of one culture over others. Neither is respect an outrageous demand. The man couldn't help thinking of Uncle Anselm's pride in his American ancestry and his foreign roots. There was no need to choose, then or now, especially not today, as Americans celebrate who they were and who we are.

Dear Paul & Sabine —  
Our best to you. Please note article  
above. — Love Ed & Rhoda

July 6, 1991