

## **Poverty of Culture**

### **Alex Hassan**

If I were to ask, “what’s your background?”, you could offer many answers. You could say, “I’m from California, an economics concentrator.” Or maybe, “I’m from Illinois, but my family is originally from Poland and Germany.” But in so few words, you would reveal very little of your whole story.

Whether we realize it or not, our culture is a deep part of our character. For some of us, it’s obvious how our families, traditions, and cultural experiences have shaped us; for others, less so. But regardless of whether it is apparent, our history defines each of us – and I hope it stays that way. In the modern world, we have a tendency to turn a blind eye to our backgrounds. Not intentionally, but subconsciously, influenced by the pressures of the world around us.

My background is mixed -- half Egyptian and half Colombian. My four grandparents were immigrants from these countries and kept their traditions strong in our family. I was raised in a dual-religious household, where I learned and practiced the traditions of both Catholicism and Islam. I went to mass with my mother and prayed at home with my father; I celebrated Christmas, Lent, and Easter and fasted for Ramadan. This was routine for me – and yet as I grew older, I realized what a rare opportunity I had. Though I noted some differences between the two cultures, I found more

similarities. The traditional values of close family ties, large festive gatherings, and an old world spirit of hard work and modest lifestyle became the core of my upbringing – the very same things I cherish most today.

Everything about who I am comes from my family. It is inspiring to see myself in my grandfather, who despite still being a practicing allergist, regularly patents inventions, including ones as unexpected as his secure mailbox design. My grandpa also makes music; his first song, a song in Arabic about the Egyptian woman, was released on iTunes last month. It is inspiring to see myself in my father, who in addition to being on the cutting edge of retinal surgery, works on projects as far reaching as video games. Across generations, that spirit is preserved. I am hopeful that my path will mirror these -- mixing my deep passion for biomedical engineering and business with all of the eccentric, unrelated inventions I come up with along the way.

As you can see, I care a lot about my heritage and my culture. Not just my ethnicity, but the values and traits that I have come to embody by spending the past 19 years with my family. I am *sure* my siblings are just as proud of their backgrounds, but sometimes their actions suggest another story. When one of them Snapchats their way through a family vacation instead of spending time with our family, it scares me. When another wants to go out with friends instead of staying for a large dinner with the extended family, it scares me. Not because there is anything wrong with what they are

doing; on the contrary, that behavior is common, and has been the norm for my friends throughout my life. Rather, it scares me because I know how crucial all of those moments were to my development as a person. I worry my siblings are missing these moments. I worry that as a society, as our upbringings have shifted away from family tradition, that we will lose some of our richest qualities if we don't make a conscious effort to learn about and enjoy them.

So that is why I challenge each of you to find a connection to your heritage. It's not too late. Talk with parents, grandparents, and siblings. Ask them to share stories of their time at school, or their opinions on social issues. You might find that they have more insight to offer than you think. You might be shocked to realize how similar you are.

I have come to see the mixing of cultures as a mosaic rather than a melting pot. In a melting pot, we sacrifice our individuality; we lose our background; we give up the very things that make us unique and special. But we can avoid this poverty of culture if we hang on to our own traditions, even as we combine them with those of others.

So discover your culture. Protect it and keep it alive within you. If we focus on building upon our past, we will create much richer stories for years to come.