

2020 Stritch Common Read Experience

Dear America: Notes of An Undocumented Citizen by Jose Antonio Vargas

Cultivating Common Ground Through Storytelling | Small Group Discussion Guide

Opening Dialogue. Use these prompts to generate initial discussion of the book.

1. What were your expectations before reading the book? Were those expectations met?
2. What did you like/dislike about the book? What was your general impression of the book?
3. What was something that you learned from reading *Dear America: Notes of an Undocumented Citizen* that you did not know before? Did it make you more aware of- or knowledgeable about any particular issues?
4. Was there a specific chapter, passage, or incident that left an impression, good or bad? Share the passage and its effect.

Digging Deeper | The Stories We Are. Use these prompts to engage in more complex reflection and focused dialogue on the centrality of identity and power of human storytelling.

5. Was there anything surprising about Jose's story? What was it, and why was it surprising?
6. On pages 112-113, Jose writes, "There comes a time in each of our lives when we must confront the central truth in order for life to go on." (p. 112); "To free myself—in fact, to face myself—I had to write my story." (p.113)
 - a. What role did identity play in Jose's story? Describe his journey to understand and accept himself as a whole person.
 - b. Who/what seemed to help him the most on his quest?
 - c. How/why do you think it's important to explore Jose's most central question: "Who am I?"
7. What role did fear play in Jose's story? How did his evolving ability to manage fear impact his life (e.g., relationships, success, emotional well-being)? (see p. 110, p. 111, pp.118-119, etc)



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8. Jose writes about Toni Morrison's idea of the master narrative (pp. 76-29), that the stories of those in power dominate history and culture and make it harder for others to see themselves represented equitably in the fabric of American culture. For example, as a young adult, he saw America's master narrative as being white or black, and that anything out of the margins of this view was not easily seen or understood by a mass audience. He also discusses the historical construction of (il)legality, dehumanization, and the barriers it creates to immigrants' livelihood and well-being, stating **"Too often, we're treated as abstractions, faceless and nameless, subjects of debate rather than individuals with families, hopes, fears, and dreams..."** (p. 180).
- How have you experienced or witnessed dehumanization?
 - What are other examples of master narratives that you are aware of?
 - How do master narratives and dehumanization operate within/through medicine? (e.g., How might they relate to health disparities?)
 - Given the effects of master narratives, why is it important to engage with and honor *many* stories, including stories like Jose's? What is the power of human storytelling?

Closing Reflections. Use these prompts to engage in more summative reflection, application of learning to medical education, and conclude the dialogue.

9. Toward the end of the book, Jose reflects on the notion of citizenship and shares: **"I came to the realization that I refuse to let a presidency scare me from my own country. I refuse to live a life of fear defined by a government that doesn't even know why it fears what it fears. Because I am not a citizen by law or by birth, I've had to create and hold on to a different kind of citizenship...something more akin to what I call citizenship of participation. Citizenship is showing up. Citizenship is using your voice while making sure you hear other people around you. Citizenship is how you live your life. Citizenship is resilience."**
- What do you think of Vargas' idea: citizenship of participation?
 - What opportunities will you have to more actively "participate" as a medical student and future physician?
10. Reflecting on the book in its totality, what would you say are the central themes and/or main takeaways of the book? What can you learn from these themes/takeaways and apply in your own life, particularly as you embark on your medical education and training?



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