

MARIA GUADALUPE, MARIA LOURDES, and ANGELINA
SISTERS, SAINTS, AND A SECRETARY GENERAL

Names are important. My own name is usually a conversation starter or a major conversation stopper, almost always deriving totally out of startled curiosity. I am named for my mother's dreaded aunt, Mautrecia, better known to fearful nieces and grandnieces as Auntie. "Auntie" was a deceptive sobriquet, suggesting warmth and pleasantness and lovely tea parties under the trees in summer. Actually, the old girl was a tough ol' bird, one which could quiet the young with a single look or a barked command, was married three times and on her way to a fourth union when her grown sons warned the new suitor off the property, never to return – if he knew what was good for him. I remember stories like that about her, but I barely remember her. I was young when she died, and she was relegated in my memory to Auntie, The Mysterious – the greatest mystery of all being why my mother

gave me her name in the first place. My mother probably had hopes of appeasing Auntie, but nothing in family history indicates that the ploy worked. I was given Auntie's name, and she went to her grave not knowing if I lived up to it or not. My mother went to her grave not knowing if Auntie had ever been appeased or not. I will probably go to my grave not ever knowing what it means to be Auntie's namesake. Nonetheless, I believe names are significant.

When I first met Lupe, I did not know that her name was Maria Guadalupe. I did not know that her patron saint is the revered Our Lady of Guadalupe. I did not know the legends connected with Our Lady of Guadalupe. I did not know that in some cultures a child is given several names, one of which is taken from a particular saint, who then becomes the child's patron saint. Having grown up in Kentucky in a gentile-bible-thumping-hellfire-and-damnation church in a small town where two-thirds of the population was called a minority, and people boasted having only one Jew and one catholic in town, I was totally ignorant about Our Lady of Guadalupe, and I was impressed.

The legend of Our Lady of Guadalupe, patron saint of Mexico, is a legend of hope and miracle, promising new life in a new era. It is no wonder, then, that Lupé's mother, Angelina - if not a saint, yet an angel - named her first born Maria Guadalupe. It is no wonder that Maria Guadalupe was the first of Angelina's children to make the trek into the country north of the border looking for a better life.

It is no wonder that Maria Guadalupe, better known simply as Lupe, is recognized in both countries as Lupé with the smiling face.

"In my mind, my personality," Lupé tells me, "I like friendly. If you see me when I go to visit my friends in Mexico, I am so elated and happy. I take them candy and gifts. My clothes I leave there. If they say, 'Oh, I like that dress,' I say, 'Go ahead, take it.'"

I am intrigued to know more about Lupe and her sister Lulu, who demonstrate such courage in the face of adversity, and when I ask, they agree to let me tell their story. We meet at Lulu's house, where I am introduced to tiny baby Jorge and his twin sisters, Rosie and Dolly, and a cousin Cindy. The children are happy, active, and polite. Lulu has only to change her tone of voice from we-have-a-visitor polite to mama-means-business serious to keep the girls in tow. The baby is crawling around his mother, peering out at me, smiling shyly. The girls are interested in the tape recorder, I explain how it works, and then they go back to their play.

We talk about the other women whose stories I've written, all of whom, I tell them, have been strong women doing unusual work. I tell them I think they are unusually strong women, too. It may seem they are just doing traditional things - raising families, working jobs - but they are doing these things while studying for their GED,

preparing for the citizenship test - and surviving. That's why I want to tell their story.

First, we clear up some of the basics, such as how long they have been here. Lupe fourteen years. Lulu nine. Casually, I ask if they spoke English when they first came here, and my question is answered with great hoots of laughter.

"Noooooooooooo," they say in unison, laughing out loud to remember. "Nothing," they both say over and over again. "Nothing, nothing. Only, 'what is you name?' or 'chicken' or 'I did' or 'I can,'" Lupe explains.

"Like me when I try to speak Spanish?" I ask, reminding Lupe that I have said I want to learn Spanish. She has been trying to teach me a few Spanish words every time we get together, so she knows my language limitations. She tries to look serious as she acknowledges my question, but she is smiling. But what does a woman do if she doesn't speak the language and really needs to?

"Take a class," Lupe answers simply, and then she delineates her own path of progress. "Working at the Ocean Park Retreat Center helped. Head Start program helped a lot. Two times a week, two hours a day, I take English class. New friends I have met help me to study for English class and to practice to take my test for citizenship."

I tell them I think I could probably take the citizenship test right now and not do as well as they would, and I have lived here all my life. We laugh and they offer

to give me the test the next time we visit. Afterwards, I do a little research and decide that maybe this is not so funny. I call INS (Immigration and Naturalization Service; and they send me a copy of the test questions and answers. I talk with a teacher who preps immigrants for the test. I ask the teacher if she thinks I can pass that test right now without studying the questions. I can, I am told, *if* I get the right questions *in* my native language *and* have the right interviewer. Taking the citizenship test, then, is something like playing the lottery.

Applicants are told to memorize one hundred questions and answers. The applicant does not know how many questions will be asked. It can be anywhere from one to twenty, depending on the interviewer. It is an oral exam. Reading and writing English are tested separately. *And* there are several questions, the teacher tells me, which just might trip up a native born citizen. She was right. I could not name all the members of the president's cabinet nor the department under each. I did not know the number of the immigration and naturalization form used to apply to become a citizen (N400). I did not know how many changes and/or amendments have occurred in the constitution (twenty-seven, but that can change). I did remember - because I was an adult when Kennedy and Regan were shot and Nixon resigned - who becomes president if both the president and vice-president die (Speaker of the House). The most interesting answer for me, however, to a question that seems to be open

to opinion is this: What is the most important right granted to a United States citizen? The right to vote.

Lulu's children are playing in a corner of the living room, which, Lulu tells me, is off limits when they are eating anything. The living room is kept nice for visitors and family gatherings. The twins romp with little brother Jorge, who delights in his older sisters. Occasionally, he looks over his shoulder to be sure his mother is still there and to check out the stranger in the house. Then he goes on with his play. These are happy children.

Lupe begins to talk about how it was when she first came to this country. "My first job was picking oysters. Yes, in the cannery, sorting. I worked there maybe for four months because it is a very hard job for a woman, especially when they put us on in the night - when it's raining - in the middle of the night we go picking. O, my God," she says, as she puts her hand to her forehead and shudders a bit. "My little son was only a month and a half old then, and it was hard to leave him home while I do work. My second job was in the cranberry fields, and I was there for five years. Then the director of the Ocean Park Retreat Center comes to me and says, 'Lupe, do you want to work at the camp?' and I say sure. I work there for a year part time on the weekends cleaning the cabins before the groups come. Then I move into working full time. It is very nice for me because I am learning how to cook and how to do everything in the camp. I love to cook. It is one of my favorite things. I'm keeping

the job at the Retreat Center. I'm working part time in the school helping with the kids. I like to work with the kids, to help the kids, but I have to go to school and take more classes - English and computing. I don't know enough about computers. I've never run a computer before, and I need it - especially for helping children do homework."

The next year, Lupe tells me, she was working a full forty-hour week with preschool children *and* forty hours a week at Ocean Park Retreat Center. She worries about having time to be with her two sons and how to be believable when she has to tell them no, no, or yes. It is the perennial problem of working mothers. How does a mother work two jobs to provide for her children - and nurture the children in the same twenty-four hours - not to mention her own needs? There is no easy answer, but having family around helps. Lupe has her mother, as well as her sister Lulu and her family.

When I ask what they consider the hardest thing about coming to the States, both furrow their brows and think. It is not an easy question for them, and they take their time before they answer. Then, Lupe speaks in a very serious tone of voice.

"No friends," she says simply and somberly. "No friends. And because we do not speak English, how to talk to people was hard. It happens now to my mom. She doesn't like to go to American parties because she can't talk to the people. Sometimes she is crying about it."

And the best part of being here? Lupe does not hesitate this time. "The simple life," she begins. "The cares are more easy than in Mexico. I don't care how hard you have to work, but if you do work hard, you can have a car, a house, and nice clothes. In Mexico you work very hard, hard, hard, and you have an old car. The rent is expensive. It is too expensive to buy a house. In the United States it is easier to live."

Lulu is nodding. "On the peninsula," she adds, "there are more opportunities for the kids - especially for the kids - schools and all. The kids learn to speak English here. In big city they don't learn to speak English fast."

All the while we're talking, Lupe and Lulu have been speaking both English and Spanish back and forth to the children. It is a blessing, I think, especially in these times, for anyone to speak more than one language, and I envy both the children and the mothers. I tell Lupe - again - that I am going to learn Spanish. Again, she doesn't laugh, but smiles politely because she knows I haven't gotten much beyond muy bien and holla. I think I need to.

Like just about everyone else in the United States, both Lupe and Lulu laughingly talk about winning the lottery. And what would they do if they did? "Help my friends," Lupe says immediately, "in Mexico especially, without houses and schools." Lulu agrees, and adds, "buying books and maps to take to school to tell about Mexico."

Lupe has to leave for work, and Lulu and I continue to talk as best we can with her promising English and my promise of Spanish. Like Lupe, Lulu is patient with me. Baby Jorge cries. He is hungry. Lulu nurses him, and he is content again. Lulu comforts him with cooing words. The words are in Spanish. The cooing translates in any language. So the children are really learning three languages: Spanish, English, and a mother's cooing. I make a mental note to add cooing to the short list of languages I can speak.

Lulu talks about teaching children to become responsible adults. Her theory of parenting is not complicated. She talks to her children. She gives them examples of how to be in the world. She gives them rules. She teaches them how to treat other people. "You don't talk about other people," she tells them. "No, no, no. None of your business. Respect everyone. Every person deserves respect."

Lulu sets clear boundaries for her children, and as a result, they are developing a strong sense of trust. They don't have to question what they can and can't do. She has set the boundaries. Kids who don't have boundaries set for them will go around pushing everything and everyone trying to find those limits that will protect them from themselves and others, and others from them. If no one tells children where the boundaries are, children get lost. "Pay attention to the kids," Lulu tells me. "Try to say one good thing when

they come in the house." Pay attention to the children, and those children will grow up to pay attention to their children. That about covers it.

While Lulu is raising her three children, she is working on her GED and studying for the citizenship test. People come to her house to study once a week. She goes to her English class. Some day she would like to teach, pre-school maybe. She practices her English, and she has advice for others new to this country. "Come to the schools and the day cares. People need to go to schools and see their children there. Try new things for learning English. Read the newspapers. Practice your English. If you don't speak English very well, get help. Spanish-speaking people helping Spanish-speaking people is the secret. Whatever church you like, go there. Go to the churches. Jesus is everywhere. We do not need to stay separate."

Lulu is not just talking. Lulu has many projects to get others into schools, classes, and churches, encouraging them not to hide, encouraging them to become part of the community, to answer ads on TV, to call on the telephone to inquire about classes. Her listing of projects is interrupted by the ring of a toy telephone. Talk of telephones has prompted Jorge to begin playing with the phone that says things in English. He looks up at us and smiles, another convert to Lulu's cause.

Both Lupe and Lulu credit their mother, Angelina, with the skills and values they have today. They are simple

teachings with powerful potential. *It doesn't matter if your clothes are old, but they should be clean. What you're wearing doesn't have to cost a lot of money. Be nice to people. Respect others, especially at work.* They have learned these things from their mother, and they will pass them on to their children. Potential: No more wars.

For the past three and a half years I have been taking care of my granddaughter, who is almost four now, and we often watch Sesame Street together. For me watching Sesame Street is like visiting old friends of my children. I miss Kermit, but the other original Muppets still look the same, and the new ones fit right in to that wonderfully diverse neighborhood.

One morning Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the United Nations, makes a guest appearance on Sesame Street. My granddaughter is not impressed, but I am. The Muppets have a problem. They want to sing the alphabet song, but they can't decide who is going to sing. Enter the Secretary General, impeccably groomed in suit and tie.

"What is the problem?" he asks in his rich, deep voice-from-out-of-Africa.

Elmo explains that they want to sing the alphabet song, but they can't agree whose turn it is.

"There is no problem," Kofi Annan says quietly. "We all can sing together?"

And so they do. All of the Muppets - and Kofi Annan. Red or yellow, black or white, pink or purple, grouchy or

not, they sing in unison. "ABCDEFGH...Won't you come and sing with me?" Then in pure Sesame Street style, they cheer loudly, jump up and down, and clap their hands with glee, happy as little Willapa Bay clams.

Rosita says she is so-oo happy, she wants to give Kofi Annan a kiss. Then, of course, all the Muppets want to kiss the Secretary General, who sagely observes again that there is no problem. They can just have a group hug. And so they do.

Until that day, I had not known what the Secretary General looked like. I had not knowingly seen him before. But shortly afterwards, I see him on television speaking to the United Nations about war and rumors of war. "Look!" I shout. "That's Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the United Nations. I saw him on Sesame Street." And I clapped my hands with glee.

We take our lessons where we find them. The third generation of Grandmother Angelina's family is not old enough yet to be worried about the world and growing up. They are concerned with being children, as they should be. They have known love and attention all their lives, as they should have. In one sense, they have already won the lottery - determined by women of incredible courage and great strength.

So, we take our lessons where we find them, and this is the lesson. We do not need to stay separate. We are family -

in any language - and we all can sing together. No problem.

Group hug.