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Nation of immigrants has a short memory

I recently received a personal letter with a sticker reading "Vote for Saving America's Borders, Language and Culture." In these argumentative times about immigration and language, it got me thinking about America's culture.

I tried to imagine myself as a naive visitor arriving (yes, with a passport and visa) and trying to define the essence of America. Our country is a fad-driven culture — people want the latest of everything, be it cars, cell phones, iPods, and the latest movies, music and fashions. They're obsessed with celebrities, humiliating television shows, overworking and overeating.

Are these the qualities that make for a culture of shared values and ways of looking at the world around us? I doubt it very much.

Americans once espoused a culture of fair play and team thinking. At least that was the stated ideal, oddly juxtaposed with racism, slavery and religious intolerance. But even the ideal has degenerated with political attack ads, a red-versus-blue mentality, the growing divide between religion and science, and a pervasive "what's in it for me" attitude.

If we look deeper, American culture is really a collection of cultures. That's because of our extraordinary ethnic and cultural diversity. Our culture includes the customs of Native Americans; Spanish, English and French settlers; and the many different cultures that followed — a potpourri of European, African and Asian, to name just a few. If we're not a melting pot, our culture is certainly a hodgepodge and nothing less.

What is America's language? You could argue it's English, but then English has practically become the universal language of our entire world. Our own brand of English reflects a multifaceted cultural heritage, absorbing words from other tongues, such as "chutzpah" and "the big enchilada."

As a child, I'd hear sprinklings of Yiddish at home. Outside, I'd encounter an amazing array of accents and foreign tongues — Russian, German, Italian, Spanish, French, Japanese and Arabic.

Sure, they often made me uncomfortable because I couldn't understand them. But I learned to relish the differences. A strange language wasn't anything that a smile and a nod couldn't quickly overcome.

And what of America's borders and immigrants — the subject of increasingly strident words? In the 1930s, during the Depression, my father would occasionally sneak across the Canadian border to find work in the United States. He was an illegal immigrant — like most others, hard-working and willing to do what other people would not.

We all eventually emigrated, officially, and became U.S. citizens.

A recent article in the Arizona Daily Star noted that undocumented aliens contribute \$20 billion a year to our Social Security system, money they'll never draw on because they've used fake Social Security numbers. Their withheld income taxes add up to another \$40 billion to \$80 billion a year.

That's a lot of money and, in many ways, undocumented aliens help keep our government afloat. They're doing more for us than we often do for them. Unfortunately, that's often been the case with how Americans have treated immigrants.

Instead, let's honor and respect their hard work and the many contributions they make to our language and culture. Think about our diverse heritage next time you eat sushi, pasta, beef and broccoli, or a taco. All that is part

of who we are as Americans.

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