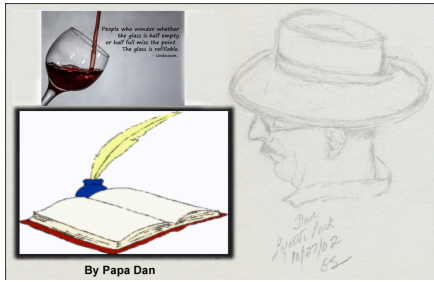


An Optimist Travels North

By Dan Sapone

**“A pessimist sees a glass that’s half empty.
An optimist sees a glass that’s half full
They both miss the point.
The glass is refillable.”
— PapaDan (and many others)**



The New Year often brings with it some “New Ideas” — some are trivial, some are significant, and *some* of those ideas are actually new (but not all of them). Lyrics to an old Allen and Sager song come to mind — [Everything Old Is New Again](#) — reminding us to be open to “new” ideas and also to the possibility that some of those ideas are not so new.

Of all the “Not New” ideas that have risen to the surface with the coming of the New Year, one that has dominated a good deal of our national conversations has been **immigration**. Since I come from a family of immigrants, that subject has captured my imagination. As I’ve written before, my immigrant grandparents and their children — who became my parents — were impressive **optimists**. Looking back on the struggles they endured before taking the leap to come to America, their optimism is quite a surprise. The stunning poverty that “booted” my grandparents out of Southern Italy and the earthquake that destroyed everything they knew there, could very well have had the opposite effect on their belief in a future; but they got on boats, spent weeks in steerage just to settle in a dusty coal-mining town in West Virginia, before launching another journey across a continent to California – but that’s a story for another time.

As I look back, what is left to me — to us — are their stories. That’s really all. In my case, stories from dawn of the **twentieth** century. So, as I hear fragments of stories from here and now, the early years of the **twenty-first** century, my imagination has been trying to recreate today’s stories of those who are so much like my grandparents. What are their stories?

Here Is Just One

Midway between Mexico’s border with Honduras and Mexico’s northern border, a man named Ronaldo came home late in the evening to the shelter his family had occupied for the past week, as they traveled north. He had been able to acquire some ears of corn, a bag of beans, some bread, and some bananas. Some days he did better than others, but today wasn’t so bad for the last week of December. His six-year-old son liked the bananas, his wife, Alma, appreciated the beans and the corn but, here in this shelter, they didn’t have a way to cook them; so, they would have to wait for a better location on their way north. Ronaldo told his wife in their Honduran dialect, “There are stories in town about ‘asylum’ in the north,” he said. “*Asilo*” was a word whispered in town among Hondurans who had gotten this far and had dreams of travelling farther north; but there were both good stories and bad stories. Ronaldo’s Uncle Mario had spoken of “*asilo*” in America and left Honduras five years ago hoping to make it to the American border and apply for asylum. He had learned the rules and figured that their attempt to escape the official corruption, street gangs, and poverty of their hometown would get his family into America.

Uncle Mario and his family left in the summer — and no one in town ever heard from him again. Ronaldo imagined two possible outcomes: one, that he had succeeded, entered Texas, made his way to California, and found a job as a fisherman in San Diego. Eventually, Ronaldo imagined, Mario may have even travelled farther north to the Central Valley and worked on one of the prosperous farms they had heard about. Uncle Mario had experience in the vineyards and fruit orchards in Honduras and Ronaldo figured he would do well.

Ronaldo had heard stories like that in the “*bodega*” where he had worked in Honduras.

Ronaldo also imagined another outcome, that his uncle had been harassed at the border, rejected, and faced the harsh combination of the American immigration system and crowds of desperate people. Those were terrible stories; but Ronaldo put them out of his mind — expecting better from the Americans. After all, America had a reputation as a nation of immigrants and a welcoming history, or so he had heard. As Ronaldo unloaded his cart he told his wife, “The time is right. It will be a New Year — 2019. Let’s leave in the morning.” So, they agreed to pack the cart with the food they had stored and bags of clothes, and left before dawn.

It took 15 days to reach the US border. It was not an easy passage — some food was available, but it was not cheap. Along the way they ended up in a large stream of people like themselves, most without vehicles, with the same plan. Out of caution, they looked for places to sleep away from the crowds, not sure what to expect from the others. They arrived at the border on Thursday January 10 and there was a bit of a commotion. People told stories that the American President was taking a tour of the border and there were some disturbances; but Ronaldo didn’t believe that — why would the President do that? That would seem to just cause trouble.

While waiting his turn to approach the checkpoint and apply for asylum, Ronaldo was optimistic. This was a new idea for his family, even though many others had this idea before him; and he was proud that he had gotten his family this far. And so they waited.

In reality, this was clearly not a “new” idea. Seeking a promised land was an ancient idea, but it felt new for Ronaldo’s family and the thousands of others waiting at the border with the same idea — waiting for America to fulfill its historic promise. And so they waited.

As they waited their turn for his dream to come true, Ronaldo remembered the bible stories he was taught in his youth — Moses and Joshua arriving with a large crowd of migrants at the threshold of The Promised Land. The story he was told as a child was offered as a triumphant example for those who are willing to be patient. But, as he grew up, read the rest of that story, he recalled that the Israelites were found to be unworthy when they arrived at the border and wandered forty years in the desert. After a whole generation of that caravan died in the desert, Moses handed the leadership of the Israelites over to Joshua. Moses died within sight of the Promised Land on Mount Nebo while Joshua went on to complete the task of leading the Israelites into the Promised Land. And that’s when the battle and the real struggle actually began.

As Ronaldo waited and heard more stories of migrants approaching the American border, he wondered: would the coming days be triumphant for him and his family, like Joshua’s entry into the Promised Land?



Or would his experience be like Moses — a dream, a promise, and a long hard journey with an abrupt ending? Would others tell **HIS** story?

And if his story did turn out like Joshua and his people, how would his children tell the story **AFTER** the crossing? Would they be welcome in The Promised Land or would a new battle begin?

Ronaldo was insistent — he would be optimistic. And so he waited.

