



## ¡Feliz Fourth!

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By John Loofbourow, MD

MY COUSIN'S POOL is a few decades old, and the plaster began to flake. So she sent out for bids. To her surprise an out of town bidder was far and away the most competitive. It was a major commercial pool operator who was finding little work in among its usual big customers.

It appears that although pool work is scarce, and many companies are laying off experienced people or going broke, this one decided to respond as in the saying, "When the going gets tough, the tough get going."

I imagine it felt there is no better time to expand than when the competition is in trouble. So it enormously widened its area of activity, and focus, and advertized aggressively, both to keep the best people working and to seize the moment by taking a calculated risk.

Building or even replastering a pool is not a simple matter to be accomplished by a visit or two to Home Depot. It is an orchestrated series of specialized tasks which must be independently and collectively completed - correctly. Every step is critical to the final result.

The work began in the heat of July last year. The pool was drained. The old plaster was removed. One morning, 12 men appeared to sandblast the tile, and to chip and jackhammer away the plaster down to reinforced cement beneath.

The accumulated plaster was raked up and shoveled into wheelbarrows. The wheelbarrows were muscled up a plank to poolside, and then about 75 feet to a truck. There, at last, was an electric lift to move the loaded wheelbarrows up to the truck bed. It was a 10 hour job in July heat. Next was the application of plaster. An entirely different crew of 8 men sprayed the plaster onto the pool, in several applications, and worked the material again and again until it was perfectly smooth, formed, and set up. Before, after, and in between these two major efforts were visits from supervisors, and various jobs done by plumbers, electricians, and technicians.

What was most curious and impressive was this: The most timely and reliable crews consisted entirely of people who could not speak English well or could not speak it at all.

A few years ago in January, a huge eucalyptus tree fell from the south side of our creek, destroying four very old olive trees. The eucalyptus was at least 120 feet high, and 9 feet diameter at the base; three great resinous trunks bearing leafy sails defied the storm.

On losing the challenge, the fallen tree roots and base nearly totally blocked the creek. That week the roiling brown water was high; it was raining heavily day on day, yet the authorities informed me the tree was not theirs (and neither was the creek). So I had a commercial tree company remove it.

The job required the bone-numbing work of 10 men, over two days. They stood with raging creek water up to their waists, wielding four-foot chain saws, cut and then carried the heavy green 100 pound chunks of eucalyptus on their backs through the fast water, up

the banks, and across 150 feet of more shallow water to a truck.

The race and origin of these men was obvious. Most were very young. I didn't ask about citizenship, or work status. I felt only kinship, admiration, and enormous gratitude, wistfully recalling my own youth, and my own foolish, fierce pride in doing heavy work alongside grown men while 'knocking' almonds in the dry dusty north valley heat.

Afterward, there was a great void in my back yard. The forest was simply gone. In an act of faith, I planted several fruit trees. Now, by each 4th of July, one little tree throws off hundreds of sweet fruit.

Is it a prune or plum? Whatever it is, the recurring luminous blasts of sweet life is like Independence Day fireworks.

I confess to my own prejudice in regard to immigrants, the result of personal life experience. I lived for a year in a Chihuahua mining town as a child. I worked with and interpreted for *braceros* as a young man. I worked in Spanish-encrusted fields and almond orchards every summer for many years. I interned in the Panama Canal Zone. I practiced in Woodland where I was the only Spanish-speaking physician in the entire region at the time. Then, aware of the life of migrants, I spent 8 years organizing and operating migrant and East Yolo clinics.

My wife is from Chile and, when we were married, I felt the need for a master's degree in Spanish Literature, because I knew how to swear and lie in many dialects but knew no literature, history or grammar. These experiences marked and changed my life.

As one result, it seems to me that the immigrants of all sorts who continue to risk life and health to seek better lives in the U.S. are our national life's blood. Those floods and storms leading ultimately to the planting of fruit trees, and now the annual July explosion of sweet fruit thrown up from the dead tree beds speak to me of the significance of recurring floods of immigrants who continue to create and recreate this most fortunate nation. So on Independence Day I like to send forth this metaphoric greeting: *Feliz ¡4th!*"

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