

El Paso

By: Ivan M. Hageman, The East Harlem School at Exodus House, Co-Founder and Head of School

How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?
Psalm 137:4 (KJV)

I was waiting to fly out of El Paso. I was young then. The dust from the Mogollon Mountains clung to the seams of my clothes, and the winds of the Gila Wilderness still whispered in my ears. My body had been trail hardened by the rough terrain Geronimo once trod, while my heart was softened by the quietly kept beauty of that corner of New Mexico - and then battered by a call from home as I came off the trail. My father had just suffered a stroke. So now I was trying to get back to the city.

I have grown old since that distant day in that west Texas town of El Paso. And my father survived, but he forever lost his golden tongue and the muscular roll of his stride. And he is now long gone. Meanwhile, my planet has grown hot with each of our many roundings of the sun together. But with that hail of gunfire, I was flung back to that border town, my father's ancient desert faith, and my great love for our country - the land, the people, and *our sacred Honor*.

In these moments - and all of my moments - I fly high above political pieties and panderings. I cling to the wisdom of the desert faiths, the Four Noble Truths, and the Enlightenment. I believe in the liberal arts - for all. I trust science and believe in manmade climate change. I think that the Mexicans I have met are the best Americans I have met. I think we landed on the moon. *That* the daughters of the poor should have the same quality of education as the sons of the rich. *That* the children of the rich suffer, too. *That* millennials are in despair. *That* women, Muslims, and POW's should be spoken of with respect.

I see that our society is tautly strung between desire and fear, and that is what makes the markets go, what wins elections - and that is also why people sometimes snap. I see that some in power cynically pluck at those tight strings. *That* the tragic cacophony on the border of the Rio Grande is a symphony they orchestrated. *That* what I say here is not politics. *That* this is moral forensics, not an autopsy - *that* there is yet life in our body politic. I know these things because my life's work has had me move across the borders of race and class. I know both sides of the Wall.

In Spanish Harlem we are coming hot off a summer of ICE raids in our community - government raids also targeting Mexicans. And I know that I am not a school Head without a heart. *That* I am not the Principal bereft of principles. *That* I am neither fundraiser nor a bureaucrat. I have the honor to lead a community where we build and balance the body, spirit, and mind. Our mission is to create and share lives of deep meaning, dynamic virtue, and transcendent joy. And we do so! EHS is a school of dignity and honor. Serenity and joy. We do not set children loose on a path that ends in emptiness and despair. Our school is a lonely outpost of the free and the brave.

Those many years ago I sat in El Paso, helpless, as my father lay silenced by a stroke. And today, while I have yet the gift of speech, I will not sit silent in New York City as people are struck down in a hail of bullets conjured from on high. A Head of School is first and foremost a protector of the school community and a guardian of the truth. And going forward, perhaps together, we will all speak, beyond politics, with one moral voice - Heads of School, Principals, and you dear and good people of principle and decency!

May we again *mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor*.