

Why I Close My Restaurant

George Mardikian - San Francisco, California

Every Christmas eve, I close my restaurant to the public. My wife and I become the hired help to serve our employees. We try to give them the finest Christmas repast. This exchange of roles is symbolic. This is an ancient Armenian custom we have introduced into our American life.

Each national group has brought something of its heritage in the form of thousands of different customs, which have become integral parts of life in this country. I believe that true humility is a basic need of mankind today. Why do I believe this? Aside from the fact that Jesus Christ taught it, my own experiences seems to me a living testimony of its truth.

As a young man in my native Armenia, I was organizing boy scout troops when the Turks and the Russians invaded the Republic of Armenia. I was captured and thrown into prison. I nearly starved to death in this time of crisis. An older and wiser inmate said to me, "Don't lose hope." He was right, for some American friends in the Near East Relief helped me to escape. They used the ruse of telling my captors that I was an American. I became an American before I became an American.

Eventually, I was able to work my way to the United States. Here I was, a humble immigrant boy crossing the Atlantic to a country that seemed to answer all my prayers for happiness and freedom. My feelings when I first saw the Statue of Liberty cannot be described. Even today, when I pass it on my frequent trips to Europe, a feeling—something like reverence—comes over me.

When I entered the shower baths at Ellis Island, I found plenty of soap and water. I used them freely because it seemed to me that I was washing away all the hatreds and prejudices of the old world. As I stepped out of the shower and came face to face with a guard in uniform, he actually smiled at me. The smile of a stranger may seem to be a fleeting, insignificant moment to others, but I remember it vividly because it set the mood for my new life. It was perhaps an omen of the joy and friendship I was to find about me.

When I first arrived, I spoke very little English and had practically no money. But I did have enthusiasm, the will to work, and bright hopes for a new life ahead. I got on the westbound train for San Francisco. Everywhere I went strangers were willing to help, and I felt very humble.

This wonderful land has been good to me. It has given me friends by the hundreds in all walks of life. I believe that in this society where love and mutual respect are fostered and encouraged, I must do more than contribute my share towards the material and the spiritual well being of all. I believe that friendship, which grows out of love and true humility, is the most important thing in life.

George Mardikian's first job in America was washing dishes in a San Francisco cafeteria; he eventually bought the place and built it into a renowned restaurant. For his work to improve food service for combat troops in Korea, Mardikian was awarded the Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian award an American can receive.