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Bridge Course Student
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When I was invited to talk about my experience in the Odyssey Project, I found myself in trouble. It is not because I lack words to describe the important and generous task that the people involved [in the Odyssey Project] take to full extent. That is to say: thank you to our instructors, organizers, and volunteers.

Exploring my feelings and my appreciation, I necessarily started thinking about myself. Then I realized that I am in even more trouble. 'This is not easy!' I said to myself. I am compelled to compress into a few sentences something that can not be measured or weighted.

I feel now obliged to start by introducing myself with some personal data. My name is Francisco Pastrana and I was born in a small town in Mexico where everything is unique: we had only one school, only one church, only one little plaza. Because of circumstances I ended up living in different places in my country. It wasn't until I arrived here that I was given a label. I became a minority and experienced what it is to be an immigrant: to live in a different country, a different culture, with a different language.

Living in a different language opens up a personal dilemma, and I, like millions in my condition, found it easier to embrace what we can more easily deal with and avoid what is more difficult. Nonetheless, I knew that such a decision involved other difficulties; the most aberrant is the alienation that comes with it. And it does not help when the mainstream media persist with their rhetoric reinforcing traditional attitudes against people who, like myself, come here to make a living and never become "Americans" thanks to our reluctance to learn the official language.

Therefore, when I received the invitation to the Odyssey Project Bridge Course I more than welcomed it. I felt the urgency and importance of being fluent and being in full command of English, especially because I knew that reading and comprehension are the core part of the Bridge Course. But I could not imagine the many fortuitous surprises that were included in the package.

We were given some books and a good dictionary, and we were invited to read them, carefully. With *gusto* and some perplexity we immersed ourselves in the content of the stories and essays. I discovered soon that with the silent readings came other solitary reflections that we were encouraged to discuss in our classes. These reflections and discussions opened new windows that helped us understand who we are and why we are here. The readings were our fountains; the writers became like friends, the classroom our special niche, the instructors facilitators to new knowledge that was there to be revealed. The class came together enthusiastically to make sense of an array of ideas and experiences that are our common heritage.

A great man from South America—whose name I can't remember—told us that knowledge is elusive. This is true. It takes time and some effort to interpret the meaning behind Plato, Hemingway, or Marx. Here we were adrift in a world of ideas where no moral lesson comes abruptly or pre-digested. The world, or better, human experience, was revealed as something subtle and deep. This was a precious gift that we were invited to unwrap at our own pace.

Now, I feel a necessity to take things slowly, earnestly but confidently meeting my goals; to be aware, to open my ears and eyes to new experiences that come into my everyday life. This is my belief. I am the same but I think a little differently; I am the same but I can understand a little better. The changes manifest in ourselves could remotely become a revolution. It is an honest beginning for a better society. On a personal level, one has a sense of what it means to be proud, not only to be American, but a whole human being. And I truly believe that this surpasses borders or races, any language, at any time.