



High School Graduation

June 11, 2017

Speech by Pati Jinich, Parent of Class of 2017

Faculty, graduates, parents and distinguished guests, it is a great honor to be speaking with all of you today. Russell, thanks so much for the invitation.

I was so excited about it, that on my most recent trip back from Mexico, I found myself jotting down a list of 100 reasons for why immigration officials should let this Mexican back into the country, just in case they suddenly decided not to. Reason #1 was “but I am giving the speech at my son’s graduation!” For Reason #100 I had pulled up the photo from my phone for a [Mexican Style Dream Boat Hot dog](#) which is so good, it has brought me to tears. It would act as proof of how well Mexican and American go together. It could shine a light on what Mexicans bring to the American table. You guys love our tacos, we love your hot dogs, have you tasted what we do to them? Ooooooh, here’s [another great one](#). If that didn’t work, I’d pull up a [Chorizo Burger](#). Smoky chorizo, crisp bacon, melted habanero cheese, avocado spread, light on the lime, heavy on the roasted garlic, hard to resist. No? Carne asada doesn’t have to always go on tacos, great [on pizza](#) too. No? [Poblano corn pizza](#)? If all failed, I’d ask officer to help me find a pork butt, I’m sure we could find a 10 pounder, and a lighter or a match, I could make [Carnitas](#) and we could have a [taco party](#) for everyone. I know... things the worried mind can think, right?

Well, turns out there was no cookout required at the airport, and here we are. In thinking about what I can share that will be most useful to you, its not the Quick & Easy recipes to cook in a small space with no proper kitchen, as you all can get that on Instagram. But rather, some insights from being an immigrant, a topic I find myself thinking about a lot lately, as you are all, in a way, about to become strangers in a new land.

When I first moved to the US, it was just for a couple of years. Dany and I had gotten married, he got a job in Texas, I was writing my thesis on Mexican democracy and planning to apply to graduate school. Then, Alan was born, then Daniel got a job offer in DC so we moved here, then Sami was born... And then, I got a call from my mom. In her most stern tone, she asked: *Pati, do you know what you have become? You have become a despatriada.*

Now, I didn’t take that statement for the insult that it was if only because I knew how much she missed me. But it shook me. Despatriada means someone with no patria, no homeland. Someone who comes from nowhere, belongs to nowhere and has nowhere to go. Someone with no roots, floating around as if cut loose in space.

Around that time, I was also professionally frustrated. According to the linear path I had set for myself when I was your age, I was working in what was supposed to be my dream job, as a policy analyst at a prestigious think tank. Yet, I was hating every second of it, except for when I was eating lunch. I had grown to love food and cooking, but figured if I loved it so much, it was

meant to be a hobby, because work is supposed to be serious stuff. So I kept at it until I got into an early existential crisis of sorts. I think this is how I landed in that frustrating situation:

Although I've always been a ridiculously enthusiastic eater, before moving to the US I hadn't jumped into the kitchen much. Once we moved, the weight of nostalgia threw me in the kitchen. I was homesick. I hankered for the tastes from home, for the foods that had nurtured me growing up. So I began a desperate quest for those recipes, as if by making them I'd find sturdy ground to stand on. So... I started stalking people: anyone who I thought sounded, looked or acted Mexican. Someone buying pounds of lard, Mexican; someone stocking up on fresh jalapeños, must be Mexican; someone getting fresh cactus paddles; without a doubt, Mexican. I approached them and asked: how do you make your pozole, salsa, tamales? I began connecting with the Mexican migrant community, people from all over Mexico, from places I hadn't even been to, or heard of before. They shared their recipes and stories, and some even invited me into their kitchens. Suddenly, I was looking into Mexico from a much wider and detailed lens. I started eating my way back to Mexico, from a small kitchen in a duplex in Dallas, TX, and loving it.

I considered going into Food studies rather than political science for graduate school. Yet, I could hear my dad say, *after our efforts to put you through college, you want to go in the kitchen to rinse pots and pans?* Dany, on the other hand, insisted I should switch to cooking as he noted *the only pages you seem to read from the newspaper are from the food section.* I began to eye him with mistrust, as I remembered my mom's wise advice *do not ever trust a man, including, and mostly, the one you marry.* Was Dany a macho man in disguise who wanted me chained to the kitchen? I yanked myself back on track, applied for a Masters in Latin American Studies at Georgetown, got merit scholarship, applied for that dream job, and we are back at that place where I was miserable working in a think tank dreaming about lunch.

At that point Juju was born. After much hesitation, I realized I didn't want to give our boys an example of working and preparing only to be professionally miserable. I wanted to give them an example of taking leaps of faith, defying your own and others expectations, following your gut. So, I resigned, enrolled in night time culinary school and instead of writing about politics I started writing about food.

By chance, I met the director of the Mexican Cultural Institute who wanted to add cooking classes to their programming. If I could build a professional curriculum, find sponsors, get kitchen equipment donated, people interested in attending, I had an open door. It took me more than a year to pull it together. Did I know how to build a curriculum? Yes. Did I have any experience fundraising? No. Did I know how difficult it was? No. Would I have done it if I had known? No.

A month before launching the classes, we did a walk through of the space where the classes would take place. To my surprise, it wasn't in the kitchen, where I thought I would teach to a cozy group of 12/15 people: it was in the grand salon that fits 100s of people, a giant screen would go here, chairs lined up there, microphone here and camera in the corner. If not, I was told, it wasn't worth it for them. I panicked. I didn't have 100 people willing to attend, I had only 34. Neighbors, friends and their friends and their dentist too. Had I spoken in public before? No. Used a microphone? No. Been on stage, or on a giant screen? No.

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I practiced so much, that instead of telling the boys our usual night time stories of a monkey called waba-waba which I had made up, I taught them how to make an imaginary [chicken tinga](#) every night for a month. The first live class came. I had stage fright for sure. But the program was set and printed out for an initial 6 classes, by the 3rd that frozen sensation in my throat was gone. I was thrilled to see the warm reception for the classes and to realize how open people were to learn, to taste, from a cuisine that I loved so very much.

Fast forward to a few years later, I'm sitting in front of the VP of Programming and General Manager at the Food Network. They had finished watching a pilot for my cooking show and decided to give the Mexican cooking series a go. When I walked out, I was so happy, I kept crashing into people and giving them hugs. Next morning, I got a call from the director with a few questions

1. Would I dye my hair red? For wider appeal, you know.
2. Had I considered getting a dog? It would make such a great addition to the show.
3. Instead of Mexican food, how about Pan Latin food? Something less ethnic. I could be like a culinary ambassador for all of Latin America and cook up a mash up of cuisines.
4. One more thing which should be an easy fix: my accent. A few people in the room had a hard time understanding what I was saying. Speech trainers could help to completely erase it.

I hung up the phone and was completely bummed. Who wouldn't want to be on the Food Network? Yet, I could foresee a future where I would not be able to look at myself in the mirror. Yes, we had been considering a dog at home... but, who was that red haired woman, cooking food that doesn't exist, being a culinary ambassador to countries she hasn't even been to, and to make matters worse, with no accent, no roots, no trace of where she is from. I would become a soulless vessel of nothing. Was that a worthy price to pay for anything?

WETA, the local PBS station thought it would be great to have a Mexican cooking show hosted by a Mexican. My accent was also a concern, but I didn't budge. They also had to approve a pilot tailored to their strict guidelines, so as the other 200+ independently minded stations. To boot, here we go again: I'd have to fundraise for production of the show. I thought I had an idea of how hard it was going to be. I had no clue. I wouldn't have done it if I had known.

Almost a decade later, Pati's Mexican Table is on its Sixth Season, airing nationwide. Last year it was nominated for 2 Daytime Emmy Awards and for 2 James Beard Awards for Best TV host and Best Culinary Series. In looking back, here are some insights, some takeaways, that I've been able to draw:

#1

There are still ingrained expectations that at the age of 18, you should know exactly who you are, what you're good at, what you want in life, and that you can draw a road map to get there, like building [layers of a cake](#), and that then, you can [cut into the cake and eat it](#)... That if you change course, you're wasting your time and never going to get to that.... place. **Yet, along the way, you are bound to change. Embrace those sides of you that have yet to sprout, let them flourish when they show up. If you bottle them up, they will resurface later on.** In cake language, this is what it has been like for me, more like a [marbled pound cake](#), where every slice turns a bit different. And as you continue to bake more pound cakes, they come out a bit different, every time.

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#2

It is not about suddenly finding your passion or unexpectedly becoming enlightened with what's your role in life and the world. I still wonder what is my next step, and now I know, that that will continue to be the case. **Your path gets built as you walk it, find the joy in the walk. With every new step, at every turn, there is a new set of possibilities that opens up.** And as you move along, don't take anything for granted. With each step, when a door that you knock on does happen to open: give it all you've got, every single time.

#3

There is a certain advantage in jumping on blind. Of course, scanning your new landscape is essential. But unless your job is risk assessment, don't over do it. **Doing too much research on what are the obstacles and risks for taking that step you are eager to take, can freeze you on your tracks before you start your engine. Don't tame your enthusiasm. Take the plunge.** You will find out how cold that water is soon enough.

#4

Know which things are out of bounds for you. **Know which things you are not willing to place on any negotiating table. They are different for each one of us.** Even if it seems that by giving them up you will have an incredible reward on the short term, even if it is a no brainer for everyone else. Will you be able to live with dignity without them? **And here is the thing, those things that shouldn't be compromised many times happen to be the ones you are most embarrassed about, the ones you feel most vulnerable for, those you have had to work the hardest on. They may be in the end the things that will distinguish you and make you proud, on the long run.**

In my case, I may have taken the long way home. But along the way, I never lost my roots, as it turns out, as I strengthened them, I doubled them up. I have never felt stronger and deeper roots to Mexico, my native country. And as the years have gone by, I have grown just as strong and deep roots to the United States, the country that we now call home, where our boys were born, a country that has given us extraordinary opportunities, and a country whose ideals, institutions, civic culture Mexicans admire so much.

As I like to say, I am happily torn between two countries, and it is by way of the kitchen how I've been able to make sense of that tear, and from it try to build bridges, so that one recipe and story at a time, families, communities and countries can connect a bit more. If not that, then at least, to try to help someone with ideas for lunch.

Graduates: As you step away from GDS, as you step away from your home, to continue to pave your own path, you are bringing what has been passed on to you and has helped shaped who you are. You will decide if you want to build upon it, if you want to improve it, or radically modify it. As you enter new latitudes, you have our commitment to be here, you have a home. And we so very much look forward to watching you as you venture out, evolve and jump into the world. We know you will find your own way to connect and build bridges between all that you have been given, and all of that, which you will encounter and try to find.

One last thing that I hope you do remember: **it is the mistakes, the failures, the obstacles, which make for the best stories to share.** We all need many of those. If it wasn't for them, I wouldn't have had anything to share with you today.

Congratulations class of 2017, [go on, get hungry, eat the world!](#)