



The Common Denominator

To: akovach@rds.com

From: harlan@msu.hist.com Subject: You're on your way!

Ms. Kovach,

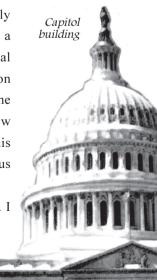
I've been thinking about your journey and the places to send you to best give you an idea of the many ways "typical" Americans think and live. But, before you start exploring America's diversity, I think it's important to understand a little about the things we share, about our common denominator, which is how we think of ourselves as Americans.

That is why I think you should begin with a visit to Washington, D.C. You can stay with my dear friend Isabel Graham . . .

arrived in Washington, D.C. late in February, a couple of months before the city's famous cherry trees start to bloom, and it was very chilly. My Washington guide was Mrs. Graham, a retired government employee. She warmed me with her hospitality and introduced me to the capital of the United States. Around a third of the people who live in the Washington area work for the government, but I doubt there are many who know more about how the city and the government operate than Mrs. Graham does.

Mrs. Graham explained to me that it was George Washington, the country's first president, who commissioned plans for a capital city along the banks of the Potomac River. It is the only major planned city in the country. At its heart, laid out like a cross, is the area most visited by tourists. The Lincoln Memorial is at the extreme top, the White House and the Jefferson Memorial face in from the sides, the Capitol building is at the foot, and the Washington Monument stands in the center. The new Vietnam and Roosevelt memorials are also located within this large grassy area. Along the center Mall are the ten enormous buildings of the Smithsonian Institution.

Over the next several weeks we visited those buildings together. I also got to know the rest of Washington.



AMERICANS THINK THAT IT'S IMPORTANT FOR CITIZENS TO QUESTION THEIR GOVERNMENTS. IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICA, THAT QUESTIONING AND SUSPICION CAN TAKE MANY FORMS - FROM THE DRAMATIC TO THE COMIC.

IN THE NEWS

Healthy suspicion or dangerous paranoia?

here is widespread evidence of Americans' belief that governments should be monitored by citizens. In a dramatic exercise of this belief, in the late 1990's, the American public called for investigations into the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), one of the most powerful and feared branches of the American government. A great number of people felt that the IRS had been allowed to abuse its powers, to harass citizens and intrude upon their private lives. The result was a new taxpayer's bill of rights, designed to guarantee protection for the taxpayer by forcing the IRS to prove a taxpayer's wrongdoings, rather than requiring the taxpayer to prove his or her innocence against IRS accusations. In this case, citizen questioning led to greater security for the general population.

nfortunately, some citizens' distrust of government can follow a tragic path. In the summer of 1997, a jury from Denver, Colorado sentenced a young ex-marine named Timothy McVeigh to die. McVeigh was found guilty of the 1995 bombing of a federal building in Oklahoma that killed over 160 people, many of them children. The bombing happened on the two-year anniversary of the fatal end of the 51-day confrontation between US government forces and the Branch Davidian Sect, a religious group in Waco, Texas. The government was alarmed by the arsenal of weapons the Davidian sect members had in their compound, but the sect members claimed they needed the weapons to defend their faith. The siege ended in the deaths of 82 members of the group, among them 22 children. What was the connection between these two events?

McVeigh was a member of a militia group called the Arizona Patriots. His actions represented the feelings of one extreme of a growing movement among Americans who are taking suspicion and fear of the government to new and, in some cases, violent extremes. This anti-government movement is heterogeneous and has no central organization. Within the movement, which may include up to 12 million sympathizing citizens, are groups of various creeds.

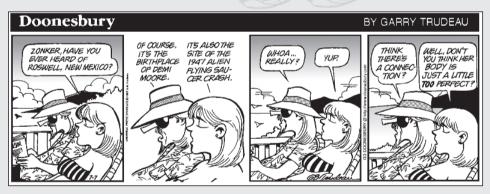
There are White Supremacists and neo-Nazis, as well as Christian fundamentalists who want to live by Biblical laws. There are also some 100,000 members of "patriot" militia groups. Most of these are located in the Western states, a region traditionally open to groups wanting to live alternative lifestyles — which, in the case of the militias, includes stockpiling guns and practicing military maneuvers. These militias believe they need to prepare themselves to defend the Constitution against the government. Some of the groups believe that the United Nations is part of a One World Government movement which will take over the country and eliminate US sovereignty. Others simply feel that the government overtaxes people and interferes in issues that should be decided individually or local. Some want to educate their children at home instead of at public schools. Others want to be able to decide how to use land and water resources.

Despite their many differences, members of the movement share two basic beliefs. First, they oppose gun control. They believe that Americans must defend their constitutional right to buy, keep and use weapons, if necessary, even against their government. Second, they believe government has grown too large; they no longer trust it. At best, they see the government as out-of-control; at worst, they fear it is a dangerous threat to their freedom.

While militia "patriots" continue to gather in the woods, nearly 100,000 Americans gathered in the New Mexican desert to mark the 50th anniversary of the supposed UFO crash in Roswell, New Mexico. The official celebration lasted for three days in July 1997. Activities included a film festival, laser shows, rock concerts and games such as an "Alien Chase Foot Race." There was also plenty of speculation as to how much the government really knows and isn't telling about alien space craft.

As the story goes, in the summer of 1947, something crashed in the desert near Roswell. The Army first released a statement confirming that it was a "flying disk." However, the next day, the story changed, and the government said it was just a fallen weather balloon. Despite this official version, thousands of people believe that it really was a ship visiting from another planet and that the government may have found alien crash victims or even survivors.

No matter which version of the crash stories they feel is true, most participants at the Roswell golden anniversary shared the belief that the government has too much power to hide important things (such as extraterrestrial exchange programs) from the people.



Distributed by Universal Press Syndicate. Reprinted with permission. All rights reserved.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Why do you think the professor suggests that Ana travel to the United States rather than just read about the country? What would be the advantages/disadvantages of these two different ways of learning about another place? If you wanted to learn about another country, how would you do it? If someone wrote to you wanting to know more about your country, where would you suggest that the person begin his or her trip?
- 2 Ana's first lesson is about what citizenship is and how Americans view themselves as citizens. Do you think citizenship means the same thing to people all over the world? How would you define the ideals of citizenship in your own country? How are they similar to the ideals Ana identifies in America? How are they different?
- 3 Ana also learns a little about how decisions are made in American government. Discuss the advantages/disadvantages you see in this system. How does this compare to the decision-making process in your own country?
- What does Ana learn about American families from Mrs. Graham? Are there similar attitudes toward family life and independence in your country? How do you feel about this kind of family organization?





Campus Life To: akovach@rds.com From: harlan@msu.hist.com Subject: On to Georgia.

Ms. Kovach.

I'm so glad you had a good time with Mrs. Graham in Washington. I can tell you're perplexed at the discrepancy between the ideals of citizenship and some of the realities you are encountering. It bothers all concerned citizens, I think. As to your question of whether those ideals are still alive today, well, discovering that answer is part of what this trip is all about. Relax. Your trip has just begun.

I do wish the weather had been nicer for you in Washington, but look on the bright side. It could have been sleeting or snowing. You'll warm up, though, in the South. Now that you've had a chance to look at our past, it's time for you to see the role that education plays in the concept of equal opportunity. And I think you'll enjoy a taste of contemporary campus life. I have a colleague at the University of Georgia in Athens. I'd like you to get to know some of her students.

It was now time for me to journey to Atlanta, Georgia on an Amtrak train, the Crescent. The trip from Washington to Atlanta takes nearly 14 hours by train, but for me it was a great way to see the countryside. It took a while to get out of the suburbs, but as the train traveled south into Virginia I had my first glimpses of pine forests, country farms and small towns. We went through Charlottesville and Lynchburg in Virginia, then down through Charlotte and Greenville in North and South Carolina. A few hours later we reached Atlanta, in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. The temperature was indeed a little warmer, and the sun was shining. Spring and I had both come to the South.





INOUIRING INTO THE NATURE OF THINGS

Prof. Harlan had arranged for me to spend time at the University of Georgia, in the town of Athens, about an hour and a half from Atlanta. As the nation's oldest state-supported university — its doors have been open since 1801 — it demonstrates that public education has long been an issue and a priority in the U.S.

Americans consider education the most important factor in the struggle for individual success and collective growth. Public education, because it is open to all, regardless of social class or status, is the most basic expression of the ideal of equal opportunity. There is a general belief that the higher a person rises in the educational system, the greater that person's chances for attaining material wealth and personal satisfaction. That is why "climbing the educational ladder" is a dream and a goal, which, because of the public education system, has become a reality for many.

Only 12% of American children attend private elementary or secondary schools. Many of these schools are run by religious organizations like the Catholic Church. Others cater to children from the upper class. All require a healthy pocketbook.

In total, there are more than 3,500 private and public universities in the United States. However, at the university level, private institutions are more common and are the choice of nearly 22% of American college students. Some of these institutions have links to religious groups, and others have upper-class roots which go back to colonial times when they were founded to educate the children of the landed aristocracy. The elitist profile of "Ivy League" schools such as Harvard and Yale, among the most prestigious of these schools, has changed during the second half of the 20th century. Enrollment at these schools now reflects more varied segments of the population.

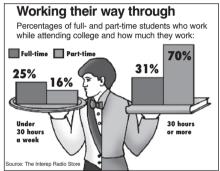
That leaves nearly 80% of the students at the university level currently working toward degrees at public or state institutions. These colleges are maintained primarily by taxes paid by state residents. All states have more than one such institution. Tuition, however, is not free. All higher education has a price tag in the U.S., though students can compete for a limited number of scholarships based on academic, artistic or athletic achievements. Since major funding of state universities comes from taxes, students who go to a college in their home state pay tuition costs that are usually 1/4 to 1/3 of those paid by out-of-state students. Along with tuition, students must pay for housing, food, extra-curricular activities, health insurance and books. It all adds up, even for in-state students, to an amount that can be prohibitive for some. This is one of the reasons many parents start saving for their children's college education

when their children are young. Students themselves often contribute to the cost of their education by working during high school and college.

Still, for some, the price is too high. For these people, there are a number of financial aid programs designed to make a college education possible. Among these are low-interest government loans for education, which must be paid back in the first years following graduation. Also, universities set aside a number of administrative or non-skilled jobs on the campus to be awarded to students in work-study programs. These programs allow students to trade from fifteen to twenty-five hours of work per week for tuition credits. A number of other part-time jobs are also available in food services, local shops and businesses. At the graduate level, individual departments have budgets for student teaching and research assistantships to help defray the cost of graduate studies.

USA SNAPSHOTS®

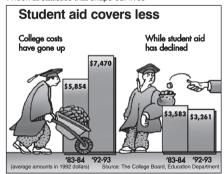
A look at statistics that shape the nation



By Cindy Hall and Marcy E. Mullins, USA TODAY
Copyright 1996, USA Today. Reprinted with permission.

USA SNAPSHOTS®

A look at statistics that shape our lives



By Patti Stang and Web Bryant, USA TODAY
Copyright 1996, USA Today. Reprinted with permission.

The University of Georgia, offering a wide variety of educational options and campus activities to its students, is a typical example of a state university. Aptly, its motto is "To teach, to serve, and to inquire into the nature of things."

Nowadays it serves and teaches nearly 30,000 inquiring students, who are working towards both graduate and undergraduate degrees in fields which vary from journalism to forestry, from music to veterinary medicine. I met some of them, and they introduced me to campus life in America.

A PLACE TO FINISH GROWING UP

The first thing that hits you on an American college campus is that it is a busy, nearly selfcontained world. Students don't just go there to study. They also go there for their first taste of life away from their families, to cultivate their independence, to work, to make friends, discover new interests and learn skills other than those included in their formal academic degree. In short, college is a place to finish growing up.

No wonder the college experience is an intense one for most students. It's a turning point in their lives, and the most important aspect of college life is probably that it brings a separation from the family. "Going away to school" is an adventure sought by both students and their parents. Many families encourage their children to apply to universities far enough away from home so that they will have to move there. This is not because the parents want to get rid of their children; rather, it is because young people at the age of seventeen or eighteen are expected to start learning to live on their own. Young people who go away to a university are taking a step toward independence, while remaining within a

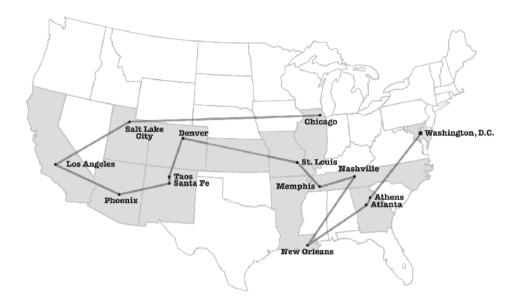


... MAN, MISSED THING YOUNGED, SOMETHING W'T FIND ANYWHERE SO SWEET!

Distributed by Universal Press Syndicate. Reprinted with permission. All rights reserved.

somewhat controlled and protected environment.

This is one of the reasons many undergraduate students, especially during their first couple of years, live in dormitories or residence halls on campus. Some universities, in fact, require all first-year students to live on campus. While most students choose to live in university housing complexes, some try to join fraternities or sororities. Each of these exclusive academic and social organizations is known by a combination of three letters of the Greek alphabet, such as Phi Beta Kappa, the oldest fraternity in the U.S., and Alpha Delta Pi, the oldest sorority. Fraternities and sororities select members according to different criteria, usually academically or professionally related, and members live together in separate housing. In any case, students can only move to off-campus housing after their first year. So, dorm life is a unique aspect of American





Teen Life

Walking through the downtown area was one of the special things the boys had planned for me. It's known as the Loop because of the commuter trains that encircle it. We also feasted on some of Chicago's delicious pizza and browsed through the 2,000 square meters of records at the Jazz Record Mart

But the most special treat the boys had planned for me was a trip to Wrigley Field to see the Chicago Cubs play a baseball game. The Cubs were playing against the Los Angeles Dodgers, and I immediately thought of Dan, who was probably watching the game on TV in Los Angeles.

Even after watching the game and listening to the boys' explanations, I'm still not sure that I understand all the rules of baseball, but I did come to understand a little of Americans' passion for the game. Baseball is one of the oldest professional team sports, and the yearly championship, called the World Series, has been played since 1903. Although baseball has traditionally been a more popular sport in the East, more and more cities in the West are now establishing baseball teams. These new teams are now competing with traditional favorites from the East such as the New York Yankees, the Detroit Tigers, and Chicago's two teams, the White Sox and the Cubs.

We were lucky enough to celebrate a home team victory. Even without understanding the finer points of baseball, I had a great time absorbing something of its tradition: the crowds cheering their favorite players; the vine-covered walls surrounding the playing field; and the delicious hot dogs we all devoured.

THE LIFE OF AN AMERICAN TEEN

Despite my enjoyment of the boys' tour of the city, my main goal for that part of the trip had to do with the boys themselves. In fact, I had rushed my trip a little in order to be able to visit the boys' schools before they let out for summer vacation. Both Craig's junior-high

history teacher and Terry's high-school civics class had organized activities and were expecting me to visit their schools during their final days. I had made it there just in time for them to show me a little of the world of American teenagers.

The experience proved to be a much richer one than I had imagined, and I felt lucky to have had the spontaneous input of so many kids. I was impressed and grateful for the attention they gave me and their candid answers to my questions.

During the time I spent with Tom and his boys, I discovered that teen life in America involves three different spheres: family, school, and social groups, each with its own set of rules, expectations and pressures. As I thought back on my own teenage experiences, I decided that while some things may be common to young people the world over, the American teen experience has its own unique flavor.

SIMONA

The best thing about school is knowing that you have learned something that will help you out in the world.

SCHOOL

To begin with, for American teens, school is much more than just a place to go for a formal education. School days begin

before 8 a.m., and classes officially end at 2:30. However, extracurricular activities keep many kids and teachers at school until later in the afternoon and often into the evening hours. These activities include sports practices and games, music and theater rehearsals, meetings of special interest clubs, student government activities, extra academic projects, and planning for school-sponsored social events like dances.

The regular school-day curriculum consists of more than academic subjects. It also includes things like art, music and physical education. Still, students are encouraged to participate in extra afterschool activities to further enhance their talents, broaden their horizons or fortify their feelings of loyalty and belonging to the

Since I pretty
much have to be
at school if I ever
want any
promising future,
I would say the
best thing about
school is the
education. The
worst thing about
school
is {that} you have
to be there to

get an education.

TRAVIS

school community. In sum, school is more than a place to go; it's a place to be, and it is a fundamental part of a young person's identity.

One thing I found particularly interesting was that both Terry and Craig could choose some of the classes they wanted to take, though Terry had more choices at the high school level than Craig did in iunior high. I was used to schools with fixed curricula where students had little or no choice at all as to the classes they would take.

The basic requirements for school curricula are established by each state's board of education, but there is variation from one school district to another. More traditional schools require all students to take the same core academic courses in the areas of science, mathematics, English and social studies. These students have choices only for non-academic classes. They can choose, for example, between swimming, basketball, or gymnastics to fulfill their physical education (P.E.) requirement for that particular semester. They can opt for art classes rather than singing in a choir. If they choose to learn a foreign language, there are usually several offered; and they can also take courses that teach them to use computers, cook, drive, work with wood or fix engines.

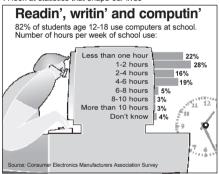
The best thing about being at school is beina with my friends. The worst thing is having the homework and the 6.5 hours that I'm here.

JADE

I don't like school, but P.E. is OK! MARK

USA SNAPSHOTS®

A look at statistics that shape our lives



By Cindy Hall and Julie Stacey, USA TODAY Copyright 1997, USA Today. Reprinted with permission.

Other school districts work with a credit system (similar to many universities) where students must fulfill only a minimum number of credits in core areas in order to graduate and can choose the remainder of their classes. Within this basic framework they have many different choices and can concentrate more of their time taking classes in areas that interest them most.

Policy at the district where Craig and Terry go to school falls somewhere between the two extremes. The boys' friends, for example, were taking a variety of core academic classes such as reading, algebra, biology and American history. In addition, they were able to

ALEXANDRA

The best thing about school is education and always being with friends. Just learning new things every day is great.

study things such as photography, band, computers, speech,

Spanish, French, and something called *teen living*, which introduces kids to the basic skills of living on their own — things like making a budget and managing money, taking care of health and hygiene, and cooking. I was

once again amazed at the communal effort invested in making young people independent even at an early age.

SOCIAL LIFE

Academics and learning may be the "official" objective of school, but overwhelmingly, the kids told me that being with their friends at school is one of the things they enjoy most. Although school is not the only place where young people can socialize with each other — churches, clubs and family also provide opportunities for get-togethers — it is still where kids meet most. Most school contacts carry over to out-of-school activities as well, because public schools are usually made up of kids who are neighbors. Although some cities have adopted programs in which children from different neighborhoods are bused to schools in an effort to promote integration, such was not the case with Craig and Terry. The boys were with their classmates both in and out of school.

MATT

The best thing about school is lunch, because you get to see your friends.

The worst thing about school is all the gossip and the cliques.

KASHALA

That much intense contact has both good and bad points. On the one hand, it promotes long-lasting friendships and a strong sense of community loyalty and identity. On the other hand, group rivalries, conflicts, and peer pressure are intensified.

Gang activity has become a major worry for young people, their parents and educators in America. And while many people associate gangs with lower-income populations and inner-city settings, they are by no means limited to these areas. Gangs are formed in well-to-do suburban neighborhoods as well as in peaceful-looking small-town communities.

Gang membership can perhaps be best understood as a search for identity and belonging, something all young people must work out for

themselves. Even in cases where kids can reject or escape gang membership, they still have to cope with all kinds of "groups" that put pressure on them to act, think and dress in certain ways, some positive and some negative. There are academic cliques, ethnic and religious groups, groups involved in community service and political activism, and arts and sports cliques. There are groups who drink, smoke or take drugs. The list goes on and on.

But even with so many choices, some kids have trouble finding their place, and for those who are EDTLICISC

BY CUNN JOHNSTON

OH, MAN-I WIGH I COULD LOOK LINE THAT

SHE'S A MODEL, HZZ I IT'S
PRO BABLY TRICK IN 3
HORS, JUST TOP
HER MAKEUP!

AN ANAMER'S JUST TOP
HER MAKEUP!

AN IBET THE WHOLE PHOTO
GRAPH WAS BLECTRONICALLY
RETOURNED BY COMPUTER!

DISTRIBUTED BY

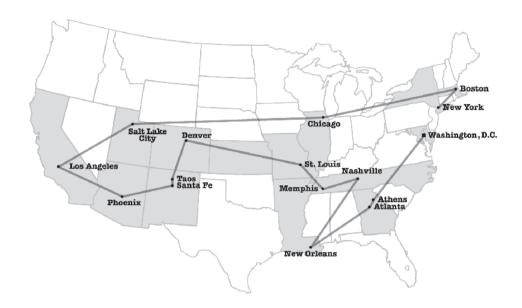
DIST

Ron Ballar

Distributed by Universal Press Syndicate. Reprinted with permission. All rights reserved.

different in some way, there may be little room for integration. Terry told me that he felt best when he was with his own group of friends, who were all interested and involved in sports. He said he felt sorry for kids who couldn't seem to find a place at school — like new kids, kids from different backgrounds, loners.

Belonging to a specific group often involves criteria of appearance that cannot be controlled. The girls, in particular, seemed to me especially victimized by the American preoccupation with image, looks, weight, and clothes. There were girls among Craig's junior high classmates wearing make-up and dressed in styles that didn't seem quite appropriate for their age. I wondered where the pressure for all of that was coming from, and whether it was fair for that kind of maturity to be forced upon these young people. Trying to fit into someone else's ideal is often an agonizing and impossible goal. During my days at the schools, it was easy to spot the kids whose different "looks" or "shapes" kept them apart from others.





Completing the Circle



JUMP START

BY ROBB ARMSTRONG

WOW! FOURTH
FENDER BENDER
STATEMENTS
SURE THEY
FROM THE
WO DRIVERS?

COLLISION.

BY ROBB ARMSTRONG

THEY KE STILL
ON THEIR
THIS WEEK.

FROM THE
TWO DRIVERS?

Reprinted with permission of United Feature Syndicate. Inc.

A FAREWELL SONG FROM THE HEART OF AMERICA

"I'Ve prepared a list of reference materials for you to take home with you," Jack said as he handed me some papers. "I've marked the most essential ones with a star." We were sitting in his office. I had arrived in Boston nearly three weeks before, and we had just finished going through the last of my notes from the trip. "Even though I suggested this trip, I can't let you go home without recommending a few books, now can I?" I looked at more pages piling up as they came out of the printer.

"Thanks. I'll certainly be going home with a lot of information. I

know it's still far from complete, but I think it's enough to keep me going for a while. If my students get through all of this, the next step will be for them to experience America for themselves! And I'm ready to go home now after being on the road for so long. It's been a wonderful trip, and I'm so glad I took your advice to do my research this way."

"Well," he said with a smile, "you can always e-mail me if you get stuck on something."

The printer finally stopped, and as Jack handed me the rest of the pages he said, "Carol and I have been talking about doing something special for you as a going-away treat, and she has found just the thing."

Two days later, Jack, Carol and I sat on the grass in one of Boston's parks at an outdoor folk music festival. We heard bluegrass bands, barbershop quartets, and gospel groups while we waited for the main attraction, a presentation by the well-known and well-loved folk singer Pete Seeger. The friendliness and good will that the gray-haired singer brought on stage quickly spread to the thousands of children and adults gathered in the park. People laughed at the stories he told, clapped their hands, and were encouraged to sing along whenever they felt like it; some got up and danced. As I sat under the trees with my friends, I felt I was part of one big family.

Among the songs Pete Seeger included in his show were traditional American tunes, a couple of folk songs in Spanish, and towards the end, a song that I felt he was singing just for me. As his fingers plucked the strings of his banjo, he gave us this introduction.

"Woody Guthrie wrote a song that you all know. I guess you learned it in school. But believe me, this song was not well known at all until they put it in the school songbooks. It never got on to the top 40, and no famous rock stars ever recorded it. But the song went from one person to another till I think everybody in the country has heard it. You know which one I'm talking about." Then he began to sing:

his land is your land,
This land is my land,
From California to the New York Island;
From the red wood forests to the Gulf Stream waters
This land was made for you and me.

"As I was walking that ribbon of highway, I saw above me that endless skyway; I saw below me that golden valley; This land was made for you and me.

"I've roamed and rambled and I followed my footsteps To the sparkling sands of her diamond deserts; And all around me a voice was sounding; This land was made for you and me."

And everyone, including me, sang together: "This land was made for you and me."

THIS LAND IS YOUR LAND
Words and music by Woody Guthrie.
 TRO - © - Copyright 1956 (Renewed) 1958 (Renewed) 1970 (Renewed) Ludlow Music, Inc., New York, New York.
All rights reserved. Used by permission.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Ana comes to realize that because of diversity, there is no "typical" American, but there are shared values that tie Americans together. Discuss some of these values. What are some of the shared values that connect the people in your country to each other?
- What are some of the positive things Ana discovered about Americans? What are some of the negative things?
- Ana sees that a positive quality can become distorted into a negative one. Discuss some of Americans' positive qualities that have undergone such distortion. What are some of the contradictions that Ana finds in the American character?
- 4 What are some of the problems that America will need to solve in order for it to have a bright future? What other changes do you think America will need to make for the future?
- Describe your image of an American. Has Ana's trip changed your view in any way? If so, how?