

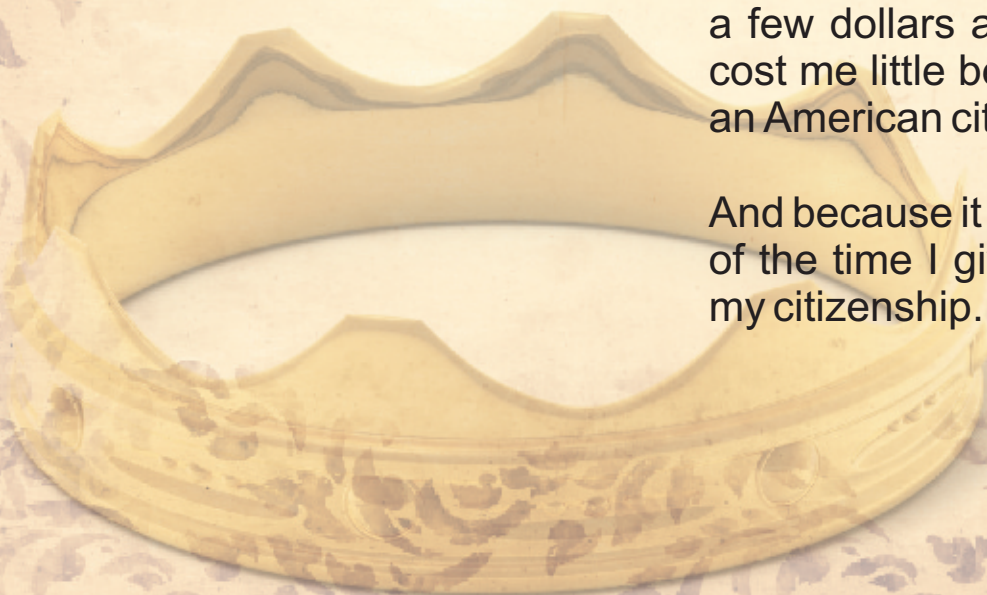
I Hereby Declare

By Barb Larson

I possess an American passport.
When I travel, it is proof that I am
an American citizen.

It cost me little—a recent picture,
a few dollars and some time. It
cost me little because I was born
an American citizen.

And because it cost me little, most
of the time I give little thought to
my citizenship.



Certainly, from time to time, I recite the Pledge of Allegiance that I learned as a child in school. But often, little thought is given to the words that roll so easily off my tongue.

But for many, the right to belong to this nation comes at a high price. Millions of people, through the years, overcame great difficulties and numerous obstacles for the right to become US citizens. They crossed closed borders and survived treacherous sea journeys. They were separated from family and friends, they fled repressive governments, and they came with much uncertainty but always with hope of a better life. Recently, under a beautiful blue, cloudless sky in front of Denver, Colorado's Civic Center's Greek Amphitheater, 600 new naturalized citizens from 77 nations around the world gathered to speak words that I will never be required to say.

"I hereby declare, on oath, that I absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty of whom or which I have heretofore been a subject or citizen; that I will support and defend the Constitution and laws of the United States of America against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I will bear arms on behalf of the United States when required by the law; that I will perform noncombatant service in the Armed Forces of the United States when required by the law; that I will perform work of national importance under civilian direction when

required by the law; and that I take this obligation freely without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; so help me God."

My friend Walter is a naturalized citizen and took this oath. He came to this country as a 17 year old, from The Philippines. Walter had been abandoned by his father and spent years in extreme poverty. He lived in a shanty town in a make-shift home that most of us can't even imagine. He remembers having a choice of meals: rice with a little sugar sprinkled on it or rice with soy sauce, and nothing else. Years later, Walter's step-father brought him, his mom, and his brother to this country. Walter truly saw the United States as a land of opportunity. He learned to appreciate the simplest things, things that we don't give much thought to. When he got off the plane from the Philippines, he ordered a hamburger and, not Coca-Cola, that most American of drinks, but a glass of milk. He was fascinated and amazed by free access to the local library and the knowledge he could reach as he checked out "all the books that he could carry." He was mesmerized by the choices of colleges and universities because in his country the possibilities were limited. After suffering the prejudice of being half American in the Philippines he found that in United States, he was "just Walter", just himself and from his point of view, the opportunities never seemed to end.

A few years later, Water joined the Army and he began to protect and represent this country both nationally and

internationally. Although the path to citizenship normally takes only 3 years, Walter was moved by the Army too often to fulfill certain requirements. He served in the Army for 7 years before he finally became a United States citizen. He entered a courtroom, stood before a judge and declared that he renounced all allegiance to his country of origin and all others. That oath absolutely strengthened his ties and commitment and increased his sense of responsibility to his adopted nation. Though he had served this country faithfully, now, as a citizen, he is entrusted with matters of national security, matters that were off-limits to him as a non-citizen.

Taking that oath represented everything that he desired to be as an American. He does not consider himself an Asian-American, simply an American. He believes that it is his "American-ness" that defines him as a person. And as he became a citizen, he knew that he found a home.

As I listened to Walter's story I was struck by his pride in and love for our United States. It sounded in his voice and was reflected in his passion. He had left much behind to come to this country but he had no regrets for he had gained so much more. And I was reminded how similar our lives were before we became citizens of God's holy nation.

We belonged to a kingdom where all we had were temporary pleasures, empty promises and ultimate death. Our lives were rooted in spiritual poverty and there was no way

for us to find a way out. The Bible describes our existence in that kingdom in a number of different ways. It says that we “were once darkness” (Eph. 5:8), we were “dead in our transgressions and sins, in which we used to live when we followed the ways of the world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air” (Eph. 2:1-2), and we were “objects of wrath” (Eph. 2:3). We were “foreigners and aliens from God's people” (Eph. 2:19. Jesus said that we were “slaves to sin.” Slaves in the Roman world had no rights and were used by their master in whatever way he chose. Such was our spiritual state—separated from God and slaves to Satan.

But, like Walter's step-father, God offered us passage to a country that we did not yet know, a place we would learn to appreciate as home. He offered us citizenship in the eternal kingdom of his son, Jesus Christ. We would not live in this kingdom as foreigners or illegal aliens but rather fellow citizens with all of God's people. We would become members of God's household, his family, and would be adopted as his children—showered with his love. Through Jesus Christ, God did all that was necessary for us to have this new citizenship—with new freedom, a new identity a new passport, and free access to the King. But for all this to take place, it required a transfer of true faith and allegiance.

Like those who become naturalized citizens of the United States, we cannot take on the citizenship of this eternal kingdom unless we “absolutely

and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty of whom or which we have heretofore been a subject or citizen;” When we accept Jesus Christ as Savior, we leave behind the kingdom of darkness, turning our back on its worthless values. In renouncing our former way of life, we commit to living according to the principles of God's Kingdom. We commit to support and defend the law of this Kingdom. It is a law of grace, which was first offered to us and which we now offer to those around us. We are called to a life of radical love and unity, a life where we are transformed to resemble our King, and we are to represent him to those who are still slaves.

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about the author

BARB LARSON is a speaker with Shepherd Project Ministries, mother, and Director of Women's Ministries at Heritage Evangelical Free Church in Castle Rock, CO where she lives with her husband Ron and two (of four) children who have not yet flown the nest.

She has served our King as a missionary with her family for 14 years in Ivory Coast and France.

