

## ESL Wednesdays with Sophia

Sophia wants to be a US citizen,  
and for that, she needs to pass the naturalization test,  
and for that, she needs to read, write, speak, and understand simple English and answer questions about  
the United States,  
so she comes to me for tutoring on Wednesdays after work.

In the windowless church basement,  
Sophia and I sit on children's chairs  
and lean in over low tables.

How are you, Sophia?  
You look tired. You've been studying late at night?  
Well, let me quiz you on the material.  
What is the supreme law of the land?  
Yes, the Constitution,  
but you'll have to answer quicker than that on the test, Sophia.  
Now tell me one thing the Constitution does.  
Yes, but you'll have to say it more clearly than that for them to understand, Sophia.  
Repeat after me: The Constitution sets up the government.  
And the first three words of the Constitution are ... you got it!  
We the People.  
We, the People, Sophia. Me and you.

Repeat after me:  
The Bill of Rights is comprised of the first ten amendments to the Constitution.  
The First Amendment guarantees the freedoms of speech, religion, assembly, press, and to petition the  
government.  
These rights will be yours soon, Sophia.  
Sophia? I know you are exhausted, but stay with me.  
We're really making progress here.  
How many amendments does the Constitution have?  
I need you to get this right, Sophia.  
C'mon, I know you know this. You knew it last week.  
It's twenty-seven, Sophia. Twenty-seven amendments to the Constitution.  
Gosh, you're so tired from working all week you're forgetting some of this ...  
tired from keeping other people's houses ...  
and caring for other people's children ...  
as well as your own house and your own children ...  
your own two children, Sophia, who came to this country with you  
and whose citizenship depends on yours.

Don't worry, Sophia. Rest your eyes for a minute.  
Just listen to me and repeat:  
The rule of law means no one is above the law.  
And what does that mean?  
It means everyone must follow the law.  
Yes, everyone, Sophia.  
Yes, even the leaders.  
Yes, even the police.  
Yes, even the rich and powerful.

Yes, Sophia, everyone. Please focus. I know you know this stuff.  
Think of your life as a US citizen.  
It's within your reach,  
if you can show the government  
the hard work and determination you show me every Wednesday night.  
I need you to show them, Sophia,  
because this has become bigger than just you now.  
It's about me too now.  
Yes, me, and the work we do together, Sophia,  
and my need to believe in a just world.  
My need to believe that someone who works as hard as you do  
deserves the same rights and privileges I do.

Sophia, repeat after me:  
The Supreme Court is the highest court in the United States and there are nine justices.  
Yes, nine justices, Sophia.  
One day soon, these nine justices will be working for you.  
Right now you fear the courts, Sophia, but it won't always be that way.  
One day you will be able to walk up to that old boss of yours,  
who hired you under the table  
and held that over your head  
and threatened to have you deported if you reported  
what he did to you in that house that day when no one else was home,  
and you'll be able to look him in the eye  
and tell him,  
in the unbroken English I know you are capable of,  
to go f\*\*\* himself,  
or someone else,  
and if he ever touches you again,  
you'll report *him*,  
and not the other way around.

Sophia, stay with me.  
Why did the colonists come to America? For freedom, opportunity, and to escape persecution.  
Who lived in America before the colonists arrived? Native Americans.  
What group of people was taken to America and sold as slaves? Africans.  
These answers need to roll off your tongue, Sophia.  
You need to live and breathe them,  
so that you can pass the test,  
and I can believe in a country,  
where, I'm told, all people are created equal,  
where everyone is entitled, by God, to the same inalienable rights,  
because, you see, Sophia, that's sort of in question for me right now.

Unless you can pass this test.  
So what are those rights, Sophia?  
What are they?  
Yes, life!  
Yes, liberty!  
Yes, looking for happiness ... that's close enough, Sophia!  
You got this.

Did you know that your name, in Greek, means “wisdom?”  
In this windowless basement,  
over these low tables,  
your wisdom is blazing  
like a signal fire,  
warning,  
if We the People  
can't treat All His People,  
like we treat ourselves,  
then how can we ask God to bless America?

That's it for today, Sophia.  
Go home and practice what we learned.  
I'll be here.  
Next week.  
Same time.  
Same place.  
Until you learn  
what you need to earn  
your citizenship.

You have already taught me  
the value of mine.

Ingrid Anders  
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