

JOSE ANTONIO VARGAS

TEACHES CURIOSITY, CULTURE,
& BETTER QUESTIONS



► **This session explores how curiosity can shift the public imagination.** Jose challenges storytellers across all mediums to meet audiences where they are, lead with empathy, and use every platform available to tell more human, truthful stories.

STORY LAB

CURIOSITY AS A WAY OF SEEING



YOUR TEACHER Jose Antonio Vargas is a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, Emmy-nominated filmmaker, and Tony-nominated theatrical producer. His best-selling memoir, *Dear America: Notes of an Undocumented Citizen*, was published by HarperCollins in 2018, with a new edition released in 2025. His forthcoming book, *White Is Not a Country*, explores race and identity in America.

► WHY THIS MATTERS

For Jose Antonio Vargas, storytelling began with asking questions. As a general assignment reporter, he learned that curiosity is both craft and compass. It was a way to navigate a country that didn't see him, and to make sense of it through story.

As a former undocumented American and journalist, curiosity became Jose's method of survival. Without legal immigration documentation, his byline was his way of writing his way into America. It allowed him to observe without fear, to see what others overlooked, and to "make something real for people who didn't have an entry point." Journalism gave him permission to exist in a country that did not always invite him to belong.

► JOSE SHARES

"Journalism was my way of making sense of the world. Curiosity was my way of surviving it."

► WATCH AND REFLECT



VIDEO 1 : CURIOSITY AS A WAY OF SEEING

Key Takeaway:

Curiosity is the foundation of storytelling. Every great story begins with a question asked bravely and answered honestly. When you ask questions that others overlook, you uncover stories that make people feel seen and valued.

Reflection Prompts:

What drives your curiosity as a storyteller?

When was the last time a question changed how you saw the world?

Reflection Prompts:

What is a question that you have been reluctant to ask?

Creative Exercise:

Make a “Curiosity Map.” Pick one story or topic you care about and write five questions that dig beneath the surface. Then, next to each, write why that question matters.

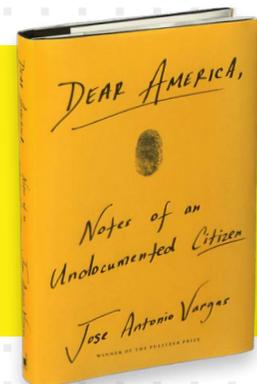
Explore Additional Resources



**TELLING AUTHENTIC
IMMIGRANT STORIES**
A Media Reference Guide



DEAR AMERICA
**NOTES OF AN
UNDOCUMENTED
CITIZEN**



MAKING STORIES ACCESSIBLE ACROSS PLATFORMS

► WHY THIS MATTERS

Jose has told stories everywhere—on the page, on stage, on screen, and online. But across every platform, his guiding question stays the same: Can people connect with what I’m saying?

Accessibility, he reminds us, is about connection. Whether you’re producing a podcast, developing a play, creating digital content, or writing an article, your role is to make the story human enough that your intended audience can find a way into it. As Jose puts it, journalism taught him to “make something real for people who didn’t have an entry point.” That skill translates across all media.

When we write or create only for those who already agree with us, we limit our reach. When we make stories accessible, we expand who belongs in the conversation.

► JOSE SHARES

“My approach to storytelling has always been: How do I make something accessible? How do I write in such a way that anybody can access what I’m saying?”

► WATCH AND REFLECT



VIDEO 2 : MAKING STORIES ACCESSIBLE ACROSS PLATFORMS

Key Takeaway:

No matter your medium—film, journalism, social media, theater, or podcasting—your job is to make stories that invite people in. Accessibility is the art of building a bridge between what you know and what your audience feels.

Reflection Prompts:

What platform do you tell stories on most often? How does that shape your voice or style?

Who are you currently not reaching, and what might make your story more accessible to them?

CULTURE FIRST: MEETING PEOPLE WHERE THEY ARE

► WHY THIS MATTERS

For José Antonio Vargas, culture has always been the bridge to connection. Before politics, there's food. Before debate, there's humor. Before difference, there's family.

Culture gives people a shared language—and it's through that language that empathy begins.

► JOSE SHARES:

"Before we get to the politics, culture is where we connect. Everybody eats. Everybody laughs. Everybody has a family."

When we tell stories through cultural entry points, we meet audiences where they are. That's how we expand our reach. That's the heart of Define American's research series, Move Them or Lose Them: understanding that audiences connect through cultural entry points, shared spaces like food, humor, faith, or family.

Before starting a conversation about immigration, Jose looks for what's human first. Sometimes that's a restaurant, a grocery aisle, a familiar laugh, a story about home. When storytellers start with connection instead of conviction, they invite empathy into the room, and that's where real narrative change begins.

► WATCH AND REFLECT



VIDEO 3 : CULTURE FIRST MEETING PEOPLE WHERE THEY ARE

Key Takeaway:

To move people, start with what you share, not where you differ. Humor, food, and shared emotion invite curiosity, while facts and politics alone can close it off. Curiosity builds bridges where certainty builds walls.

Reflection Prompts:

Who are the audiences you find hardest to reach and why?

What might be their "entry points"?
What do they care about deeply, outside of politics?

Reflection Prompts:

How can you open your next story with something universal—humor, food, faith, or family—before diving into what divides?

Creative Exercise:

Pick one audience or group from Define American's Move Them or Lose Them:

- **Taking Responsibility:** Social rule-followers, interested in culture and invested in their local communities.
- **Following the Plan:** Church-goers who respect authority and are interested in helping others.
- **Doing My Own Thing:** Autonomous pleasure-seekers interested in fun, play, relaxation, personal growth, and fandoms.
- **Getting it Done:** DIY go-getters, interested in action and practical solutions

Research what matters most to them, through local media, cultural habits, or shared experiences, and brainstorm one way to start a story from that shared space.

- Design a project plan for a piece of content (e.g., a video, post, or written story) that leverages culture as a doorway to empathy.
- As you create content, consider: If someone who disagrees with me sees this, will it draw them in or push them away?

Explore Additional Resources



**MOVE THEM
OR LOSE THEM
PART 1**

Strategies for
Deepening Engagement
with Moveable Middle
Audiences



**MOVE THEM
OR LOSE THEM
PART 2**

Strategies
for Reaching
the Middle



YOUR TURN: YOU ARE THE MEDIA

► REFLECT

For Jose, storytelling happens everywhere; it is confined to newsrooms or studios. From journalism to film to social media, he's spent his career proving that anyone with curiosity and courage can shape culture.

Today, that power—and responsibility—belongs to all of us. Every time you share a story, repost a video, or publish a thought, you contribute to shaping how people perceive the world. The question is not if you have influence, but how you use it.

► JOSE SHARES

"You are the media. You are in charge of the misinformation and disinformation that surrounds you. You are in charge of stepping up and using your platforms for change."

José's work reminds us that no one tells stories in isolation. Every meaningful shift in culture happens through collaboration—through allies who use their platforms to amplify truth rather than center themselves. To "be the media" is to join that collective effort: to model curiosity, empathy, and care in a digital landscape that too often rewards outrage over understanding.

► KEY QUESTION

How can you use your platforms—whatever they are—to practice allyship through storytelling, modeling curiosity, empathy, and truth-telling so that the stories you share help others see more clearly, not just speak louder?

► FINAL CREATIVE CHALLENGE

1. Choose one platform you use regularly—social media, podcast, newsletter, or film.
2. Identify one topic that feels misunderstood or misrepresented in the mainstream.
3. Create a short piece—an image, clip, caption, or story—that reframes it with humanity and clarity.
4. Before sharing, ask: Does this build understanding, or just add noise? Does it bring people closer?

Our consulting program helps storytellers, filmmakers, and producers tell nuanced, humanized immigration stories, from script development to production across scripted and unscripted content. With experience on over 100 TV series and films across 23 networks and studios, we offer tailored services including script review, research, writers' room visits, and legal consultation to fit your project's needs. **For more information, send us an email at ent@defineamerican.com.**