I first learned about America from Uncle Sam. His real name was Gus Milonas, but everyone called him Uncle Sam. There's something ironic about a real person named Uncle Sam who spreads wisdom about this country, but I was too young to see it.

He was knee-deep into his seventies; a big, widebody jet, slightly hunched and aristocratic man with a lightning-quick smile and a professional face. He was Uncle Sam. He will always be Uncle Sam. The first time I ever saw that imposing figure was when we had just arrived in the country, on a chilling Saturday night that was bleak and cold and yet full of inspiration. We had come to America.

At the door of the second-story apartment, he was waiting for us, beaming like a lighthouse. My father's brother had picked us up at the airport and although we cracked with exhaustion, when our eyes swallowed this new land, we were too overwhelmed to be tired. Not now.

"Eh, yeasou, Giorgio!" he flashed to my father, and then my father did something incredible, made even more incredible, to me now, by the passage of time. In a moment of tremendous humility and supplication, a moment that he must have rehearsed over and over, until it became almost tortuous and painful, my father fell to his knees. Like Jesus had done with Mary Magdalene, he bend over slowly but with a sense of pious dignity, and kissed Uncle Sam's feet. We all stared in dumbfounded silence.

It was some kind of grand gesture, the kind you read about in books about kings and other pompous figures, yet it had just happened before our eyes. I didn't know if I should laugh or cry.

A few months later, we left Viking Apartments and moved to a tiny house in Edmonds with a huge from yard and not enough bedrooms. I had to share a bed with Uncle Sam and quickly became his confidant.

He was a pre-dawn man, arising at that time of the morning when darkness is like an eternal possibility and light just a wishful memory. It was something like 5:30 a.m. and as I had done back in Greece for my parents, I would make coffee for him. Not the Greek stuff, but the American kind brewed in a big tin can with a little glass lid that raged like a cauldron when the water boiled.

It was deep into winter one day, if we can call it winter, the air felt muggy and swampy and slightly fresh, and he seemed particularly pensive. He turned to me with a slight but weary smile, a look I would later come to associate with aging, cynical professors who know too much but don't know how to spill it. It was not a look I particularly fancied because wisdom restrained is wisdom in pain, and nothing quite hurts like suffering in your mind.

"You know how you make money in America," he suddenly blurted out, catching me by surprise as I delivered the coffee and placed it under his wrinkled nose.

Really, I couldn't say anything. I expected him to offer some memory from Greece, or about his wife who had passed away many years previous, or about his sputtering lungs that had withstood too many years of smoking and now were giving out like old Chevy engines.

He raised his feet up and plunked
them on the table. “This is how you make money in America. Don’t forget it, Taso. The people who make money aren’t slaving away in some factory, but are sitting behind a desk, counting the money and smoking a cigar. Promise me you won’t forget it?” he demanded gently, peering at me with those big labrador eyes.

“I promise,” I offered back meekly, not really sure of the implications. No, those would come later. Much later.

In a sense, I did indeed take his advice, but it hasn’t turned out like it was supposed to. Obviously, the dream may yet take place. I am still young and this is the beginning of my career, but I wondered what would have happened if old Uncle Sam had never told me those words in that freezing, darkened dawn. Would my life had been different? Would I have been a banker instead of a writer?

Down in the caverns of our memories lie the cacophony of voices and conversations, memories and recollections, whispers and cries. Our lives are like tape recorders — a jumble of noises that rarely make sense when played back, but just remind us how frantic and fragmentary our existence really is. There is no constancy running in our lives, but a scatterbrain patchwork of bits and pieces collected from any number of sources (our own weird imaginings, television, some book somewhere, a conversation we overheard on the train), and to which we owe most of our waking thoughts.

But I cannot help but think Uncle Sam was right. He had distilled America in a statement and nothing I’ve seen after that has ever contradicted it. We all come to understand that true wealth is made not being on assembly lines, or construction sites, or selling shoes in department stores. You make money by owning your own means of production. It is the single American truth and he had expressed it succinctly.

Some months later he moved back to his house in Euphrates, a little pothole town in farm-dominated Eastern Washington. He asked that I live with him, we had gotten along so well. At the last minute, my parents vetoed the idea.

Too bad. There may have been a whole basket-full of other wisdom to learn. I might even have been a rich man by now.