

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Happy Belated July 4th: Re-Discovering America Through Immigrant Eyes

Eric · Wednesday, July 9th, 2014

I brought my wife-to-be here to LA from Indonesia on August 3, 2001. We had met on the lovely island of Bali a little over a year before in the early summer of 2000. We e-mailed each other for several months, she in “broken English”, and I went back to visit her for almost a month around Christmas time and New Years. We traveled across the island of Java together, taking night buses through the drenched green rain forests for 10 hours at a haul, touring the great Buddhist temples in Borobudur, riding small horses up into the active volcanic crater at Gunung Bromo, watching the traditional Ramayana dance-stories and shadow puppets in Yogakarta, and getting to know each other just a little bit over the bumpy weeks. It wasn’t easy, with the tri-chasms of language, culture and age, looming large between us.

Yet by the time I came back to LA, we had decided that she would move here if and when I could help her get all the immigration paperwork together. Still months before 9/11, I was able to persuade/brow beat the American Consul General in Surabaya, a rare, sensitive and responsible career diplomat, to grant her a five-year multiple entry visa. This was quite a feat, since we didn’t want to get her the standard tourist visa for just six months, nor a “fiance” visa, on the condition that we would marry, also within six months.

“It’s just too much pressure,” I wrote the Consul General, “getting married to a woman I hardly know within six months.

I think my persistence and sincerity just wore the poor man down, and after about 10 e-mail exchanges, he finally granted my wife-to-be the visa. I immediately bought her a round trip plane ticket from Denpasar, Bali to Los Angeles, something the INS (now the Department of Homeland Security) also required.

I remember waiting for her at the Tom Bradley International arrivals terminal. I held a huge, hand-lettered sign in my arms with her name on it, Wati (meaning “girl” in Bahasa Indonesian). I was nervous as hell, having never been married, but now, for some desperate or unknown reason, I had invited a woman to live with me for the first time in almost 20 years. Wati was born in the small village of Sibolga on Indonesia’s largest island, Sumatra, and she grew up in its “biggest” city, Medan, with a population of almost half a million. She was from a poor, third world family, where her single mother worked impossibly hard to raise six children. I could only imagine how she felt, flying for the first time on a 23 hour flight from Bali, the tiny island jewel

in the South Pacific to big bad, wonderful Los Angeles. She was incredibly brave and ambitious, giving up everything she knew of comfort, language and familiarity — to take a risk on this old “panjang boulay”, i.e. long-nosed gringo. That is... your Trulesly!

It is now 13 years later. Wati now goes by the name Surya and she became an American citizen in 2008. I went to her naturalization ceremony at the LA Convention Center on crutches, and we have her citizenship document signed by George W. Bush on the wall, the only thing with his name on it I will allow in our house. It has been quite a journey. An amazing adventure. Challenging, difficult and many more things. And for this college professor... tremendously educational. Not only emotionally, my being a stubborn, never-married-before ex-hippie, but also legally, philosophically and dare I say... spiritually. Through it all, I have reluctantly and surprisingly discovered that my own country, big, bad America... is still... the much-loved “land of opportunity”.



This is saying a lot, coming from a dyed in the wool American ex-pat wannabe. Someone who not only turned on, tuned in, and dropped out of middle class American culture in the '60s and '70s, but who is also absolutely infuriated and ashamed of his government's policy in the Middle East and around the world. American empire, capitalist hegemony, war on terror, these are definitely embarrassing “black marks” in my book.

But I wonder now, way back in 2000, *what the hell was I thinking?* This young, beautiful girl was 30 years my junior and she spoke almost no English. Here's an example of her well-crafted e-mail to me: “*Helo, Eric Trules. Enjoy meet with you. When you come agan to Bali? Well, bye bye. Luv, Wati.*” This, with the help an English-Indonesian dictionary and many hours in the local internet shop. To say that her vocabulary, grammar and writing skills were “extremely limited” would be a generous understatement. Not to mention that she had no idea who Richard Nixon, Bob Dylan, or the Beatles were. In fact, before she literally bumped into me on the street in Kuta Beach, Bali, she had never even dreamed of coming to America. And although English was certainly a useful tool to Indonesian locals working in Bali, in Wati's case, it was not essential. Yet now... just three weeks before 9/11... by some unforeseen and synchronistic twist of fate...here she suddenly was in... Lala land.



Enter Evans Community Adult School, the largest ESL (English as a Second Language) school in the country, and fortunately for us, right down the street on Sunset and Figueroa, about five minutes from our home in Echo Park. Evans was a miraculous discovery for us both. For her, it was a free English-teaching school right down the street with seemingly terrific teachers, which offered classes from six in the morning to almost midnight. It fit anyone's schedule. For me, Evans was a free English-teaching school that offered classes to immigrants and non-English speakers, regardless of nationality or proper legal identification. As I said, things like this came as quite a surprise to me. I mean, how could this country, this city, offer free classes to students without proper “legal” immigration papers? Doing so sounded illegal in itself. Too generous. Too socialistic. Too outside the government's knowledge. I mean, who paid for it?

Well, as I soon discovered, with just the barest amount of inquiry, the Los Angeles Unified School District paid for it. It paid for the teachers from six to midnight. It paid for the rental of the huge, five floor building right next to downtown. For the administration and advertisement of the classes. It paid for student services, college counseling, citizenship preparation, and professional career

training. All without cost to the student, except six dollars for a student picture ID. Amazing, no? Certainly, yes. The theory being one of inclusion: teach the non-English speakers coming to this country, legally or illegally, how to speak the language and become productive members of the City and of the society. Teach them to become citizens. You certainly don't see something like this being done for the African and Muslim immigrants of Europe, now do you?

Who did Evans teach? Besides my wife and her new friends of parallel circumstances from all over the world?



From China, Russia, Mexico, Israel, Brazil, El Salvador, Armenia... her best friend from Senegal... an endless array of hungry-to-learn-English immigrants. Well.... Evans also taught international non-English speaking doctors, nurses, dentists, scientists, and accountants... who came to America for things such as marriage, political asylum, opportunity and work. Evans taught all these new arrivals to America to speak English so that they could take the licensing exams in their respective fields. Become doctors, lawyers, dentists, nurses, scientists and accountants — here in America. Sure, it taught the well-known Spanish-speaking illegal immigrants from Mexico, Ecuador, El Salvador, and Guatemala... to give them the opportunity to be able to enter the work force at McDonald's, Taco Bell, in the parking garages, in the hotels and restaurants all across the city, as they studied, worked, and integrated themselves into our multi-cultural, 134 language-speaking, City of Angels.

This astonishing school taught the poor, the rich, the undocumented, the illegal — taught them all — regardless of ethnicity, skill, economic status, or caste. All were welcome at Evans. All you needed was six bucks and a desire to learn English as a second language. Imagine this kind of inclusive governmental policy employed in other places around the globe... where the politics of exclusion, of racial strife and of division are currently and rampantly dividing the world into "clashes between civilizations". Imagine that right here, in good ol' LA, city of vast chasms between the rich and poor, between haves and have nots, between Beverly Hillians and East Los Angelenos, between the 99 and the 1 percenters — imagine right here — was Evans Community Adult School, leveling the playing field and offering English and inclusion to anyone who wanted to step up and play.



As I watched Wati begin with Level 1 ESL classes and work her way up through level 2, level 3, level 4, and eventually to the 5 day a week Intensive English Program, I also watched first hand, how people from different cultures, different lands, different walks of life — all came together at this multi-lingual, multi-cultural melting pot of a school. I watched with joy and envy as the shy Indonesian girl I had invited to Los Angeles to live with me, made friends with young men and young women from all over the globe. Educated people, uneducated people. Husbands, wives, and children. Doctors, lawyers, and Indian chiefs — from all around the lonely planet. It was eye-opening — and marvelous. It gave me a whole new new view of my city, my country, my government. Come to America and learn English. For free.



A month and eight days after Wati came to LA, the Twin Towers collapsed in shock and awe in New York, my home town. We got a call at 6 in the morning, and still in bed, we turned on the tv.

We saw the day unravel in front of our eyes. But... what I saw and what Wati saw were two different things. Me? I saw what most of you reading this piece saw. Death, destruction, terror, and the world being altered within a single hour in a way that has forever changed all of our lives ever since. "Wati"? What she saw, I think, was more like the movie, *Towering Inferno*, on the tv news.... shown over and over again, in an endless loop of shock and confusion that she couldn't quite understand. New York was a place she didn't know. Seeing buildings collapse, smoke, fire, and death, was something she saw in volcanic eruptions, tsunamis... all on tv. And what she saw on tv really had... no connection to her, personally, at all.



So... 9/11 meant very little to my soon-to be wife. Sure, she watched the fear, anger, and commotion all around her but... she continued to attend classes at Evans. She learned English. She studied hard. She learned to drive after failing the DMV's confusing multiple choice tests multiple times. And eventually, she landed a job as a bartender through one of her Thai friends at Evans.



At first, she didn't pay taxes. She worked "under the table". Not that it was necessary for her to do so; we had done all the paperwork, legally, jumped through all the hoops, legally. But other girls, other bartenders hadn't. The owners paid cash. The IRS was not part of the equation. The IRS made no visits to the Thai bars, nor to the parking garages, where her international, English-learning friends worked. This was America 2001, 2002, still the land of opportunity, the land of taking free ESL classes, studying when you could, getting a job when you could, sending money back to the kids or parents in your home country, and pulling yourself up by your bootstraps. And as I said before, and as I'll say again, this was a lesson in American civic policy for me, a lesson in ambition and idealism, a lesson about the ability of the human spirit to aspire, to achieve, to succeed. Right here in my own back yard. In the jaded and ravenous city of LA. 9/11 mattered less to this bright-eyed and ambitious community of new immigrants than did study, hard work, paying the bills, and carving out a new life for each and every one of them... where they had, indeed, "come to America".



Surya and I got married on Valentine's Day of 2003. Hell, it was about time. I was 55-years-old. We had survived the first rocky year-and-a-half together, including eight months in Islamic Malaysia, just months after 9/11. I was there on a Fulbright and the image of Osama Bin Laden was all around me, including on the screen savers of many of my Muslim colleagues. Sure, it was a shock to the system, but no more than going through the challenges of being married for the first time. We bumped heads and emotions a lot. We learned, at least I learned... to compromise... a lot. But I was ready. I had been living inside the prison of my own so-called "freedom" long enough. I was ready for relationship. I was ready to share my life, my love, with someone else. So... being the eternal curmudgeonly romantic, I arranged to go to a courtroom at LAX on February 14, and with only one friend, the great Taj Mandayla, there as best man and witness, we got hitched.

For me to have married a young girl, an immigrant from a small town in the third world, was something I could have never imagined during my first 53 years on the planet. Sure, I was an offbeat, one of a kind artist-bohemian. And sure, I had become a modern dancer and a professional clown instead of becoming my parents' much wished for "my son, the doctuh"... in my lifelong

pursuit of taking “the road less traveled”. I had run for Mayor of New York City as a clown and survived cancer at age 42. But *this...* this was really a blind leap of faith. I mean I had landed on my hands and knees many times before (part of the job description), but *this...* this was personal. And not particularly rational. And really risky. And potentially... permanent. Really, Trules! What the hell were you thinking?

The one thing it did make easier for us was... Surya’s becoming a U.S. citizen. It wasn’t that hard now that we were married. It just took tiiiiime. Lots and lots of tiiiiime. I did *all* the legal work. It too, wasn’t that hard. After consulting with several “immigration lawyers”, some legit, some shadier than others, all expensive, I decided to do it myself. All I had to do was download the Department of Homeland Security (USCIS) forms... *many, many* forms... and fill them out. Then wait.

Form I-130, Petition for Alien Relative.

Form I-485, Application for Adjustment of Status.

Form I-864, Affidavit of Support.

Form I-693, Medical Examination of Aliens seeking Adjustment of Status.

Form I-131, Application for Travel Document.

Form I-765, Application for Employment Authorization.

And Form G-325A, Biographic Information.

All these in the mighty “Green Card Application Package”.

Don’t you just love the usage of the word “Alien” as many times as bureaucratically possible?

But... one year and two months later and we had it. The elusive and all-powerful green card. Surya could legally start working in America. And she could legally re-enter the country after traveling abroad, something many of friends could no longer do, after their tourist and student visas had expired.

Next... we had to wait two years before we could file the next form, I-751, Petition to Remove Conditions on Residence. We filed and waited.

We stood on many long lines at 5:30 in the morning at LA’s downtown Federal Building on Spring Street and Temple, To get fingerprints. To get Surya’s status adjusted. To get her medically examined by a Homeland Security-approved doctor. To get her travel document. To get the famous interview where they ask you:

“Which side of the bed do you sleep on?”

“What kind of toothpaste does your spouse use?”

We did it all of it... together.

In May 2007, four years into the process, we filed form N-400, Application for Naturalization. Still just \$400 at the time. A bargain. And finally, on May 22, 2008, almost seven years from the date she first arrived in America, over five years after we first filed for a green card, “Suryawati Manalu-Trules” became a naturalized citizen of the United States of America.



And damn right, I went to the almost anonymous, swearing in ceremony of over 500 new U.S. citizens at the downtown LA Convention Center... albeit on crutches... having just gotten out of USC's University Hospital with a right hip replacement. Hell, I wasn't gonna miss that friggin' citizenship ceremony for any friggin' thing in the world. I... we... had worked too damn hard for it.

Other than having to stand for the signature George Dubya Bush on my office wall, I am proud of my wife's journey to America. She really wanted to change the limited life of opportunity that she had in Indonesia, and she has. She has worked as a bartender at a trendy jazz club in Chinatown. She has served Jack Nicholson and Robert De Niro at the Oscars, catered Jay Z's and Rick Caruso's private parties in Beverly Hills, and worked the annual Emmys, Grammies, AFI Lifetime Achievement and SAG Awards for years. She has probably seen more celebrities than almost anyone in town (probably more than the celebrities themselves), but she isn't impressed at all. She calls Martin Scorsese "Bushes" because of his thick eyebrows, and because she doesn't know a single movie he's made. She tells her envious husband (that's me!) that half these people are already dozing through their meal by the salad course, until they suddenly feel the heat and light of the camera on them, when, in a start, they bolt to attention and flash the paparazzi their best pearly white smiles. Kinda funny and ironic, don'tcha know?

She works really hard. She's gone from Evans Community Adult School to LACC (Los Angeles City College) to Kaplan College, a professional school, to learn X-ray technology.



She's worked as a dog walker, waitress, stock clerk, and even as a "lice technician". What that is exactly, you don't want to know. She's bought, financed, and repaid her own car, a 2nd hand 2002 Toyota Rav 4. She's saved enough money to put her younger sister through nursing school in Medan, and she's paid a down payment on a house for her mother, sister, brother, sister-in-law, and three nephews, also in Medan. Her industriousness and her will remind me of... my own grandparents... when they first "came to America" at the beginning of the last century. My Russian-Jewish grandparents, first generation immigrants who came from Kharkov and Kiev, both now in tumultuous Ukraine. My grandparents, who were grocers and house painters, truck drivers and tailors, working their way up the economic immigrant ladder in Brooklyn and Queens and on the Lower East side of Manhattan... as they pushed their sons and daughters from blue collars into white collars... and lived their own, earlier version of... "the American Dream".

Of course, I have trouble with America's current immigration policy. It is most certainly broken. We have 11 million illegal people here living in the shadows of our society, afraid to identify themselves for fear of deportation. Of themselves... of their children. I have a young immigration lawyer friend who works for the Department of Homeland Security. He stayed with us in Echo Park when he was interning, right out of law school, at the Department of Justice in downtown LA. A nice guy. He's soft spoken and modest to a fault; the wife and I both like him. He now works somewhere in the "heartland" of America, deporting illegal aliens back to their countries of origin. He says that naturally, the deportations are mostly to Spanish-speaking countries south of our border. But some to the Mideast, others virtually to... anywhere. But Andy says he "hates his job". That what he does is morally ambiguous, if not entirely reprehensible, and that US immigration policy keeps flip flopping, from aggressive to passive, and then back again the other way. He says he feels just as trapped as some of the illegal immigrants in their holding pens, as he see the same ones over and over again, and he feels more and more impotent within the inconsistent system.



But back to the wife. She's still a happy U.S. citizen. So happy that she even gave up her Indonesian citizenship. Whereas the U.S. allows dual citizenship, Indonesia does not.

"I don't care. I don't want to ever live there again. It's too hot. It's polluted. The only reason I go there is to see my family."

And it's true. We tried to bring both her nursing sister to LA to become a nurse here, and her mother, just for a month long visit, but the US Consulate in Jakarta denied both of them visas. It's a post 9/11 world and the US doesn't hand out visas as easily as it used to. Even to the sister and mother of a U.S. citizen. So... she goes there... and I go to Bali. Not a bad trade off, but I'm not sure about the visa decisions. To say the least, it's been very frustrating.

But Surya loves America not only because it's the first world and she can shop until she drops. But also because of how she can dress here. How she can wear sleeveless, sexy dresses and makeup... without the onerous eyes of fellow Indonesians judging her in harsh, small town Islamic ways. She likes how you can be anything, do anything... in Los Angeles... and not be judged. She likes more than anything... the "freedom" she has in America.



And once again, my self-critical judgments of my own fat cat, self-centered country are brought to their knees. My wife and her experience in America have allowed me to see my own country differently. With more respect. With more gratitude. With more appreciation.

This week, we'll celebrate my wife's birthday. June 19. She'll be.... well, that's another thing she's learned in America: women don't comfortably reveal their age. But hell, she's been here almost 13 years, come this August 3rd. We'll go out to a nice restaurant, probably somewhere in downtown LA, hopefully to one of Pulitzer Prize-winning restaurant critic Jonathan Gold's more affordable "Top 101". We'll invite some of her international friends: the mad Russian masseur from Siberia, the Brazilian Word Cup-obsessed samba queen from Rio, the put-herself-through school PR social media whiz from Senegal. And we'll all sit around the same table. In America. In fact, I might be the only one who will have been born here.

But we'll all eat some calamari or some crab cakes together, some fondue or some pad Thai. And we'll all talk and laugh together. And we'll all drink together. And to me, it will be like a miracle. Maybe not to them, because they probably won't even be aware of it for a moment. But less than 13 years ago, some even less, none of them were in here in America. None of them lived here, worked here, were "citizens" of Los Angeles, legal or not. And now they are. Like wow, huh?

And then my wife will pick up the bill — because that's what you're supposed to do on your birthday — treat all your friends — not like I learned in my tribe where friends were supposed to treat the birthday boy... or girl. No, Surya will pick up the bill without thinking twice about it, and she will pay with the money she earned by working two double shifts last week. And her friends will thank her, and they will all do the same on their birthdays... in America.

I think of my lovely Indonesian wife and I think how beautifully she fits into the fabric of this country we call America. Sure, I know I romanticize her life. Because I also know my wife still often feels overwhelmed here, her future still being unknown, her still worrying about "not having

a career". What will she do when I make my inevitable exit, most probably far earlier than her own?

Then I remember back to when we visited New York for the first time over Christmas of 2002. We stayed with a former student of mine, now a big creative VP with Blue Man Group, in Astoria, Queens... which in 2002, was still the land of first generation immigrants. Greeks, Puerto Ricans, East Europeans, Latinos, it was a patchwork quilt of languages, foods, and cultures. I loved it. My wife loved it. I reminded me again of my grandparents, the grocers and house painters, working their way up the blue collar immigrant ladder, just like Surya and her immigrant friends in LA 2014.



We're going back East again this July — to visit several different childhood friends of mine — in Ithaca, New Yawk, in Barnet, Vermont, in the Massachusetts Berkshires, and in small town, New Joisy. We're lucky and privileged to be doing so. Especially my wife, who 13 years ago had never before even been on an airplane. We'll be staying with my old friends, some of whom now own two or three different houses around the country, but all of us who grew up in the suburbs of Long Island, when my GI dad and their dads came back from "the Good War", World War 2, and this country once again created an opportunity for its citizens and soldiers to go back to college and to buy cheap homes, as a reward for "serving their country".

And I know that as I putter around and swim and laze my way through New England, that I will be sharing it all with Surya, my lovely wife from Sumatra and Bali, Indonesia. And I already know that we will be sending a picture-perfect electronic Facebook and Instagram photo — back to her family in Medan and to our immigrant friends back in LA.

In a couple of weeks, it will be July Fourth, America's Independence Day. We will walk over to Dodger Stadium in Chavez Ravine to see the glorious fireworks display. It will be beautiful. And deep in my curmudgeonly, reluctant heart, I will think... and feel:

“Ah..... America, you are still something to love and believe in....”



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And his “e-travels with e. trules” blog at: etravelswithertrules.com/blog

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