

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

How We Pay

Sylvie · Thursday, February 21st, 2013

Unless you are Native American, you are an immigrant—or you are descended of immigrants. I am too, and I have found a safe home and good life in this vast and beautiful country; its democracy, for all its flaws (and they are many), has made it possible for me to look back on that life with joy, humility and profound gratitude.

In the past decade at least, we have had raging exchanges in this country about immigration. Mostly, the discussion is about politics—laws, borders, money, bigotry and an amorphous “them.” But the national babble has paid relatively little attention to “them” and a central yet major event in their lives: the *emotional* cost of immigration—not to the government or the country, but to “them,” the emigrant/immigrants.

Mulling over how to engage this subject, I came across these notes from scenic artist Melissa Ficociello as she prepared to design a stage adaptation of Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*:

“Where did Ma get the gold earrings? Maybe they were her wedding earrings from her mother... Was the furniture in the house passed down from generation to generation? The family must make a choice to get rid of what they own except for what can fit on the truck... In the novel there is a chapter about household objects being sold. ‘You’re not buying only junk, you’re buying junked lives. And more, you’ll see—you’re buying bitterness... You’re buying years of work, toil in the sun; you’re buying a sorrow that can’t talk.’”

Leaving everything

A sorrow that can’t talk. The words resonate loudly with me. They are branding irons that stamp the universal anguish of *leaving* on one’s being, the leaving of everything behind that has been home, that has meant something seminal, the going blindly into the unknown. Emigration doesn’t always mean moving from one country to another. It can be one place or one life to another, when the move is irreversible and there is no turning back and nothing will ever be the same again.

I came to this country legally and eagerly. I suffered no major traumas. I was a student, supported by good parents able to provide. And even though everything was in my favor—language, education, studies I wanted to pursue—there were two things I hadn’t bargained for: culture shock and an undefined but overwhelming feeling of loss.

It made no sense and I was not prepared for it. I had no desire to go back. The country where I was born and grew up, where friends and loved ones were, was a country that held no future for me. And yet I found myself mourning it. Not that I had a choice. You see, before I was allowed to leave, I had to sign a paper renouncing my citizenship and stating that I would never return there to live.

That is how I came from Alexandria, Egypt, to Pasadena, California. I was 18, and for all of my extreme desire to leave a country that had so unceremoniously given me the boot (although I was a full-fledged citizen with birth certificate and passport), it was a country that also had begun a

systematic purge of its entire Jewish population. And, yes, I was that oxymoron: an Egyptian Jew. So were more than 80,000 others. Maybe more; the statistics are murky. Eventually, all of us had to leave. Some of us had to flee. But I hadn't banked on how wrenching that *leaving* would turn out to be.

I would never again see my Croatian nanny who had been more of a mother to me in some ways than my mother; I would never again experience the exhilaration of the wild desert beauty of the beach at Agami on whose bleached sands I grew up or marvel at the deep orange of North African sunsets or hear the muezzin's call to prayer that accompanied me on my daily walk to school. Not because I pray. I don't. Just because it was an integral part of my aural landscape—more cherished than I knew.

No guidebook

People who never have had to do anything this drastic can be forgiven for not understanding. There is no guidebook that tells us what we must feel or that emigration, under any circumstance, can be destructive on a level even the new immigrant finds impossible to explain. But everything we do in life is a search for self. Losing such a vital and formative part of the past tears away at a core part of who you were; it alters not only who you will be, but also who you might have been.

The new person you become will emerge, but will be different in ways largely forged by the new environment and at considerable expense to the old. You may be fired up by the idea of that hoped-for new life before the fact. But the Before and After, good and bad, will bear little resemblance to each other. And an unanticipated gut-level angst sets in that never entirely goes away.

That carefree emotional balance—that unthinking sense of “rightness,” of knowing where you belong—is unrecoverable. Emigration is exile. It is like losing a great love. The only way is forward—and forward, wherever it leads, is never quite home.

In the mid-1970s, Peter Brook produced a play about the Ik people of Africa—a small ethnic tribe of a few thousand hunters and farmers living in the mountains of northeastern Uganda, near the border with Kenya. When Kidepo National Park was formed, the area where the Ik lived in the shadow of their sacred mountain was declared a nature preserve. The Ik had to be relocated, except that no one had bothered to discuss that with the Ik. A few refused to leave. They chose famine over change, which brought on horrific human degradation. Those who remained were denatured by hunger. They learned to abandon their children, compete with them for food, even steal it from them.

Beyond logic

Emlyn Williams directed a film called *Women of Dolwyn* (1949) in which a young Welsh shepherd boy chose to remain with his flock in the village of his birth—a village being evacuated because it was in the path of rising waters caused by the construction of a new dam. He chose drowning over leaving. Fiction? Maybe. Not logical? Logic has nothing to do with it.

Pragmatists may dismiss this behavior as sick, irrational or sentimental, but the French actor, Jean-Louis Barrault (*Children of Paradise*), once called suicide the ultimate civil right. Scoffing ignores the profound mystery and wide-ranging complexity of our human condition, this odd, involuntary attachment to culture and place. I cannot pretend to explain it, but it's there, it's profound, it exists, even if it makes no sense. Something in our genetic code ordains it. And it won't be ignored.

The shepherd boy and his Ik brothers made a choice few others would make. I don't recommend it, but are we to judge? And are we to judge when the reverse happens and impoverished, long-suffering people, hungry for peace of mind as well as food, work and a chance to pursue happiness, defy another country's laws and infringe its borders? The goal is pure: achieving a more bearable existence. How many must then learn to live with what follows when the reality differs from the hope?

Leaving is an emotionally very expensive act of self-preservation.

Adapting to this world

Most immigrants adapt. Some do it well, others wither, shut down and, on occasion, inflict the depth of their frustration on an unsuspecting public. Some cannot do what others are perhaps simply better equipped to do.

If the world seems to have become a more violent place it may be in part at least because so many populations have been displaced, jostled by wars, poverty and politics, and too many people find themselves adrift in a foreign universe that speaks an incomprehensible language.

I have no words of wisdom to impart. Only observations. The world is whatever it is and there is no road map leading back to the Garden of Eden.

Image from Francis Ford Coppola's The Godfather: Part II, as the young Vito Corleone arrives in America.

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