

IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCES:
SEEKING UNITY OF SELF IN A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE

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The end of the 19th century had already started to take a toll on the once all-mighty Ottoman Empire. Rather than the world-renown conquerors and leaders it has once had, the Empire was increasingly left in the hands of incompetent, self-serving, child-like Sultans who have brought one socio-political misfortune after another on their peoples. This was also the time when once peaceful and generally loyal peoples of the Balkans of the earlier conquests had started to rise up and turn on the Ottoman Turks living amongst them. Driven by ideals ranging from the lure of re-establishing self-governance, to the raw emotions of sheer vengeance, the Balkans had become an inhospitable land for the Ottoman Turks, despite their close to 500-years-old roots in those lands. Thus, our ancestors had been reduced to immigrants and refugees, leaving their homes, mosques, businesses behind, and moving in small and larger groups to the remaining homelands in Anatolia. For peoples who have left all their belongings behind, it was an arduous voyage indeed, inching along through the cold, through the barren-lands, and above all, through the hostile rejection of people that they once considered friends and neighbours.

In this traumatic exodus, there was a young couple, who have exchanged their life-long wedding vows not more than a couple of years back. They were hanging on to their new-born baby-girl whom they called 'Mesrure', and trying to reach a safe place, mostly for her sake. They were trying very hard to re-establish a life of abundance and dignity in the land of Anatolia. Alas, the journey was long, the terrain treacherous, the young couple too young and naïve, and the hostility of the locals impossible to bear. No one knows who got sick first: Was it the young mother or the young man? Maybe their broken hearts and shattered dreams made them get sick at the same time. The truth is that sleeplessness, scarcity of food, the sheer exhaustion of the walk got to both of them. No one knows if one survived the other, or if they mutually let go of their shattered world at the same time. What we do know is that the young couple entrusted their baby girl, Mesrure, to another couple in the refugee caravan. No one knows how they said good-bye, no one knows how they pinned their hopes, their prayers and their love onto their little child. Thus, whether Mesrure realized it or not, she began a long journey with only the clothes she had on her back, and outside of the protective arms of her parents. Basically, Mesrure started her young life as an orphan refugee, at the care of total strangers who themselves were walking towards an unknown. After many generations of absence, the sons and daughters of the once victorious Ottoman Turks were returning to Anatolia.

Of course, there is a difference between being forced to become refugees, and immigration to another country. The first involves little voluntary choice, and could even be a result of a life-versus death struggle. Immigrants, on the other hand, often make a rational selection, and freely choose a second home-land. This does not mean that the latter is easy: On the contrary, despite the voluntariness of the move, and despite the new opportunities the receiving country offers, uprooting oneself from one place and trying to

establish roots in another is a trying process. Immigrants are not tumble-weed, they yearn for establishing roots. The process is the hardest for the first generation that has made the move.

Let us try to visualize the 'immigrant experiences' of the first generation Canadians. Although each immigrant probably has completely different kinds of experiences, each immigrant also understands the true meaning of the concept. More importantly, immigrants coming from parts of the world that are culturally very different from their host countries experience a 'culture clash' much more sharply than those who move between more similar donor and receiving countries. As Turkish immigrants to Canada, we fall in the former category. After all, our country of origin differs in its history, language, traditions and norms, religion, food and music. It also differs in its physical climate and social temperaments. Non-immigrants, in other words, those who were born in Canada for one or more generations also use the term 'immigrant experience' frequently, perhaps because it is the 'in-thing-to-do' in a multicultural society. However, I would bet my last penny that they do not really understand or relate to what these experiences might be. Canadian-born people, unlike those of us who are first generation immigrants, have neither the luxury nor the misfortune of having such 'experiences'.

So, you might ask, what are these experiences like? Well, each is different, each immigrant also feels and reacts to his or her experiences differently. Nevertheless, there is something that 'binds' the immigrants together, like the air we breathe thousands of times a day without really thinking about it: Something ethereal, something that does not smell, taste or has colour, but nevertheless something vital for being who we are and becoming who we will be.

As Turkish immigrants to Canada, we are people who mentally and physically, occupy places in two different worlds. This double occupation of space does not require that we travel back and forth, which most of us do anyway. It is more like a split state of existence even when we stay put, even when we become permanent dwellers of our chosen land. For example, when we speak, you can hear our split existence in our accents. It does not matter if the accent is heavy, belaboured or soft like an undercurrent. It is there, like the shadowy reflection of the different world we have come from that we still carry in our heads; Like the reflections of our pre-immigration selves that surface in our dreams and communications. Even those of us that were raised in western garb, absorbed western styles of education, somehow give away our two-worldliness through our over-colorful make-up or over-use of hand-embroidered accessories or by the multitude of 'evil-eyes' that adorn our homes. No matter how many deodorants we try, no matter how we splash ourselves with perfumes, the aroma of our bodies gives away our zest for exotic spices. Of course, there are also those who cling on to their past identities through covering themselves in long skirts, long-sleeved jackets or coats even under blistering heat. They try to announce their origins to the world through the 'in-your-face-modesty' of their head-scarves or skull-caps. As first generation immigrants, we are people who desperately try to fit in, but simultaneously and stubbornly, cling on to our differences.

In the absence of all other external cues, we immigrants still distinguish ourselves through the way we tilt our heads, use our hands, and speak in unnecessarily elongated and flowery or unusually choppy and simplistic sentences. We sometimes make direct

translations from our own language into English, which for the native English speaker make little sense. We insist on preparing mega-quantities of food for special occasions, and over-feed people who visit us in our homes. The dead-give-away to our immigration status is the way we become defensive about both our past and the current existences. Immigration somehow thins our skin, lowers our tolerance and endows us with a plethora of reactions towards any real or imagined challenge to the legitimacy of our backgrounds. As far as we are concerned, everything about our countries of origin is perfect, and much about what we have found in our adopted country needs change and improvement. The logical question that is rarely asked, and almost never truthfully answered is: What are we doing 'here' if all was so perfect 'there'? Yet, logic is not necessarily part of the immigrant experience; Raw, unbound, deep and even contradictory feelings, emotions and perceptions are. The truth is that we like it here, as well as there!

As first generation immigrants, we all face the challenges of trying to fit in. Like those who have come before us, we also desire to own our homes, buy new cars, and send our kids to good schools, so that they too will become successfully integrated into the country that we now call home. We also like to 'keep up with the Joneses' although our 'Joneses' are often called 'Ahmet/Mehmet' or 'Ayse/Fatma'¹. On the other hand, the more we integrate, the more we are vulnerable to accusations of disloyalty to our original roots. The accusations need not have to come from outside sources. The internal 'guilt' feelings Turkish immigrants abundantly feel serve the same psychological purpose. I once heard a tongue-in-cheek remark which identified 'guilt' as the number one export product of Turkey. Joking to a side, Turkish immigrants do indeed carry a heavy burden of guilt, and try to compensate for their guilt by putting everything related to Turkey on a pedestal. So, we complain about our experiences 'here' to show our loyalty for 'there'. The divided selves created through the immigration experiences require a constant balancing act between identities: Retaining how much of the old to become an acceptable new. Put it differently, how to become new without sacrificing too much of the old. In this eternal, emotionally draining dance, our goals, ambitions, aspirations and dreams embrace and clash, clash and embrace continuously, like waves on an open sea. Talking about open seas, maybe this is a good place to continue my story of divided identities with recollections from my beloved Black Sea coast.

I spent a good portion of my childhood, playing on the golden sands of Sile. At the time, Sile was a yet-to-be-discovered sleeping beauty of the Black Sea coast. I loved the brilliance of the sun, the gentle ebb and flow of the waves, and the shimmering surface of the sea on calm days. I loved the lacy traces of glistening salt on my gloriously tanned skin. Unlike now, in my childhood, the 'sun' was our friend, and we all burned to a crisp without worrying about skin damage.

In Sile, my family's rented home was perched on a cliff which directly accessed the beach through a steep, overgrown pathway. Since this was a time before crimes against children and child abductions, I was allowed to spend most of my days at the beach, with or without my parents. Every single soul that set foot on that beach knew who my father was, I was absolutely safe. Moreover, I was an excellent swimmer, and I followed my parents' rules about how far I could swim on my own. So my childhood in

¹ These are very common Turkish names

Sile gave me the first taste of my independence, which I still fiercely preserve and protect.

I also loved the moody darkening of the water, the violent turbulence of the sea, the pounding of the waves and the foreboding beauty of the nature during flash storms that were unique to the Black Sea. Each year, a few naïve tourists would lose their lives in these unpredictable waters. There were a few tears, but no law suits. People in Turkey lived and died under an unshakeable trust in ‘alin yazisi’.² After each storm, fishing boats would sail to the horizon and come back with baskets full of fresh fish. The taste and aroma of the bounties of the Black Sea still remain buried in my taste buds. Thus, it is fair to say that the mind of the child that I was, was permanently etched by the love and contentment I felt in the arms of this magical body of salty water. The Black Sea bathed me and fed me, and I thought nothing.... absolutely nothing in this world could match its majestic beauty.

That is.... until I had the unique opportunity to experience the shores of Lake Superior! Unlike Sile’s legendary golden sands, Lake Superior’s shores consist of hard, darkly streaked, granite boulders. On summer days, the boulders get steaming hot, burning the heels and the toes of those who venture to walk without their sandals or shoes. The smouldering rocks contrast with the dark azure of the lake, the chill in the waters, and the harsh sound of the breaking waves along the polished edges of the rocks. Lake Superior, like the Black Sea of my childhood, is magical. At the shores of Lake Superior, I feel I am in the most beautiful spot in the whole wide world.... but what about my beloved Black Sea coast? Do I really prefer the golden sands to the polished boulders? Would I exchange the shimmering salt water to the cool touch of this glorious lake? Where does my heart really belong?

After Sile, my family moved to Uskudar for a number of years. At the time, my paternal grandmother whom I knew only a little through her billowing white hair, had passed away. Her very old but beloved mansion was to be eventually divided between her three surviving children. Since my father was the only male amongst the three, and since my family was patriarchal in nature, his family (us) was chosen to occupy the mansion until the rest of the siblings decided what to do with it. So, we all found ourselves living in the spacious, two storey home of this old woman we barely knew while she was alive. The mansion came with its own underground cistern, a huge fruit and flower garden, and a functioning garden pump. Its 14-foot ceilings dwarfed all of us. Every year, a man was carefully lowered into the cistern to scrub its tile walls and floors. After the ritualistic cleaning, my mother carefully collected the rain water through a wide pipe specifically designed for the purpose. On rainy days, the water made a gushing sound like no other as it hit the cistern floor. The sound of the water rejuvenated and cleansed my child-soul while at the same time, scared me a little. In a way, my grandmother’s home was built on top of water.

As it turns out, my paternal grandmother whose house we now occupied, was an amazing gardener. The gardens she had created and lovingly tended bloomed for at least a decade after her death, with no help from us. The fruit trees she had planted and nurtured into maturity provided us with a bounty of fruit. The flowers that still reside in my memories are the aromatic roses: Pink, red, mauve, white and yellow. Before she

² Directly translates as ‘writing on the forehead’ or fate

passed away, my grandmother had made rose jam and rose syrup from the petals of the pink roses. We inherited many jars of jams, jellies and preserves and many other delicacies in her pantry. My mother did not continue the culinary traditions of jams and jellies, so I raided the fruit trees, and consumed the fruit in its raw state.

I also clearly remember the fire-engine-red and white tulips lined-up beside the wooden garden gate, and the slightly pungent ‘itir’³ plants that bushed out of rusty tin cans beside the garden pump. From the fruit trees, the ones that I loved the most were the figs and the mulberries, both black and white. We were also blessed with green plums, apples, pears, pomegranates and parsimones. My grandmother’s garden was the place I ate at, played in, slept on, invited my friends to and dreamt my childhood dreams about. It was a place of blissful peace, beauty and even exuded an all-encompassing spirituality. Even the rambunctious chickens my parents introduced into this pristine place were not able to dispel the magic in spite of the fact that they made screeching sounds and pecked at and beheaded every flower in sight.

I now have my own garden in Toronto, and I tenderly tend to it, like my grandmother might have done to hers. It is neither as big, beautiful nor as bountiful as my grandmother’s, but it is my oasis! My garden provides peace and beauty, and it brings contentment and closure to my life. I am no longer the small girl with braided chestnut hair, and purple lips and fingers from eating mulberries. I am no longer running in the flower-laden pathways, or climbing trees, or skipping rope as if there was no care in the world. Yet, the child in me still awakens when I smell one of my roses, or bite into the juicy flesh of one of my own pears. I breathe in the air, and somehow remember how my grandmother’s garden used to smell. The white, billowing clouds in the Toronto skies remind me of the white-haired grandmother that I once lost without ever getting to know her. Yet, it is as if she is looking down on me and to my garden, with an approving smile. It is as if my grandmother and my happy childhood memories in her garden have ripened and matured half way across the world, in my new home. After so many decades, I begin to understand who my grandmother was and she helps me to understand who I am.

The city of my birth, and the city of most of my adult dreams is Istanbul. Istanbul cradles the east and the west, Asia and Europe, the ancient and the modern, in its unique geopolitical placement. Istanbul sits on seven hills that provide unique and convenient perches to take in the deep blue waters of the Bosphorous, the white sails of the boats and graceful ferry boats that glide over the turquoise background. Depending on which hill you are perched at, you can see the Princes Islands, so haphazardly but at the same time, so gracefully scattered across the face of the Marmara Sea. Again, depending on the sights garnered from the hill of your choice, you can be awed by the profile of the minarets of the Blue Mosque or Ayasofya,⁴ that reach out to the sky in a spiritual yearning. You can also look over the deep, exciting blue-black of the Black Sea, and if you are patient and careful, you can spot the joyful games of glistening schools of dolphins. As a child and as a young adult, I often told myself that the panorama one gleaned from the seven hills of Istanbul was undoubtedly the most beautiful corner of the universe.... until I had an opportunity to climb the Rocky Mountains of western Canada.

³ Citronella plant

⁴ Hagia Sophia was a Greek-Orthodox church which was first converted to a mosque by the Ottomans, and then converted into a world-renown museum by the Republic of Turkey.

Unlike the warm breezes of Istanbul's hills that gently ruffle one's clothes and one's hair, the sweeping winds of the Rockies can be chilling, even dangerous. Unlike the gracious minarets that scrape the baby-blue of the Istanbul sky, the peaks of the Rockies are sharp, jagged shades of gray and are snow-covered. Yet, I feel a similar awe in the face of this natural beauty, a similar spiritual Nirvana in the ascend towards the sky, a similar bliss of being and belonging in this harsh and unforgiving Canadian terrain as I did on the gentle hills of the magnificent city of my childhood. Istanbul's hills and the Rockies, half a world apart, tug at the strings of my immigrant heart, through their so very different similarities. They both belong to me, but to which one do I really belong?

I spent a few summers in southeastern Turkey, where the earth is bone-dry, coppery and infertile, where water is scarce, where animals eek out a difficult living in their eternal search for a mouthful of vegetation, and where people age before their time. In the southeast, wee babies look like miniature adults, and one can see a web of wrinkles in their young faces. Yet, people have an internal glow of contentment, and everyone is eager to share what little they may have: Be it a glass of 'tavsan kani'⁵ tea, or a frothy cup of 'ayran'.⁶ I think, generosity of the heart is inversely related to owning worldly riches. Peoples of the southeast are eager to break bread with the passers-by, ask for news from big cities, and generously provide their own interpretations, in loud, excited voices, often accompanied with hand and arm gestures and clenched fists. In the southeast, time stalls, if not stands still. People do not rush, they do not check their watch to go from one place to another to catch the next meeting. Most people do not even wear or own a watch—they do not have meetings. They are blissfully confident in the knowledge that what little time they may have on this earth is already on their side. I often felt a hard to match warmth exuding from the dwellers of these harsh lands, and an unimaginable gentleness in their leathery, wrinkled hands and faces. Their warmth envelopes people like myself who live at the mercy of our wrist-watches, cell-phones, pagers and computers, always worrying about the next place that we need to be at rather than soaking in the blessings of where we currently are. Southeastern Turkey has a very different relationship with time and space, as if the then, now and the future are harmoniously rolled into one.

The Canadian Prairies are half a world apart from the rugged nature of southeastern Turkey. The Prairies are flat, as far as the eye can see, and amazingly fertile, feeding not only Canadians, but most of the rest of the world. You can travel for hours on end, passing through fields of wheat, oats and corn, gently waving their golden heads of bounty. Somehow, one feels the encapsulating charm of these flat lands, the glory and the generosity of nature, and the timelessness of their existence. In the Canadian Prairies, the view in the rear-view mirror is identical to the view the driver sees from the front window of the car, and the hands that incessantly move on in one's watch become less important, even irrelevant. In the Prairies, like in southeastern Turkey, people's relationship with nature becomes more important than greed for worldly possessions. Prairies, like the coppery earth of the southeast, cleanse and heal one's soul.

⁵ The Turkish saying about tea that is the colour of a 'rabbit's blood'

⁶ A yogurt drink

To my knowledge, Pamukkale⁷ has already been chosen as one of the ten wonders of the world. If it were not chosen, it should have been! Gracing the Aegean coast of the Anatolian peninsula, Pamukkale is a mountainous cliff consisting of cloud-like, low, shallow, oyster-shaped terraces built upon one another. This miraculous natural structure is the doing of a heavily calcified natural spring, covering everything in its path with stayrations of white calcium. Locals dip pottery into these calcium rich waters which in a short time, gets encrusted with a white coating. Tourists buy these whitened artifacts, and thus carry a bit of Pamukkale to their homes. Yet, the glory of the nature is not in these tourist grabs but in the structure that graciously fans out hundreds of feet from the earth, covered in its bridal gown of white. The naturally calcium-rich springs of Pamukkale, keep on mending and renewing this miracle terrace across millennia.

The power and beauty of Pamukkale is matched, and dare I say, surpassed by the power and beauty of the Niagara Falls. Unlike the opaque, calcitrated, soft and steady flow of Pamukkale's natural springs, the mega-tons of water that hurriedly rushes through the Falls is clear, bluish green, loud and full of danger. The onlooker is mesmerized by the thunderous flow, gets soaked by the rising mist, and is awed by the frequently present rainbow over the Falls. No wonder, the Niagara region is the honeymoon capital of North America, where couples try to incorporate some of the strength and the beauty of the Falls into their newly forming unions. Pamukkale is also a popular spot for weddings, where the white gowns of the brides both reflect and blend into the bridal gown of nature. Two different worlds, two different wonders, each adding a healthy dose of glory to my immigrant existence.

In one of my last visits to Turkey, I stayed in Bodrum for a while. Bodrum is a historical harbour on the cost of the Mediterranean Sea. Bodrum is fittingly adorned with a historical castle. It is rumoured that Homer has written some of his world-renown epic of the Iliad from this city. It is also rumoured that the real St. Nicholas, not the jolly cartoon character which adorns children's books (Santa Claus), has actually lived here. Regardless of the rumours of past fame, Bodrum is a booming Mediterranean jewel, with its warm climate, enchanting coast-line, white-washed, dolby-style summer villas gently caressing its slopes, brilliantly coloured begonevilles, and exceptionally friendly local population. In Bodrum, you can see the sun taking its time to go through one of the widest arches in the sky, as if giving a long embrace to the aquamarine of the sea. In Bodrum, people eat, drink and rest, since there is nothing more desirable to do than just being a witness to this God-given splendor.

I visited Halifax on a cold day, under dark, pewter-coloured skies. The insidiously pouring rain had made the landing strip so treacherous that the plane I arrived in had to make more than one courageous (possibly dangerous) attempt to land. At that moment, I had no idea that I was going to love this 'other' harbour as much as I love Bodrum. Well, the magical transformation took place on the following day of my arrival, when the dark, depressing clouds disseminated, and the cold, bone-chilling dampness gave way to a brilliant blue sky, a golden sun, and the verdant green of the rain-washed trees. Like Bodrum's homes, residences in Halifax are also short, narrow, closely built complexes that immediately conjure up feelings of intimacy. Unlike Bodrum's white-washed structures, Halifax homes are painted in bright, cheerful colours, creating an endearing

⁷ Literally translates into 'cotton castle,' or hills made of white clouds of cotton

perceptual cacophony. It is said that the bright colours were chosen to aid the returning fisherman from a catch to spot their own homes from a distance. Despite their exceptionally differentiated climate, people of Halifax, like the people of Bodrum, have developed an interpersonal warmth that is difficult to find in other parts of the world.

So as immigrants, we live and dream in two worlds, making each our own in our special ways in our struggle to carve out a place to call home, without totally letting go of the home we once had. Pride through both the country of our birth and the country of our choice brings richness and depth to our existence that only other immigrants understand and share. It also brings feelings of confusion and displacement: When we are here, we want to be there, when we are there, we yearn to be here. The 'here' and 'there' are really irrelevant since they switch all the time. What is constant is the subtle, but long-term restlessness of the immigrant experience. As immigrants, we are in a life-long search for unity amongst our contrasting worlds and difference. Our memories of 'home' arise in the most unexpected places, under the most unexpected conditions to make us compare and contrast. When we are sad, a smell, a colour or a sound can suddenly make us smile, or when we are happy, a sight or a song can bring up unexpected tears. We see similarities in difference, and find differences in similarities. In our over-sensitized minds, Istanbul's gracious minarets rise to the sky alongside the snow-tipped peaks of the Rockies, the Black Sea waters shimmer their way into and mix with the azure of Lake Superior, and the white villas of Bodrum find their perfect matches in cheerfully painted Halifax homes. Pamukkale's snow covered verandas equally welcome brides and grooms as Niagara Falls does. Across time, as first generation immigrants, we feel alienated as we integrate, but we integrate despite our alienation. My white-haired grandmother watches the transformation from the billowing Toronto clouds, and she warmly smiles at me. After all, she herself was a displaced child of the Balkan wars, and her name was Mesrure.

When looking at factors which explain whether immigrants find skilled and well-paid jobs in Switzerland, language was a key consideration: 23% of non-EU men and women, both low- and high- educated, do not speak one of the national languages (and few speak 2-3). Some targeted support exists to ensure that immigrants have equal rights and opportunities to access jobs and improve their skills. According to the Oxford English dictionary, an immigrant is one who lives permanently in a foreign country, whereas an expatriate is simply a person who lives outside their native country. It's the difference between not understanding a single word, which can be very intimidating and stressful, and being able to understand the general gist of what someone is saying to you. Unity in diversity is the vision that we bishops, as pastors of the Church in the United States, offer to our people as they welcome the new immigrants and refugees who come to our shores. In the past thirty-five years the number and variety of immigrants coming to the United States have provided a great challenge for us as pastors. Encuentro 2000 also demonstrated that communion in a multicultural Church is a true possibility for the new millennium. The call to solidarity can be summed up in Pope John Paul II's Message for World Migration Day 2000: "The Church hears the suffering cry of all who are uprooted from their own land, of families forcefully separated, of those who, in the rapid changes of our day, are unable to find a stable home anywhere. Whereas immigration to Russia shares many features typical of large migration flows in other parts of the world, it is quite unique in its historical context and its rapid increase in a relatively short period. The history of Russia's immigration has been influenced by the disintegration of the USSR into a host of independent states in 1991. Accordingly, large-scale labor migration of native Central Asian groups to the Russian Federation is relatively recent, starting in earnest only in the first half of the 1990s. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the first significant migratory flow of Central Asian natives to Russia was composed of forced migrants, primarily from Tajikistan (present-day population of c. 8. million), where the new state formation was accompanied by a civil war (1992-1997). 10. Every immigrant experience is different. I have met hundreds, if not thousands, of immigrants, and I can say with absolute certainty that no two immigrants have experienced being an immigrant in the same way. This is even true within my own family. My father was born into a British settlement in Chile, and he immigrated to Australia as a teenager. TBINAA is an independent, queer, Black woman run digital media and education organization promoting radical self love as the foundation for a more just, equitable and compassionate world. If you believe in our mission, please contribute to this necessary work at [PRESSPATRON.com/TBINAA](https://presspatron.com/TBINAA). We can't do this work without you!