

Being a Foreigner or Being at Home

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Since my arrival in the United States in April of 1986, it has become my new home. It was not easy – twenty-seven years of ups and downs, successes and failures, happiness and sadness. But overall it was fulfilling. It came together, I have arrived, I am home.

I don't think leaving one's home country is easy for anybody. Regardless of circumstances, such as political, social, or economical obstacles and hardship, anyone would be proud of their heritage and their background. You can hear many treasured stories about the old country; all the traditions, cultures, and memories from many parents or grandparents who immigrated to the United States, or any other country. Sweet and savory stories that make you laugh and want to cry at the same time. Stories that make you proud of who you are and that connect you to your roots. Stories of how your family became who they are, how hard they worked to provide for each other, how heartbreaking it was to leave the old country, their loving homes... Homes full of memories, birthdays, weddings, sad days, happy days and feelings of belonging.

And now we are here, in a strange country, different in many ways – language, culture, food, music, family traditions and more. How can we adjust to all these changes? It was the hardest for generations who immigrated during the first two decades after 1979 because they were more old-school and immersed in old country tradition and family structure. It is much easier for our children who came to the new country and were raised here. They are the ones who were born here. They have adapted and have blended in with the new society and ways of living in a western country. However, the problem and hardship still exists among older generations, parents and grandparents, who still need to be respected as they were in the old country and live with the traditions and culture with which they are accustomed.

This particular issue is what separates us from the rest of society and makes it harder for us to feel at home. Our resentments toward the old country, our resentments toward our new country,

our regrets because of all our past decisions, our upsets for all fast decisions, for many reasons. They make us feel more separated from our new place of living. This unfinished business of being away from home and always being a foreigner is what causes us to not feel at home here, in this new country where we are trying to make a new life.

Living among others as a foreigner is hard in itself, but on top of that we doubt ourselves and our decisions. We are always in survival mode and trying to protect ourselves from an imaginary threat generated by us feeling like a foreigner and stranger in this new society.

We, the older generation, feel we have to carry the burden of the old country and constantly prove that we are not like that, or that we had nothing to do with everything that has gone wrong in the relationship between our two governments. On the other hand, our children have mixed within society much faster than us and feel more at ease with their friends and society as a whole. They finished their education here, they have businesses and careers here, even married non-Iranians, and have really gotten their family comfortable with their new country and culture.

I think what makes us feel at home and at ease with our new place of living is to own our own prejudices and feelings of being different. Unfortunately, we carry some “looking good” and some “false pride.” Please don’t get me wrong, I am a proud Iranian-American. I know who I am and I am proud of it, but I will not rub it in other’s faces that I am better than they are, or that I am superior because I am from the old country and a very ancient culture. It is our own feelings of separation that are causing us to be more separated among the people we are living with. Why is our younger generation having a much easier time adjusting and finding their place in society? Because they carry less baggage of their past with them. I am very happy when I see our younger generation showing interest in learning about their family history, culture, dance, food and overall tradition.

But at the same time they know they are American by virtue of their choice as much as they are Iranian by virtue of their blood and heritage. They go hand-in-hand and they are coming together; creating a space where they are free to be themselves and be at home with their unique situation.

Feeling or experience of being at home starts from a personal responsibility of making a place our home, period. It comes from accepting our situation as our choice and our own creation. Freedom to be begins with the accountability of “I am here, it is mine and I will make it work.” This simple mental action is the first step to being at home and feeling that you belong to your new society. The second mental action is to stop the language of separation, such as “us” vs. “them” or “we Iranians” and “those Americans” or any other language that could cause more separation between us as a nation.

We are Americans, which is a fact. Look at how many Iranian-Americans are serving in the U.S. military and government. See how many Iranian-Americans are contributing in big government, the medical field, scientific or agricultural institutions... We are home already, we are part of this great nation, and we are this great nation. We have arrived in someone else’s home. They welcomed us and gave us the opportunity to start a new life and build our future. It is our Iranian value to say “Thank you” and start taking one side of societies’ difficulties and be part of the solution, not part of the problem.

I think it is about time to we accept ourselves as proud and devoted Americans who came from a great country called Iran, which we are so proud of, and continue loving.

We shall stop being foreigners and start being at home.