

What Has Become of Us?

Today the Reverend Eliza is the visiting pastor Downeast in Ellsworth, Maine, by Mt. Desert Island. Maine is my home state, and even in drab, foreboding November, the Maine coast is magnificent. Given that yesterday is the traditional last day of the annual deer hunting season, today is the day when non-hunting rural folk in Maine consider it safe to come outside again, so I hope Eliza and her friends get to wander Acadia National Park and climb Cadillac Mountain for its spectacular view of Frenchman Bay and the cold North Atlantic.

Having this opportunity to participate in the service in Eliza's absence has given me a new and deeper respect for the gift she brings to Wildflower, and for the enormous teamwork it takes to bring these services together each Sunday. I would like to express my gratitude to Jan, Gary, and the rest of the Worship Committee for the work they do to enrich our lives and attend our souls each week, and to our substitute pianist, Cindy Mills. Welcome, Cindy.

SO, now you see what happens when you're a pontificating curmudgeon during committee meetings: you end up here, in the pulpit! So take this as a warning: The Reverend Eliza is very much a believer in penance!

Before leaving, Eliza asked what I was thinking of talking about, and I said, "Oh, likely something about the experience of moving away from the US and then coming back."

"Oh right," she said, "the ex-pat sermon."

So here's a novice's version.

My family moved away to a far off land, and it ruined me as a good American, and changed us forever, but we were happy. Then we came back to a country that seemed determined to ruin itself, and we didn't know quite how to fit in. Thus the cheerful title, "What has become of us?" That is, my family, that is, my country. And that's it in a nutshell.

In the fall of 2004, when my oldest daughter, Lucia, was scheduled to enter middle school, my husband, Norberto, and then 5-year-old son, Julian, and then 10 year-old daughter Elena and I moved to Norberto's home country of Costa Rica. We stayed there until circumstances compelled us to resettle back in Austin full-time in the summer of 2010.

The principal reason we moved was so that our children would have the experience of being fully bilingual and bicultural. A second and powerful motivation was to wrest them from the full frontal onslaught of US commercial culture with its often toxic, high-volume and pervasive messages regarding sex, consumerism, the stupidity of adults, the omniscience of youth, and so on.

The fact that our departure also coincided with the reelection of George Bush helped our exodus take on the faint aura of a righteous political gesture, which we embraced, but really, the reasons were mostly personal.

Happily, our relative poverty in the US, me a recent graduate student and full-time homemaker, and my husband a dump truck owner operator whose business was hit hard by rising fuel and insurance costs, didn't really matter, because, remember, this was back in 2004, the heyday of the home equity loan. And we had bought a house cheap, and had nearly had it paid off.

So, on a hot August afternoon we walked out of a lawyers' office in downtown Austin with a check for \$65,000 dollars and plan of action. We ship our dump truck full of our possessions to Costa

Rica and then build a small hotel on a piece of land we own in the Pacific beachtown of Tamarindo. I'll run the hotel and Norberto can drive the truck, if necessary.

Which leads me to the first step in my ruination.

Like most average Americans, I was very good at planning and organizing; indeed, I would now say that for me, like for many, planning had become something of a fetish. Many of us grew up taking for granted the notion that we can and will control the circumstances in which we find ourselves. We spend a great deal of time and energy on this; we make lists, we sketch blueprints, we plot, we anticipate contingencies, we are pro-active, and we assume that by doing so we help to assure a positive outcome. The very act of planning generates a sense of security, of confidence. Better to be caught dead than to be caught unprepared. In fact, be prepared is a kind of national mantra that reflects this cultural value.

My husband and his compatriots are far less sanguine about the advisability of planning. In their experience and perspective, conditions tend to be fluid, circumstances neither easily nor accurately anticipated. Solutions tend to spring forth from each unique situation, which must be experienced to know how to proceed. Planning often amounts to wasted energy, which must be avoided at all costs. And this is a key value; it's not that my husband and his compatriots are lazy, far from it, but they see squandering energy as stupid, verging on immoral. Better to think fast on one's feet than to waste time worrying about what will likely never happen. Instead of "Be Prepared" the watchword is *Hay que ver que pasa*, loosely, "Let's see what happens." Like many good Americans, I was certain that our way was superior.

So here we were with plans for a hotel – I was already making elaborate lists of needed supplies – AND we had an empty dump truck to fill, AND a big check in hand, AND someone mentioned that

goods were often so much cheaper in the US...You may see where this is going. A casual trip to Home Depot was the Helen Keller- Annie Sullivan-at-the-well moment. Air conditioners on sale for \$50 at the end of the Texas cooling season...why we would need air conditioners in Costa Rica!

And we were off on a glorious spending spree! Days and nights were spent checking supply lists and comparing prices, and then walking the concrete aisles of the giant home-supply warehouses, thrift, and department stores.

Fifteen air conditioners! Check!

Fourteen insulated, metal, pre-hung exterior doors! Check!

Sixteen insulated glass windows! Check!

Fourteen ceiling fans with lights! Check!

A new refrigerator, stove, and washing machine! Check!

One hundred and ten special alloy roofing panels sufficient to roof a 2800-square-foot building!
Check!

The more we bought the more confident we felt. Why, we had our little hotel virtually built, and we hadn't even left Austin yet!

So here's what happened: To my astonishment, within a half an hour of arriving in Tamarindo, I knew I would never live there with my children. It was a spring break, swim-up bar, world youth culture, sex, drugs, and surfing beach town, which may be good for business, but not for raising a family. Besides, virtually everyone spoke English! Why we hadn't noticed this before is beyond me, but we were there with different eyes, and I think our prior family trip had been during off-season. Then, in one of those clarifying moments in co-parenting, I said to Norberto with bated breath, "This is no place to raise children." And to my enormous relief, he agreed.

So up the mountain I went with the kids to live in my in-law's non-touristy highland town, and Norberto bought into a souvenir shop owned by his brother in Tamarindo. There would be no hotel.

And all the things we had bought? They sat packed tight with all our worldly possessions in the dump truck on the cut-rate shipping company's dock near Brownsville, Texas, for seven months, tied up in red tape involving new homeland security requirements. We had left Austin with barely a change of clothes, thinking our things would arrive within days.

For all those months we had adjusted very well to having virtually no possessions. Our modest house was never cluttered; it was barely furnished. Sure, there were things that we missed – books, movies – but so much of life was spent outside, with friends and family, walking, talking, eating. We were equal among equals in that friendly neighborhood.

When we finally realized the ship would never leave the US, Norberto flew to Texas, unloaded the dump truck and shipped the goods in a container with a different company, and sold the dump truck at a Houston truck stop.

And the new ship did arrive.

I'll never forget the horror of seeing that giant cargo truck lumbering down our narrow cul-de-sac to deliver that mountain of stuff. It took four men quite some time to unload all the boxes, crates and roofing panels. Up and down the street, neighbors came out to watch. And as the stuff rained down, you could sense our status shifting from equal among equals to those rich Americans.

And when we opened our boxes we could hardly believe that we had bothered to send so much superfluous junk with the now unneeded hotel supplies.

And because we had neither the space nor the desire to put much of anything in our house, we were obliged to build a garage to store it all, a huge concrete tomb to my American hubris, where all that has not been given away still sits.

After that humbling experience we slid porously down that slippery slope of cultural absorption.

There were new, hard-learned lessons in alternative ways of doing things that may seem trite and obvious when spoken, but actually required sweat, shame, tears, and much earnest contemplation to come to a full understanding and application in real life. These include:

- That sorrow and joy are inextricably linked
- That adversity is to be met with humor, as are mistakes and follies
- That a pleasant exchange is usually preferable to an honest one
- That there is no such thing as privacy, ever
- That all things do not require discussion, in fact, many things are better left unspoken
- That reason is not the only, nor even necessarily the best way to understanding
- That certain situations and problems are clearly unresolvable, but with a little time and *hay que ver que pasa* (let's see what happens), they can work out just fine
- And perhaps the most important maxim for linear North Americans to remember in order to stay sane in a circular culture: NEVER ASK WHY

But then we had to come back to the United States. And as Beryl Markham says, if you have to leave a place you love, leave it quickly. Our departure was not so fast. Financial concerns forced

Norberto to return to the United States first to get a job, while we remained in Costa Rica. For a year and a half he lived alone in Austin, like so many other immigrants, sending remittances to help support his family somewhere else. And then it became clear that we would all return.

To save money in 2004, when we left Texas for Costa Rica, we took a 36-hour Greyhound bus ride from Austin to Miami, where flights to Costa Rica were considerably cheaper. Riding on a long-distance commercial bus in the United States is an adventure, the way plane travel never used to be. It is its own destination, part of that broad and beckoning American experience, Road Trip, that has a version for every occasion, and that we wanted our children to experience. In addition, Bus Trip – just like Emergency Room – is a good way to spend time among what seemed at that time to be an increasingly marginalized sector of society, the working class, the poor, the working poor, a majority of whom are usually people of color.

As we rode that Greyhound across the flat sweep of Florida we noticed that many of the houses we passed still had blue tarpaulins spread over the roofs, covering damage left by three recent hurricanes. Passengers struck up friendly conversations across the aisle. There were stories of financial hardship, family troubles. Some were traveling to help take care of ill or elderly family members. Some were coming to Florida hoping to find work in hurricane cleanup.

When we first came back to the US from Costa Rica in 2009, hoping to reestablish some financial security and with a certain distance-induced glorified notion of the United States, we were bewildered, for the tenuous prospects of those on the bus seemed to be becoming the condition of the masses. Alarmed, we were determined to speak out. Participating in demonstrations in favor of health care and immigration reform, our bewilderment only increased when we encountered the mean spiritedness of those who jeered and mocked any reasonable vision of equity and justice for all.

Shocked and disheartened, I thought, "WHERE ARE WE?" Freshly arrived from a society in which deeply held moral and religious principles of kindness, generosity, compassion and equality are translated into effective social policies, including universal health care and education, and where the establishment of a military is constitutionally prohibited, the Tea Partier's harsh, individualistic focus seemed jarring. Almost worse was their obsession with American exceptionalism, and the rejection of the notion that we have anything to learn from anyone else.

Hubris, how well I know thee.

And for a time, my family lost its way in the personal difficulties of readjusting.

But then, embracing the notion that I may sound like a dreaded proselytizer, Wildflower Church and the Rev. Eliza nudged us onto the path to equilibrium, purpose, community, even hope. My daughter Elena's interest in development led us to the Wildflower annual service trip to Turley, Oklahoma, where we experienced the wonder of conviction in action and the way small steps taken by regular people can bring beauty and the beginnings of renewal to a blighted ruin of a forgotten town, and what's more, ignite new, deeply satisfying friendships and alliances.

But it didn't stop there. Returning to Austin my daughters and I became involved in some of Wildflower's growing Justice endeavors, from negotiations over the establishment of a medical home in Dove Springs, to witnessing the growing strength and pride of Austin taxi drivers as they organize to rectify the breathtakingly exploitive permitting system that is still in place in this self-congratulatory liberal city, to joining with a group of amazing parishioners from San Jose Catholic Church in order to plan a Dream Sabbath in support of the hard work and hopes of a remarkable group of immigrants who have grown up in the United States and have, against many obstacles,

achieved academic excellence only to be thwarted in their efforts to contribute to the society that helped make them who they are.

Sometimes the work forces one far out of one's comfort zone, but the payoff in building community, in the fascinating folks one meets in the trenches, far outweighs the momentary discomforts.

I'm particularly grateful for feeling part of that vibrant web, because this Tuesday, my husband's employer announced they were shutting their doors for good, and sent their employees home with pink slips for the holidays.

There's no question that we have all been cursed with living through very interesting times. I think part of our problem is looking back and thinking some imagined past hour is better because it is dead. When I think, "This is not the country I grew up in," for once, I'm right. Life is change, we don't look the same, and people are afraid of what they see.

Because at this particular moment, immigrants from Latin America and around the world are the key to our way forward. And this is a good thing, for they have the energy, drive, and youth that will bolster our economy and continue to support programs that provide a measure of security to so many. I have no doubt there is much that we can learn from the wisdom of their cultures.

Reconciling ourselves to change, accommodating immigrants, these have always been the strengths of the United States. We can do this.

And the transition from my discouragement upon returning to the US and the optimistic determination I feel now makes me think of Gerry King's quiet words last week during the

Thanksgiving homilies, reminding us “America is a great country,” as if, in a way, calling us to our senses.

For now, when I look around me, I do see an America I can believe in. I see that in the genuine interest of the new Austin/Travis County Health and Human Services Director, a Puerto Rican immigrant whose mother raised six children on welfare, in reaching out to an Austin Interfaith delegation for community input on public health concerns; I see that in the proud determination of the taxi drivers, I see that in the defiant faith of Dreamers who believe in the promise of America. I see it in the kind and generous hearts and good works of you, my fellow Wildflowers.

Times of great change and upheaval such as this require great imagination, but most of all they require firm action by good people. This is a time in which, good people, we are called to action, to voices raised for all to hear, for if indeed ours is a living faith, now is the time to make good on that claim.

Amen

Lois M. Smith, 11/27/2011

Please rise in body or spirit and turn to Hymn #128, For All that is Our Life

Closing Words:

Take courage friends,

The way is often hard, the path is never clear

And the stakes are very high

Take courage,

For deep down, there is another truth: You are not alone.