

THE WALL ON GLADSTONE AVENUE

By: Pina MARCHESE

Abstract

"Since the house is on fire,

Let us warm ourselves..."

(Calabrian Proverb)

It all began in the village. We would wake up with the sun, we would rest our laboured bodies underneath the moon. Gli vecchi (old folks) often told us: "In the end, all that will remain is our story. Nothing else really matters." This article "The Wall On Gladstone Avenue" will take you into a life of duality and how immigrants "press-on" to acquire knowledge and manifest meaning in a new land -- Canada.

By telling and sharing my own life history and creating a framework of understanding of my narrative experience, I learned to recognize different types of knowledge and feel that I can offer diverse ways of manifesting experience (Carter, 1993). My story and identity are embedded within my expression of culture, language, diversity and the unconscious myths (Feuerverger, 1991) of the daily life narratives of my family. Hunt (1991) indicated that if I begin with

myself, I validate the educational research I intend to undertake. Thus, to successfully identify and understand the diverse manifestations of acquiring knowledge and learning, I needed to reflect on my life history (Cohen, 1991; Cole, 1991, 1994;) in relation to my present life as a daughter of an immigrant, teacher and soul seeker.

I grew up on Gladstone Avenue. My family lived on the main floor and upstairs lived a family from Croatia. All the kids in my house slept in the same room. Nobody had their own bed. My socks were her socks and her socks my socks. And this is how it was. All the adults worked till dark. The older children took care and kept a close eye on the younger kids. We didn't have books in the house.

Cat, hat, rat, mat, oh how I held onto the rhythms of words. Once again at the age of three, my mother and I sat together in front of the television as we watched the Sesame Street Program. My mother, who never had any formal education learned to speak the English Language and also learned enough letters of the alphabet to write her first and last name. Programs such as 1, 2, 3, 4, 55555 in flashing red, yellow and blue colours enlightened both of us as we copied the numbers, letters, and then words onto a blank piece of paper. However, we discovered singing to the theme song even more enjoyable:

“Sunny Days,

Sweepen the clouds away

The Wall on Gladstone Avenue

On my way to where the air is sweet

Can you tell me how to get

How to get to Sesame Street

How to get to Sesame Street... “

Soon, my mother mastered the English language. Proud of her accomplishment and further independence, every evening she teased my father for speaking the English language more articulately than he. During dinner time, as we all sat together eating pasta, my mother intentionally practiced out-loud the sounds and words in which we both had learned and shared throughout the day. She would say her name and things like “I cook pasta anda broccoli”. Furthermore, as if she almost searched for recognition and approval she practiced the words referring to the different parts of the human body: “this is my head, this is my nose; these my eyes.”

While my father was impressed with my mother’s determination to speak the English language, he never led her to believe how impressed he was with her ability. “Ah, he’d often comment: “I have seconda media; I went to school for two years, you didn’t.” “Ah..., if I had the opportunity to attend school, I would have been a teacher,” she’d respond. “Ah, for someone who never went to school, I “speaka” English better dena you! I don’t needa anyone to transalata when I go to the doctor. I speaka for myself!”

My father nodded his head slightly, as he sighed deeply and held up his glass of wine up to his mouth. After a strenuous day in construction, my father did not have much energy to argue with my mother. Often he responded silently as he looked into my mother's face with his emerald green eyes and reddish-brown, sun burnt skin. He held a glass of red wine into his large laboured hands while his body contained a life of its own and told a story:

“My words are very easy to understand, very easy to practice. But no one is able to practice them. Words have authority, affairs have an ancestry. It is simply because of their ignorance that they do not understand me. Those who understand me are few. Thus, I am ennobled. For this reason, the sage wears coarse clothing over his shoulders, but carries jade within his bosom” (p. 45 Tao Te Ching).

Different levels of language comprehension existed within my family household. Whereas my mother became the household communicator for acquiring the English language, my father could only speak the Calabrian (Southern Italian) dialect. Thanks to the Sesame Street Program which became essential for both my mother and myself we both learned to read and write in English. Everyday, I learned and recopied and rehearsed words I had learned from the Sesame Street program that day. The basement of the semi-attached house on Gladstone Avenue was my play and creative ground. This was a place, I could be and become. In this place, I felt free. With white, yellow, pink and blue chalk I'd write on the cold, rough cement ground. My mother didn't mind. And with my

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crayons, I'd write on the great, big wall facing the washing machine. On the light grey wall with a rough surface, I'd write:

cat

hat

bat

mat

Oh, how I loved to hear the rhythms and sounds made when putting these words together. After each word, I drew pictures. Yes, this was my WALL. I FELT ALIVE AND FREE WITH MY OWN WALL. I would spend hours writing words, chanting, singing these words and then drawing pictures next to each word. We didn't have books in our home – on Gladstone Avenue....We had stories, we had words, we had music....

SONG: "GIRA, GIRA, TONDO

QUANTO E BELLO IL MONDO

HUSHA, HUSHA,

E NOI CADIAMO..."

"Sunny Days, Sweepin' the Clouds away..."

My parents immigrated to Canada from a predominately oral culture. After dinner my parents told stories they once heard in Calabria. Stories of “Cenorentola” (Cinderella); stories about the Wise Old Man who lived in their village; stories about the wealthy Marquis, who corrupted the masses; stories about the “evil eye” (mal occhio) were my favourite. Both my parents strongly believed in the perils of witchcraft practiced in the villages throughout Calabria. Life was predestined by fate and curses. If someone was hexed by a curse, only Natuzza, the wise Old Woman who lived alone in a house on top of the mountain could remove the “letaturras” (curses). Natuzza, I was told had special powers from God. In a past life, Natuzza was a saint and had once again returned on earth to heal humankind and save souls. She was the village healer, who accepted only food for her special practices. Natuzza’s healing powers extended far beyond other supernatural worlds. Natuzza had a direct line with the supernatural. Many sought Natuzza for advice and healing. My grandmother, the village midwife, who everyone knew as “Comara” (Godmother) exchanged herbal remedies with Natuzza. Calabrian Women relied on the oral wisdom from the elders in the village, like Natuzza and my grandmother, to learn about their intuitive selves and on-going lives. My grandmother’s knowledge to deliver babies was passed on from my great-grandmother (Nonna) who was also once the village healer. Hence, in Calabria women were educated by older women who passed on centuries of wisdom and knowledge.

“Sunny Days, Sweepin’, the Clouds away...”

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I'm three years old. I want to go to school like my older brother and sister and all the other kids. There are seven children living in this house. Another family who came to Canada from Croatia also lived with us. I'm not the oldest, and I'm not the youngest. I'm right in the middle. I like to do things on my own. I don't like to be TOLD what to do. Let me do it my way or else...

The house is empty. Everyone is either at work or at school. I'm alone in the house with Signora (the Croatian lady). I like her. She's kind to me. She speaks to me in Croatian, and I understand her.

Down to the basement I go. I've covered all the walls. I put two chairs together and I pretend that I'm in school. In this school, I am the teacher. At the front of the classroom, I ask my students to read out loud the words on the wall. "Okay, everyone, say:"

Cat

Hat

Bat

Mat

Rat

"Now, whoever is good gets one of my marbles." The basement on Gladstone Avenue was also my classroom. Signora is calling me; I have to go now."

SONG: "BATI, BATI, LE MANINE

ADESSO VENE PAPA,

MI PORTE LI CIOCALATINI

E PINA LI MANGIERA..."

Eva Hoffman (1989) similarly speaks of a "double vision" where children of immigrants learn to live in two worlds, their reference points varying according to the culture in which they are placed. To find meaning in the inevitable double vision of reality, there is a need to assimilate the multiple perspectives and their constant shifting (p.164). This middle ground is the place where I live. It has become my waking world.

"In the end, all that matters is your story. This is all that will remain in this world" (Calabrian Old Folks). "To hope is to create a communicative space in which dislocation and marginality, suspicion and fear can be transcended through open dialogue" (Feuerverger 2001, p. 188).

Our ancestors never leave us. Their spirits linger. We are made-up of all that was and is. When you hurt, they hurt. When you're content, they are too. Your life is lived with your ancestors. Through the sun, the moon and the falling rain, they speak.

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I'm an Italian-Canadian woman who lives with her ancestors. They are with me everywhere I go. I'm an Italian-Canadian woman who has heard stories in my mother's womb and forever after, since I was born. I'm an Italian-Canadian woman who has lived a dual life, attentive to the whispers and chants of those who lived before me in the village, and in touch with the urban story in Toronto. I'm an Italian-Canadian woman with her ear to the ground but playing her own drum. With each sound and vibration comes an awakening and a call to the emergence of the Calabrian Story.

I'm an Italian-Canadian woman who lives in Toronto, but continues to hear voices across the Atlantic ocean calling, telling..."we have lived before you..." My grandmothers are still with me. Their stories have never died. Their spirit and their tales continue to linger wherever I am. They are with me when the sun rises and remain as the sun sets. They are with me in the moonlight. Their stories twinkle through the stars – their spirits sparkle through the night.

I'm an Italian-Canadian woman who stood underneath the olive trees and heard the whispers and chants of her grandmothers: "We're still here; we are with you. We have passed-on and engraved our stories.... I'm an Italian Canadian woman with her own beat, drumming to the chants of her grandmothers. Their spirits and stories are with me forever. They are in my attic and in my basement. A village of spirits live with me always – calling, murmuring, telling....I'm an Italian Canadian woman....

Dr. Pina Marchese has a B.A., B.Ed., M.Ed., and P.hD., from the University of Toronto. She has twenty years of classroom experience teaching all grade levels (primary, intermediate and secondary). In addition, for over twenty-five years, she has specialized in Storytelling and Dramatic Arts. Her life long process of learning has contributed to pedagogy: rewarding and uplifting experiences occur through collaboration with colleagues and learners and the cultivation of an exciting, creative and challenging curriculum. As Pina states: "The stories we tell are essential expressions of self and personal creativity. Through our stories we can proclaim who we are, who we were, and who we imagine that we can be."

Email: pmarchese@ica.net

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