

It Takes One To Know One

(An immigrant by any other name is just as foreign)

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In his book “Other Septembers, Many Americas Selected Provocations, 1980 - 2004”, Ariel Dorfman has collected his writings of his own search for meaning, understanding and value of his own history within the context of global history and that of Latin America specifically, all within the shadows of the 9/11/1973 (Santiago, Chile) and 9/11/01 (New York, USA) tragedies as well as others without such auspicious dates. He switches from being the victim of circumstances to the beneficiary of the results of these conditions. His search for understanding as to why these things happen, the resulting effects, how they affected him and his family and how it affected people as well as the impact on South American cultures in general, and often in particular, is a recurrent theme throughout his essays. On the scale of victimhood (if we can imagine such a horrid thing) he does not really consider himself that much of a victim, but he does know of others who were and are. He understands, however, that he is a part of history; a part of the ebb and flow of successive dominant cultures, their people, their leaders, their strengths, weaknesses and their prejudices and he has issues with the way the world has apparently ignored the plight of the Latin Americans (though this may be a good thing in the long run).

Like Ariel Dorfman I, too, am an immigrant. Perhaps not one (*like Ariel*) who has lost (*leaving Argentina*) and then found (*coming to America*) then seemingly lost again (*leaving for Chile*) then found again (*in Santiago, Chile*) only to lose once more in exile (*leaving Chile for America once again*) one’s culture and voice, but certainly I did lose my language of birth and so my real “foreign soul” (*where Ariel did not and, rather, found his*).

For all intents and purposes I am a Canadian - wonderfully blasé regarding nationalism, although I did compete internationally with Canada written in red on my chest and back for five years, but I have always considered myself more as a citizen of the world. I think most Canadians are like that even if they don’t know it, and most don’t. Canadians are so un-nationalistic that it embarrasses them when it does appear. Certainly we’re good at some things,

world leaders even, but that's more due to great people than it is our nationality.

I was only two when I came to this country, the same age as Ariel when he first arrived in America. All I have from the "old country" is what was innately given to me: the need to control water, liberalism and tolerance, coupled with a certain uniquely Dutch form of taciturn stubbornness that often lands me in trouble, as well as some odds and ends that I picked up from my parents, rather by default than intent on their part. Father said that we were in an English speaking country now and so no more Dutch at home. And there wasn't. This has come back to haunt him in his 85th year as he now wishes I could read Dutch so he could pass along to me his fishing stories, war stories and memoirs that he is currently writing. He's exasperated that I don't know his language. I'm exasperated that I don't know his language. I am not, however, angry, or sad, at the loss of a good bit of my heritage and language as I found that I am here for a very good reason.

My parents left Holland in 1958 with me and my sister in tow. We weren't running from anything really - no oppression, terrorism, war, illegal political views or flight from prosecution. No, we, I should say they, my parents, needed to go somewhere else, perhaps where the grass was greener. They both had survived the Second World War and so maybe their greatest need was to escape the long and bloodthirsty history of Europe and their own lives. To begin anew, to create a second chance for them and to set a different, that is other than European, course for their children. Our first home in Calgary was a modest rental house with Dad pushing broom for the CPR to pay for food and rent with mom staying at home to look after us kids. In the early sixties we moved into our "own" home in a new southeast neighborhood and had attained the dream of every immigrant, that of safe security in one's own home. Thinking on it now, we were a part of a great number of immigrants all searching for somewhat the same thing.

As a young teen I played on a community soccer team who's father's would all yell at us

as we moved the ball down the field or defended our goal. This is not in itself unusual, but all the players were immigrants, even down to our center fielder who was an American, and all our fathers yelled at us in their native tongues! We had Hungarian, Scottish, Dutch (of course), German, French, English and the token American as players on our team. Imagine the representatives of the General Assembly of the UN all having their children playing soccer - what would that “Babel” sound like on the sidelines? The “coded” multilingual information from our fathers was magical and it worked because we had a common interest (soccer), purpose (playing it well) and goal (to win). All the teammates went to school together, we knew each other’s background ethnicity or nationality, some were new arrivals and others “old hands”, some had thick accents and we all played, worked and dreamed together. We accepted it, we must have as we did not even notice it. It seems extraordinary now, but to us it was normal then, it would have been odd if it were otherwise. Our parents probably noticed, for good and bad, but they didn’t say anything, this was a new country.

And this brings me to immigrants, Canada and my thought that globalisation has been occurring here since Lord Durham’s Report suggested allowing the French Canadians retain their language and culture as members of a larger and more liberal idea of what would make a more loyal citizenry. Today the Canadian standard of multiculturalism within its borders has lent itself well to the ideas of globalisation - it’s no surprise to us, we’ve been living it for decades. We’ve seen the pitfalls and the great successes and, as in the idea of nationalism, Canadians in general don’t see the great issues within the idea of globalisation but rather see it as an inevitability. There are poor parts of Canada and there are poor parts of the world - treat them the same with transfer payments from the wealthy areas to the poor. If we can deal successfully with it within our country why can’t the UN deal with it in the world? Why does simple economics have to have devastating politics to accompany it affecting people in often deadly ways?

I never have experienced the dislocation that Mr. Dorfman has, nor the angst and sense of loss he feels, that creeps into his writing from time to time. None the less by virtue of being an immigrant I do understand his feelings and where they may come from. His unsettled feelings for Latin America, the unsettled history, the unsettled feelings of Latin Americans that he portrays all seem to suggest quite a different past experience and present life from that of us here in Canada. Certainly vastly different than the past and present of America which has dominated, and clearly has sought to determine, political and economic histories of the peoples living north and south of it through the Monroe Doctrine, Roosevelt Corollary, NAFTA, CIA the OAS and many other such vehicles aside from sometimes naked aggression.

The Latin American, or *South of America*, experience is, however, vastly different than that of us in *North of America*, Canada. The age of the history of our southern brothers and sisters is nearly double ours: they fought for independence, we did not, we have negotiated for everything we have, or do not have, while they either fought for it or had it taken away by force. This resonates through most of Dorfman's work and is, by varying degrees, illuminated by it. But seemingly unforeseen by him, and, as reported by Gwynne Dyer, as the Americans continue looking away at the Middle East, South America has made great strides in forming a South American Union and one day when the Americans refocus they may be in for a shock as "After centuries off in the corner, South America may be joining the world at last." (Dyer, 6 Dec,2004)

One day I asked my father why we had come here, to Calgary, of all places, as much in the middle of nowhere as one could get. Dad said that in Holland the only place you could dream with your eyes open was up. Here one could head out of town and dream big from horizon to horizon and all around not once seeing another person, building or hint of what was or is to cloud your imagination. Here the sky truly was the limit. This explanation of my own existence in this part of the world has served me well ever since with no regret nor sense of loss.