

An Immigrant's Search for Home

By Grace Virtue, Ph.D.

When does an immigrant become an American? When does any migrant from any place to somewhere else throw off the constraints of native culture and nationalism to become a loyal citizen of a different place? In fact, do they ever, or do most simply surrender to life in a liminal space--blurred borders, shifting sense of place and uncertain identities and loyalties?

Routinely, during 10 years in America, I have asked myself these questions. For the first five years, the answers were quite clear: I was as Jamaican as Reggae music and ackee and saltfish and that was all I would ever be regardless of where I lived and for how long.

Beyond my reluctance to relinquish my affinity to a vibrant and beautiful culture, albeit a troubled one at times, I was not really an immigrant—just a student, and then a worker in the United States. The temporary nature of my status served as a constant reminder that I could not put down roots, while the marginality of my existence stoked an ever-present longing for the freedoms and privileges of my own land. After all, I had not fled economic hardship, genocide or any form of abuse; I came to attend graduate school, and in the process, gain a first world perspective into critical aspects of national development that, presumably, would be very useful on my certain return home.

But, students and workers have lives too and a decade is a long time to live in no man's land. So, while I worked on my degrees, I went to church, made friends and developed a fierce loyalty to Montgomery County, Maryland where we lived and where my two daughters went to school. They too had made friends with many Americans their age, as well as others from the cultural and ethnic kaleidoscope resident in America. Of course, their presence in school ensured that I took a keen interest in the education system, thereby developing a sound knowledge base and grounds for comparison to what I left behind. And, as a consumer of media, the arbiter of culture in many ways, I soon learned to appreciate great American traditions--like Thanksgiving Day. I now cook the turkey and candied yams alongside my curried goat, rice and peas and fried plantain.

I love the Fourth of July too—from the dazzling fireworks to the symbolism of freedom, equality and dignity implicit in the celebrations. Indeed, judging from what I have seen on the Tonight Show, I have done better than many Americans on the patriotic front. I know the "Star Spangled Banner" by heart, and I twice made it inside the White House, even sitting in the President's Chair.

So what does all this make me? Am I any more American than I was five or 10 years ago and conversely, am I any less Jamaican?

My feelings were best put to the test on a trip home in December '06. After spending the last nine Christmases in the United States, I succumbed to a deep longing for a taste of the Island Christmases of my childhood. In the good old American way, I charged

three tickets to my Visa card and headed South.

Together with my two teenage daughters, both of whom have been here since kindergarten, I arrived in Kingston. Immediately, I found myself marveling again at a startling cobalt sea fringed with lacy white waves; at the undulating green hills; the yellow sultriness of the December sun; the warm, rich cadences of island voices... island laughter.

Yes, this was home, I told myself, a sentiment that crystallized over two weeks of reconnecting with friends and relatives and soaking up the unique flavor of Jamaican life. My children agreed. All we needed, my daughter said, was the Internet and cable television, and she would be ready to be an islander again.

But what about our lives in America? I fretted quietly. What about Wheaton Library where my children spent countless hours rummaging through old books in the basement? What about the memories we have made on our trips to Disney World, Luray Caverns, Virginia Beach and to the National Mall each spring to see the marvelous spectacle of the pink and white cherry blossoms around the tidal basin? Was it possible to simply set aside the years I spent living, growing, learning, understanding and appreciating America?

January 4, 2007. We arrived in Maryland to an absurdly warm day, though nothing close to what we left behind. As I dragged my suitcase toward the door, I glanced around the tree-lined streets of my neighborhood. Across the street, a pair of silver and black Honda Civic told me that my friends, Matt and Demetra, a Greek-American couple, were home. My friend, Michal, a Jewish single mother of three, was home too, said the black Ford Explorer in her driveway.

Then, I looked at my garden. In the weird winter of 2006, a potted petunia in the window box had not bothered to die. The irises too were way too high for early January. I sighed. I worked hard on my garden, on my home—the embodiment of the American Dream.

“I love Jamaica... but I love Maryland too...” My daughter said suddenly. Her voice trailed off into the confusion of my thoughts as I unlocked the door and inhaled deeply. The house smelled of French Vanilla, my favorite fragrance.

It smelled like home.

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