LEAVING A LAND WITH LIMITS AND TAKING OWNERSHIP OF AN ADOPTED NATION

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We can have all the statistics, all the data, and all the numbers to capture the state of multiculturalism in this country — and perhaps hope the information will sway us one way or another when it comes to the many issues swirling around immigrants and immigration policy in Canada. Yet at the end of the day, what must not be missed when summing up the character of our country are the stories of those immigrants and how they've contributed to our society. It's all about how they take ownership of the nation that adopted them, how they grew to serve and continue to grow as Canadians.

To leave a place that had limits and to venture across the globe — travel the oceans to the place that is not limited — that is my story in Canada. I share it in memory of all those who helped me be part of Canada.

My father told me he did not see a future for us in Iran; he had a feeling that things were not safe for us as members of the Baha'i faith, and felt a wave of change was brewing. So he shipped me off at the age of 11 to Victoria, B.C. to live with my uncle's loving and welcoming family. They had just moved from Montréal (because my uncle felt the weather was too cold) to Victoria, where he hoped to settle in what he imagined was Canada's California.

As a young boy, arriving in a strange place is never easy — no knowledge of the games your new peers play, what TV shows are popular, what music made you cool. It took a while to settle in. Neighbourhood children would watch across the hedges and think of us immigrant kids as headhunters (TV shows like *Gilligan's Island* didn't help). We were looking back, wondering why they were staring at us. It didn't take long for Mrs. Reilly to come over and introduce herself and her kids, and the friendships we developed with that family last to this day. Every

memory is a great treasure.

What was firmly etched in my mind at the time were the stories of the sacrifices made by the generation that came before. They taught me, when I first arrived in Canada, about how they had fought in a war to prove that no race is superior to another, and that hard work and perseverance would define you in your new country. This was my first lesson in what is a primary Canadian value: that no race or religion is above another, and any prejudice we hold is a betrayal of the sacrifices made to build this country.

It didn't take long to fit in, to make friends and glide through high school, to find a girlfriend and to learn that you were part of the community. Those early days were all great memories of friends and of high school adventures.

What my late uncle entrenched in us was that this is *our* new country. We must be productive, not be passive; we must plant roots, contribute, go forward. And his most valuable lesson was to take ownership of this country as our own, to care for it as our home and be part of its growth, even in a small way, to speak up if we saw injustice and to not to stand still.

After high school I travelled throughout the United States for two years. I learned many valuable lessons that only traveling teaches, and saw many differences between the U.S. and Canada. In South Dakota, I saw the First Nations in a different light, completely different from my perceptions derived from cowboy movies. In Texas, Nebraska and California, I saw the kindness Americans are known for, but never felt the same as I did in Canada. Everyone questioned where I was from; in Canada, I had not had that happen for a long time.

When the Iranian Revolution forced my parents to move to Canada, I had to come back to this country.

My father arrived with an envelope in his pocket that contained the warrant for his arrest and execution — number 31 in a list of 50, the very first order by a revolutionary court that listed the Pahlavi regime's most wanted. My father and the others were wanted for no other reason than their relationship with the previous regime. He told me that half of those on the list had, in fact, been executed, that one or two of his friends on the list were assassinated in Paris, and that he felt safe only in Canada. He said there was no time to waste, that we must plant roots and get out in the community.

He started right away and worked hard. He always said productive people are always productive, no matter where they are, adding that we had come from a great culture and that we must prove it by setting a great example and adding something special to this country that has welcomed us. Slowly he settled in, my sisters married and life moved forward. First-generation Rohanis married other Persians. My grandmother's wish was that we would marry a Canadian with blue eyes. It didn't take long for Saied, my cousin, to marry Gretchen Edwards, the daughter of a Canadian admiral, and make her wish come true. They have beautiful kids.

I met my wife at a memorial for her uncles, who had been killed by the Iranian regime. These three family members had been given the option of recanting their Baha'i faith, and were even given a chance to go back to their roots by becoming Jew-

ish. They had refused.

Her family chose Canada over Europe, and all of them moved here. I was the first Gentile to marry into their family. That was 32 years ago, and it was from my perspective an intermarriage — different cultures forced into exile accepting the fundamental inclusive nature of our new country, that we are all Canadians.

Circumstances play an important role in one's life — in personal interactions, social life and business. Our life in Canada was no different.

I was lucky to be introduced to a great Canadian, the late Milton Wong, and we talked at length about the contributions of immigrants to the formation and evolution of this country. From trade, to cultivating the farms in the Prairies, to the development of the railroad that finally united east and west and defined Canada's landscape.

His passion for the First Nations was contagious; it didn't take long for me to see them as a great treasure that we in Canada were lucky to have access to. Their philosophy and welcoming culture is what John Ralston Saul was to later define as the roots of our Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the third pillar of the history of Canada alongside the English and French cultures.

I set a goal for myself to always appreciate the contributions of the First Nations to a country that welcomed me and my family, that permitted us to prosper, and to never forget their sacrifices — resolving to remain true to their history as the first people of Canada.

Our family portrait has changed dramatically over the many years that I have been married. My brother married a Japanese-Canadian girl, my mother an Italian man, my son a Dutch girl. My daughter is dating a German Canadian, my nieces and nephews have all intermarried, and we have come to live what I value — to have realized that diverse ethnicity is part of the Canadian identity, and what keeps us together is the love we all have for each other and for the country that brought all of us together.

Being an immigrant has allowed me to succeed in many ways. The very basic thing that immigrants share is the experience of taking a chance, of seeing opportunities where others may not — to transplant yourself, to face odds that are stacked against you, and to overcome them and not give up. These are what immigrants do best, and that risk-taking is what creates innovation.

The value placed on education and giving back to the community, on getting ahead by hard work, of keeping your head down and proving your worth with results are also what immigrants can relate to.

I never had that sense of entitlement that some Canadians of European descent hold and is evident now more than ever. I never complained about being treated like a foreigner. I never felt any racism: I didn't allow for it. I knew this was my country as much as it was the country of those who were here before me.

I spoke and wrote about things not politically correct, I worked to remove barriers, to challenge taboos, to go to the heart of finding the common bond between us, to go a mosque or a synagogue, to

attend a temple or a shrine — all as a Canadian with no hyphens, to find and embrace our differences, and to find the unity in our diversity.

Canada's economy is small, its population is small and its land is vast. This fragile balance between accommodating the social change and the need to invite more people to maintain our population, grow our economy and care for an aging population must be dealt with by tapping the wisdom that maintains the bridges that were entrusted to us by previous generations. That harmony is something we must pass on to those who follow us.