

It can be a long journey to connect with the ‘Other’

BY LEEMA FARHA

FEAR of the unknown is understandable, but what engraves humane qualities is willingness to move towards understanding, connecting, and accepting.

Colonial and post-colonial theory portrays the ‘Other’ as an individual who does not belong to a particular group or a community, with different cultural practices. Edward Said, in his book *Orientalism*, extends the concept of the ‘Other’ by explaining the relationship between groups through binary opposites: the Occident and the Orient, the Orient being identified as the ‘Other,’ concepts emerging from the effect of colonization.

Today I have just borrowed the word ‘Other’ simply to mean: a stranger, an unknown, not belonging to the person one has met and yet wishes to get to know and live together in harmony.

Immigration has become a part and parcel of globalization, promoting and increasing interactions between different regions and populations around



ONE CITY,
MANY VOICES

The Thunder Bay Anti-Racism and Respect Advisory Committee and Diversity Thunder Bay produce this monthly column to promote greater understanding of race relations in Northwestern Ontario.

the globe. But it is not as easy as it sounds. Rather, accepting differences requires great efforts, understanding, time and endurance.

The above discussion is a preamble to portraying the developing relationship between the local and the newcomer immigrant. Both the immigrant and the local become the ‘Other’ in each other’s eyes — trying to bridge connection between the differences they possess. In the process of inclusion on the local’s part and integration on the immigrant’s part spirals confusion, fear and sometimes vulner-

ability. These are the emotional stages of ‘getting to know’ the ‘Other’ with different cultural background. This requires time, and one group may need more time than the other, but patience and tolerance pave the way to acceptance and integration.

When we talk about being afraid of the ‘Other,’ it doesn’t necessarily mean hatred and racism, inferiority or superiority. It could simply mean being not familiar with the new group, culture, language, or the mindset. The immigrant might be struggling to develop the skill set to integrate, to know the new country and the locals, whereas the locals could be trying to acquaint, to take risks to welcome and include the immigrant as a member of their group.

So, if there is a struggle in creating that bridge, we shouldn’t conclude that it is the shortcoming of the immigrant, or the unwillingness of the locals. There is a saying, ‘it takes two to tango.’

I can only talk about myself when I first immigrated to Canada in 2010. I felt out of place, wondering how I would adjust. This drove me crazy and ultimately

homesickness intensified. ‘Have I made the right choice?’ No, it is not totally because the host country made me feel this way, but because I was afraid and frustrated; I wanted everything to be alright overnight. It wasn’t quite rational.

As time passed, my professors, my classmates, my neighbours, my colleagues helped me to overcome the emotional turmoil I went through during the first couple of years. But the feeling also came when I thought I wasn’t really valued by few. However, this number was nothing compared to the love, respect and friendship I received as I walked the path towards integrating over this past 12 years. I am no longer haunted by my dilemma (like Shakespeare’s Hamlet, asking “To Be, or Not to Be, That is the Question.”)

I have seen dreams shattered, especially when the expectation of the immigrant is not met. A doctor (back home) ending up working at a store, a professor working as the maintenance guy. Frustration spikes when there is no way of returning back as many have resigned and given

up everything to fly to their dreamland.

Both the immigrant and the local have roles to play.

The locals might need to be compassionate towards and recognize the skills the immigrants bring with them, and the immigrants need to see the fact that many locals go through the same struggle of building a career. We also can’t turn a blind eye to the many newcomers who have successfully built their career. However, it is true that it takes the immigrants twice the effort to adjust and assimilate.

I was no different. I was frustrated, I cursed, I was ready to go back. But time healed me, patience rewarded me and local friends embraced me. This helped me to become one with the citizens, to be a contributing member of the community.

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