

A Canadian in the Making: Letters to Canada

Fourth Annual June Callwood Lecture, Toronto Reference Library

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By Ratna Omidvar

Thank you very much for inviting me to speak to you today. To be absolutely frank, I am a little awed, if not over-awed to be on the same platform as James Lockyer, Sally Armstrong and Mary Jo Leddy. And even more awed that I am delivering the June Callwood lecture today. June, I am sure, is looking over us right now, because she always had the uncanny sense of the being at the right place at the right time and saying the right things. I hope some of the last rubs off on me today.

As you may guess from the title of the session: "A Canadian in the Making" my remarks are of a somewhat personal nature. This is new for me, I normally speak about my work at Maytree and about integration, diversity and immigration solutions. Not so much today. But you will note that links between the personal and the professional.

My story is no different than that of the hundreds of thousands of immigrants who choose to make Canada their home. We all have a starring role in the same reality show which runs roughly along the lines of exile, endurance, awakening and redemption.

So instead of a speech, I have chosen to write a few letters to Canada and so share my journey with you.

The first letter is titled: EXILE

June 2, 1981

Pearson Airport

Dear Canada,

I got my first glimpse of you from the airplane. Everything I imagined is unfolding in reality – a vast land, forests, green spaces dotted with small and large lakes. Even as I look at you from up here in the skies, I can almost touch and feel freedom, possibility and optimism. I clutch a piece of precious yellow paper in my hand that allows me to be part of you. Just a piece of paper, but so hard come by, and so very valued.

When we left Teheran a year ago in the early dawn and fled across the border into Turkey, with our one-year-old daughter (who is in the audience with us today), we had no idea where we would find refuge. Those of us who are Iranians or have Iranian friends know that every Iranian has a horrifying story of escape to tell.

In retrospect ours was rather mundane. A long bus ride, a nervous exchange of papers at the border, then into Turkey in the middle of the night, then finally a flight to Istanbul and then Munich.

But there is one moment that stands out in my memory. It is pretty indelible. We are in a square room at the Turko-Iranian boarder in northern Iran. It is bitter cold in the room, which is set up as a border crossing point. The northern side of the room is Turkish and has an unsmiling picture of Ataturk on the wall. The south side of the room, where we are, is Iranian. It too has an unsmiling picture of Khomeini on it. I remember clearly the mental bargain I was making with God at that moment: "Get us across to Ataturk and we will never, never ask you for anything else."

Well we did get across. And I have, being frail and human, sadly broken my promise. But when adversity strikes, as it always tends to do, then I make it a habit to revisit that moment in my life and count all the blessings that I do have.

Safe in Munich, we started to think of where now? Australia – too far; the UK – too imperialist; India – impossible; Germany – no permanence. Only two options presented themselves to us. The US and Canada. The US was unattractive to us after our years in Iran seeing first hand the results of their political interference. And so, almost by default, we chose Canada. We had family and friends, we had heard of and admired your principle citizen, Pierre Elliot Trudeau. In school I had learnt about the Hudson's Bay Company and completed a fascinating school project on lumber jacks. That was the sum total of our knowledge about you. A charismatic man, and a series of romantic, and as I later understood, outdated stories!

To be fair, Canada, you knew even less about me. You will remember that our first introduction to each other was not happy. Your representatives in Bonn very quickly dismissed our interest in you and noted that we were not the kind of immigrants that you wanted. No other reason given. But we knew people, who knew people in Toronto, who knew your people in Ottawa and so you summoned us back to Bonn for an interview. The same representative shook our hand and said we were exactly the kind of family Canada needed and predicted a great future for us. Jobs aplenty he said, lots of affordable housing, wonderful seasons, cheap loans, great schools etc. etc.

No wonder, I am filled with joy and excitement as we land.

I know that You and I, Canada, are going to be fast friends.

I am in great anticipation - Yours sincerely,

Ratna Omidvar

The second letter is written five years later and it is titled: ENDURANCE

Winter of 1986

Dear Canada,

I have lived with you for now close to 5 years. I am no romantic, and expected an uphill climb, but not a mountain of hurdles. These have been hard years, filled too often with disappointments.

At the same time, I have learnt much about you and am slowly beginning to understand you. You in turn, I hope, are beginning to understand me.

You promised me much and have given me much. I have no fear of persecution. I can speak my mind and join whichever political party I wish (although I am surprised that there is so little choice). I can live where I want, associate with whom I want, and go about my life the way I want.

It continues to amaze me that schools, doctors and hospitals are free, inasmuch they are funded by the public purse. Two years ago, the first home grown Canadian in our family was born, we brought her home from the hospital (she is here today as well) – no bullets, no soldiers in the corridors and no bills.

But there is much that is difficult to deal with.

You have unwritten rules that I find hard to decipher. You have norms and practices that are difficult to understand. And there are invisible barriers that I must learn to navigate.

But there is one constant.

You are always polite, so very polite that it is sometimes hard to understand whether it is politeness or indifference. When I meet members of your family, they say to me “How nice to meet you. We must see each other again.” It is only with time that I have learnt not to take such statements too literally. I of course, want to fix a time immediately, because we are lonely and need friends, until I see the look of mild horror on their faces.

In order to survive, I am beginning to learn slowly the rules of engagement. I know now that it is not Canadian to be overfriendly or curious for fear of being taken for an intrusive busy-body. I no longer ask someone when I meet them where they live or what they do, or worse, how much they paid for their house/car or what they earn. Nor do I stand too close to people, for fear of “infringing on their personal space”. This is to be frank, for an Indian, entirely new territory for me. Indians have a healthy curiosity about everyone and in India, to be alone, is to be lonely.

But there is a parallel life I live with other immigrants who are my friends who share our context and these are exactly the kind of conversations I have with them.

There is a very safe topic of conversation though and we are learning to use it good effect... the weather... ice flurries, black ice, snow storms, ice storms - these are all new experiences for me. I must really admonish you for forgetting to tell me about the weather and providing me with a list of all the winter essentials I would need: hats, mitts, gloves, ear muffs, snow suits, long coats, short coats, fall coats, winter coats to cope with the weather.

But then I have also learnt that after every winter comes spring and then summer. Just as your summers are glorious, I continue to hope that we will find our metaphorical summer as well even as I shiver in your cold winter.

Don't get me wrong. People in Canada are kind, so very kind. They look at me earnestly and ask me slowly: "Do...you...speak...English?" I am stunned at my reaction to the question. Me, top of my class in English Lit... member of the university debating team!! It dawns on me slowly that I am just another brown face to them.

There are other things that daunt me. Our search for work is far more difficult than anything your representative in Bonn indicated. Wherever we go, we are asked for a magical dust that we cannot buy for love or money – Canadian work experience. We have become friends with many others – doctors, lawyers, engineers, scientists, who find themselves in the same quandary. We sit for hours in coffee houses to figure out what to do next in our lives.

Many of our friends are working in factories, or driving taxis. Others like us have sunk their life savings into small business which more likely than not will fail. There is a look of grey despair in their faces. Some are not coping well with the loss of face and dignity. Their marriages have split up; they have left or simply disappeared from our circle. Others go about their daily lives with a quiet grimness to their faces.

We too have not been spared. We have spent all our money trying to find work and keep our heads above water.

Some are cynical. They think that immigration may well be a giant ponzi scheme, with every successive wave of immigrants paying for the success of those who came before ... a dream sold to the first generation of immigrants so that they work hard, in the hope that their children will succeed.

I have received some interesting advice as well and I am pondering over it. It relates to my name, which is apparently very difficult for Canadians to get their tongues around. So I have been advised by a well meaning friend so change it ... I have even come down to the final short list of names under consideration: Rita and Rosa. But in the end, I know I will not be able to this. My name is so much part of my identity, handed down to me by my grandmother, it is as indelible as the colour of my skin. And I guess, we will just have to manage.

But, there have been a few breaks as well. Through volunteering at my daughter's child care center, I have come to the attention of the Director. She has watched me raise money for the center through small efforts like pot lucks and palm reading. She sees

something in me that is more valuable to her than Canadian work experience and has offered me a contract position. This is exciting work, very different from the mind numbing number crunching work I previously had. My job is to find money, organize events and generally be a kind of odd jobs person to the boss. She is my first mentor and takes great pains to show me how things are done here, what to say when and more importantly what not to say.

So I remain, yours somewhat dejectedly, but still in hope,

Ratna Omidvar

Ten years later I write: AWAKENING

Toronto, June 1991

Dear Canada,

Today it is exactly ten years to the date since we arrived first in Canada. I am happy to tell you that time is proving to be a great healer. Slowly but surely, we can see that our initial hardships will one day translate into a good life. The clouds have not entirely lifted ... after six years in occupational exile, both my husband and I are not exactly in, but around careers that have a future, even though we have lost possibly the best working years of our lives. After first starting and then shutting down a small business, then gaining a foot hold as a technician, my husband is finally employed as an engineer. I have been practical. I realized long ago that nobody in their right minds in Toronto would want to learn German from an Indian, so I have, with the help of my wonderful mentor, reinvented myself and found meaningful work, in fact a career, in the not-for-profit sector.

There have been other silver linings to our clouds. We are slowly but surely becoming part of a community, primarily through the children's schools. I have learnt that it is not disrespectful to ask and challenge teachers in the schools, and in fact the more you ask and challenge, the better your children seem to do!

I have also become a really good friend of our local library. I borrow and read books and magazines, rent movies and music, watch other people learn English, look at the senior citizens reading their week-old Italian newspapers, receive guidance on how to fill out my tax return. I take my daughter to music classes there, and every summer we compete in the reading competition.

It occurs to me that it is in these public spaces and places – schools, libraries, parks that we are more equal than in others.

There are a few instances that stick out in my memory as critical first experiences of belonging. We have enrolled our older daughter in a competitive gymnastics club in order to drag her away from the TV. Even though I have no understanding of the sport, I spend most Saturdays hauling a variety of children to remote strange locations all over

small town Ontario, like Aurora and Trenton and Chatham, for competitions. With other mothers I make coffee, sandwiches and a very strange Canadian culinary confection from hell called peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.

It is during these early mornings that I sense the connection to people who are different from me but also very much like me.

It is, I think, these experiences of collectivism – raising money, making sandwiches, planting bulbs in neighbourhood gardens, finding similarities across our differences that join us in a society that is so highly individualistic and where the rights of the individual seem to be primary.

I have taken another very important step. Looking at my own experience and that of my other immigrant friends, a group of us have come together to do something about the wasted talent of immigrants. We have developed a proposal to provide employment counseling for immigrants, so that those who come next will not face the disappointment and waste of time that we have. We have drafted a plan and met with people in various important ministries who have made noises of encouragement. We have met with a few politicians, and they have done the same. This is an exciting experience and a new experience for me, to be able to identify a problem but then create a solution to it. All paper work is done and we wait now with baited breath for the result.

Lo and behold, we are awarded the grand sum of \$ 75,000 to set up this new organization. I begin to learn about a whole new set of responsibilities – setting up a board, hiring an executive director, being accountable to the community. We have found a church basement to locate our offices, have hired staff and are now providing counseling to a steady stream of new immigrants.

This is wonderful, but not enough as I learn. Now I begin the uphill task of raising more money and applying for United Way membership to secure its future. Talk about a steep learning curve.

But, the best part of these past years though is that in 1987 I became your loyal citizen. You gave me another piece of paper, this one much more formal, that declared to all and sundry that I was a member of your family, and can now officially call myself by your name. I am Canadian.

It is indeed a strange sensation to become a part of your family, even though they are no blood ties. I have taken this step seriously, bought a number of books on your history, spent time with a citizenship teacher, learnt about the Plains of Abraham and the early years of confederation and know the names of all the ten provinces and the three territories off by heart.

I also know now that this path from exile to belonging has been shared by thousands who came before me and will be shared by thousands who will come after me. I have read about the cold weather farmers from the Ukraine who came to Canada in 1913 to settle the west, about the British orphans who were sent to Canada after the Second World War, about the Chinese who came to build the railroad, about the Ugandans who

found refuge here after being expelled from their land, about the boatpeople from Vietnam, about the Italians who expected to find the streets paved with gold, only to find out that they had to pave the streets, the Portuguese, the people of the Caribbean... wave after wave of people, all in search for a better life...each in a sense a refuge...just arriving at different times, from different places.

I feel, in a small way, part of this history and so I am able to find an emotional connection with the rest of you, with those who came before me, and those who will come after me.

Knowing what I do now of you Canada, I wonder how you do this, how you keep your soul and share it with all those who do not have a common history with you? What makes you so translucent, so willing to define and redefine your identity? Should this not be a huge problem I wonder? The answer of course, is no, this is not a problem, it is in fact the answer that allows us to be a "global soul". (Pico Iyer).

I look at my children, who are a strange and wonderful mix of the many cultures in our lives – Indian, Iranian, German and Canadian. They identify with all their different identities, but they are mostly Canadian. I rejoice in the freedoms they take for granted, especially as young girls. They question everything, especially authority, especially mine. They are just as comfortable eating hot dogs and sushi, cheering baseball and cricket, watching Hollywood or Bollywood. I know that when they are old enough, they and their will date, marry and hang out with people from all backgrounds. I know that when they go to work, they will work alongside and, Chinese, Japanese and Irish. And I know that their bosses are women. I marvel at this. And I thank God that they are young women in the freest society in the world.

So, I remain on their behalf, in renewed optimism,

Ratna Omidvar

The last letter is written a few weeks ago: REDEMPTION

Toronto, April 2010

Dear Canada,

We have now known each other for almost 29 years.

As I look back on these years, I am overwhelmed with a sense of appreciation for the life I have, the work I do, my friends and family. But most of all I value the freedom we have and enjoy, and sometimes take for granted. This must be the most valuable gift that you give us.

As I examine my emotions and search for a way to describe them, I am left with one over-riding feeling: I belong.

This intense feeling comes to me at strange moments: when every spring the daffodils in our neighbourhood raise their sunny head, I know I belong. When I come back to Canada from overseas, and I check in with a customs officer, who looks like me, I know I belong. When I hear our Governor General talk about her life as the child of refugees, I know I belong. When I say “what a glorious day” and the temperature is only plus two, I know I must belong; and when my heart stopped as Sidney Crosby put the puck in the goal in overtime for Canada, even when I understand little of hockey, I know I do belong.

I also know that as a member of the Canadian family, I can and must play a part in dealing and healing the family problems that I have inherited, along with enjoying all the benefits. Our ongoing issues with reserve and off-reserve aboriginals, the squabbles with Quebec. Poverty, injustice, inequity to name a few more, the concerns on health care and education...these are now my issues.

There are lessons from my life that I am still trying to learn from. For all the money we spend on services, it confounds me that we cannot spend more on doing the things that can leap frog us to success. I remember the bonding that took place with other parents as we nursed cups of steaming coffee in cold gymnasiums and cheered our daughters on as they competed with others. I think we stand a much better chance building a nation on the hockey, cricket and football fields in Canada, cheering our kids along, as they play with others, than we can in lonely ESL classes. It concerns me that even though immigrants make up the majority population in the GTA, we still speak about immigration issues, problems and solutions as silo issues. It worries me that we are not working hard enough at mainstreaming immigration, but continue to go down the road of providing separate services for separate people.

I speak to at least five or more immigrants every week who call me for advice. First, I tell them to keep their names. But I also tell them about the bargain that they have signed on with you. We must live up to our end, work hard, learn the ropes and the language, take comfort from our community ties but also reach out and make new friends. Invite more people to dinner, go bowling with them. Obey the law of the land, even when these collide with personal values. Be open to new ideas, and not live in bubbles that hold us hostage to old ways of thinking. Become members of associations, political parties, resident associations, environmental movements, book clubs, sports clubs, knitting clubs...get involved, speak up, vote. I tell them that standing on the sidelines is not an option for anyone, but it is definitely not an option for immigrants. Democracy belongs to all of us, but it always belongs more to those who participate in it, so participate, we must. And finally, I tell immigrants, someone will reach out and help you, and so when it is time, remember to pay it forward.

Canada, as for you, you too must live up to your end of the bargain. You put too much stress and attention on what the immigrant must do, you put out lofty ideals and fail to follow up with practical actions to realize those same ideals in a timely manner. You, your institutions and attitudes are often too rigid, failing to keep pace with the changing times and demographics. Your politeness can be misinterpreted as a thinly disguised veil for covert discrimination and racism. You expect the immigrant to do most of the hard work. You forget that change is a two way street and that as we change and adapt,

so must you. You close your eyes to the fact that as future members of your society, we not only step into the metaphorical Canadian home, but in time will want to rearrange the furniture. After all, it is and will be as much our country as it is yours.

I know this is not hard for you to do, because it is in your DNA. As a young country, you are still writing your story, finding your narrative. Without the rigid constraints of centuries of history, war and religion, you are free to create something different, new and unique. For all your much reputed timidity, I believe that you are remarkably courageous. You are unafraid of building a nation with people from all over the world, regardless whether they came 200 years or 20 years ago. You are willing to take the risk of allowing every new wave of immigrants to leave their own mark on your character and personality. It takes, I believe, remarkable self confidence to see oneself as a constant and unending work in progress.

I have possessed three passports in my life. I was born an Indian, married an Iranian and so gained my second passport, and finally became a Canadian. Whilst the first two were almost accidental or coincidental, this last one has been earned. I belong, not unlike many immigrants in more than one world. When I go back to India, the moment the airplane doors are opened, my knees go weak at the sights, sounds and smells of the country where I was born. For the first two weeks, I am in thrall of the colour, the noise, the music, the busy-ness of India, the incessant sound, conversations and hustle. But after some time, I begin to grasp that I am a visitor in India, that I am both of that world, but also *not* of it. I am more Canadian in my sensibilities, and the Canadianess in me is accentuated more so when I am not in Canada. I am always more than happy, in fact relieved, to come back to Canada and the place I call home. Here I have safety, security, familiarity and confidence. This is where I now belong. This is what I know, this is home.

And so I see that over these thirty years together, how much like you I have become. We are both slightly insecure, somewhat imperfect, overly sensitive, jealous of our rights, anxious about our responsibilities and our place in the world. We are fierce about being recognized for who we are – nothing gets us more agitated than being confused with others, Americans, the Brits or the French. Our inherent modesty prevents us from being loud about our accomplishments, yet we know and recognize that a new confidence and pride is in the air. We have an uncurbed enthusiasm about the future, although neither of us quite knows yet how we are going to overcome our many challenges.

We are both, in the best spirit of optimism, still in the making and I hope will always be so.

For these and many more reasons, I remain, your ever admiring and loyal citizen,

Ratna Omidvar