

# LETTERS TO FRIENDS



*life journeys*

**Wisdom Through Storytelling**  
by Jones, Hutchins, Jackson, & Zalaquett



## CHAPTER 9

**Tracing my Multicultural, Multi-Contextual Identity**

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As I look back at my life I see a kaleidoscope of multicultural experiences that have shaped my life. I am originally from India from the once idyllic city of Pune in the state of Maharashtra on the western coast of India (about 100 miles Southeast of Mumbai). My mother's side of the family had lived for generations in Maharashtra, but my father as well as the majority of the people from the Muslim religious sect to which I belong, had their roots in Gujarat, a State north of Maharashtra. Like most Indians, I am multilingual; I speak four languages – English, Gujarati, Hindi, and Marathi - with Gujarati and English being the primary languages spoken at home. Having been raised Muslim I was also taught how to read Arabic, although I have little or no understanding of the language. My parents however – as I describe later- spoke Arabic fluently due to having lived for several years in the Middle East. Speaking several languages is a common phenomenon in India as each state has a different language or dialect, and it is not unusual for people from many different states to live in close proximity to each other in metropolitan cities like Pune or Mumbai.

It was this rich experience explained above, along with many others that formed the foundation of my multicultural existence. I grew up in a large apartment housing complex (commonly referred to as a “colony”) with neighbors who were Christians, Jews, Hindu and Muslim. Languages, customs, and cuisines varied from house to house, and I learned early on the skill of navigating the cultural norms that governed each home. The “colony” was comprised of several 4 story buildings with a parking lot/play area in the middle. As children we played together in this central area and moved freely from home to home, often ending up in one of our favorite neighbor's homes who had an endless supply of comic books. We celebrated every religious holiday in the colony, partaking in the festivities, and enjoying the various cultural traditions. Growing up in this atmosphere gave us the feeling of being raised by a village - an extensive kinship network with many surrogate aunts and uncles. I have lots of fond memories of my childhood and often yearn for a similar connection with neighbors now, and the sense of security that comes from being surrounded by such a loving, nurturing community.

*Birthplace and Earlier Years*

Although the majority of my life was spent in the Middle East, in the city of Jerusalem, on the Israeli Peninsula. At the time I lived with my sister and two younger twins. My father had immigrated to the area for employment, and remained there for the rest of his life. The political power shifted from the British to the older part of the city which was a fascinating experience of life in recall. The city was surrounded by a mixture of happy-go-lucky and more frightening sounds of gunfire, and civil unrest. My culture is yet another dimension. Arabic, a language they required for communication from us children.

As a result of the rising tensions, my sister and I were placed in a boarding school. The school, which was one of the best schools in Pune reserved for children of very humble origins, to be able to achieve an accomplishment beyond the school at the time was not allowed to be present. I was in the boarding school from my parents. I was prohibited from holding eating utensils, and learning to speak in a way to make it through the difficult conduct enforced by the nuns.

Our experiences were part of a fictional tale of a British Boarding school.avid readers of this series of stories, and escapades in which the school was not that time corporal punishment.



### *Birthplace and Earlier Years*

Although the majority of my growing up years was spent in India, my birthplace was in the Middle East, in the city of Aden, a seaport in Yemen at the tip of the Saudi Arabian Peninsula. At the time I lived there, Aden was a British Colony. I, along with my older sister and two younger twin brothers were born there, living there for the first 8 years of my life. My father had immigrated to the Middle East as a young adult in search of employment, and remained there for 23 years, returning to India in the early 70's when the political power shifted from the British to the Yemenis. In Aden, we first lived in the older part of the city which was located in the inside of an extinct crater – a rather fascinating experience of living in the hollow of a mountain; one which I can distinctly recall. The city was surrounded by the Red Sea and my earlier memories entail a mixture of happy-go-lucky days playing on the sandy beaches, followed later by the more frightening sounds of war, racing to hide underneath the beds at the sounds of gunfire, and civil unrest. Nevertheless, the experience of growing up in the Arab culture is yet another dimension of my multicultural upbringing. My parents spoke fluent Arabic, a language they resorted to often in later years as a way to keep secret their communication from us children.

As a result of the rising tensions and lack of adequate education in Aden, my parents placed my sister and I in a boarding school in India, which brought yet another cultural transition. The school, which was run by British Anglican nuns, was one of the elite schools in Pune reserved for the privileged and the rich. For my father, who came from very humble origins, to be able to afford such a school for his daughters was an accomplishment beyond his dreams, and one he was very proud of. It didn't matter that the school at the time was based on strict Christian principles, where other religions were not allowed to be practiced, nor were other languages allowed to be spoken. I was in the boarding school from age 8-11, a very tender age at which to be separated from my parents. I was propelled into living in a British culture, being taught the proper way to hold eating utensils, adhering to a strict dress code of uniforms that go below the knees, and learning to speak proper English. The support of my older sister helped me make it through the difficult times; however, I must admit I have fond memories of some of the most exhilarating experiences of living on the edge by defying the strict code of conduct enforced by the nuns.

Our experiences were parallel to a children's book series called *Mallory Towers*, a fictional tale of a British Boarding School in England, authored by Enid Blyton. We were avid readers of this series and often emulated various episodes, including midnight feasts, and escapades into the neighboring boys school. As I understand it, the manner in which the school was run is akin to some Catholic schools in the United States. At that time corporal punishment was allowed, so we often got rapped on our knuckles with



a cane for any transgressions. We were also required to attend mass every Sunday, and were expected to participate in all the Christian traditions. These early experiences of being raised both Muslim and Christian simultaneously lingers in my life today as I continue to struggle with bringing coherence to my spiritual identity.

### *The Role of Education*

One of the strongest value systems inculcated in us was to "stand on our own two feet". My parents, especially my father, insisted on the best education possible so we were not beholden to anyone in the future. This was an interesting contradiction to some of the more traditional values for women in India. While education for women is valued and in fact more women than men go on for higher education, women are still expected to take the subservient role. This was not what my father wanted for us. He had high hopes that I would become a medical doctor. Unfortunately majoring in the Sciences was something I had no affinity for, so I made a deal with my father. I would enroll in the sciences for the first 2 years of my undergraduate degree, but if I wasn't successful then I would change my major to Psychology. Well of course, I didn't do well in the sciences and got to define my own path by choosing the discipline that I was most passionate about! I have never regretted that choice, as this is the path that would unfold for me – the area where I continued my higher education, first getting a Masters in Psychology at the University of Pune, and later coming to the United States where I would get a second Masters in Counseling, followed by a doctorate in Counselor Education. As a result I indeed stand tall on my own two feet!

### *Coming to the United States – In the Middle of Nowhere*

After teaching psychology for two years in a four year college in Pune, I was ready for a new experience. One day out of the blue I received a letter from a friend from my Master's program in India who had moved to the United States, with an invitation to apply to her university, a medium sized public institution in the midwest. She and I had tried applying to universities in the U.S. two years prior, however, after graduation we went our separate ways. On impulse, I applied, and the next thing I knew I had gained admission along with a graduate assistantship. It was an offer too good to pass up. The only problem was I had 3 weeks to pack up and leave. I decided to take that leap and with the encouragement of my father and the dismay of my mother, I left my secure surroundings to embark on a new life journey.

I was extremely excited and petrified at the same time. Life in the US, I had envisioned, would be one of living the fast paced life in a metropolitan city like New York – sky scrapers, neon lights, and lots of people. With much anticipation I arrived at the University only to find that I was in the middle of nowhere! I was greeted by vast empty

farm lands with tall silos was I? For the first time system of my family, friend myself. I had expected their outward friendliness supportive community with Nigerian, Indonesian, Pakistani shared the common experiences of ourselves in each other's

The most difficult adjustment couldn't taste anything – over everything just so I taste of Tabasco sauce, cream offered in the cavities in my teeth!

Life in academia was all counseling field. The questions apply to the Indian culture field, but being the only voice. I had difficulty understanding. People talked too fast! operas. I had an interest to slow down as I couldn't have an accent – you do from - you do!" It was the assuming normality in the than them. From my multiple cultures and languages rather than an exception a self-defensive, somewhat accents; they were just

My stress of adjustment hard even for me to articulate activities were difficult; in order not to embarrass people put in their money went to a fast food restaurant was said so fast that all



farm lands with tall silos, and cows in the fields. I was completely disoriented. Where was I? For the first time in my life I felt very alone. Gone was the extensive support system of my family, friends and community. I had to once again reorient and rebuild myself. I had expected to quickly make friends with Americans, but I soon found out their outward friendliness didn't mean they were my friends. Instead I found a supportive community with the international students on campus. There I made Nigerian, Indonesian, Pakistani, and Malaysian friends. Despite our differences we shared the common experience of being foreigners and found comfort in immersing ourselves in each other's cultures.

The most difficult adjustment surprisingly was getting used to the American food. I couldn't taste anything – it was all too bland. I found myself pouring Tabasco sauce over everything just so I could taste some spice. Not before long I grew tired of the taste of Tabasco sauce, and rather than going hungry I made meals of the delicious ice cream offered in the cafeteria. In three months I put on 20 pounds and had multiple cavities in my teeth!

Life in academia was also challenging. I questioned everything I was learning in the counseling field. The question uppermost in my mind is how does what I'm learning apply to the Indian culture? I challenged the Eurocentric perspective of the counseling field, but being the only non-white student in my class I found I didn't have much of a voice. I had difficulty understanding the accent of my teachers and class mates. People talked too fast! To get better accustomed to the accent I began watching soap operas. I had an interesting encounter with an American friend when I asked her once to slow down as I couldn't understand her accent. Her immediate response was "I don't have an accent – you do! To which my befuddled response was "No – where I come from - you do!" It was then that I realized the ethnocentric perspective of Americans assuming normality in their own speech, regarding others who were different as lesser than them. From my multicultural world view this was difficult to comprehend since the multiple cultures and languages I had grown up with assumed differences as the norm rather than an exception to the rule. I realize looking back that my response came from a self-defensive, somewhat mono-cultural place too, because in truth we both had accents; they were just different.

My stress of adjustment was invisible to the rest of the world it seemed. Moreover, it was hard even for me to articulate or understand what I was experiencing. Minor day to day activities were difficult; for instance, I did not know how to use a vending machine. In order not to embarrass myself, I used to sit next to a vending machine and watch how people put in their money and extract what they needed. Another example was when I went to a fast food restaurant. The cashier kept asking me "For here or to go?" which was said so fast that all I could catch was "For here to go". I had no idea what that



meant and kept saying yes – to which she kept repeating the question until a kind soul behind me said the words slowly, and explained what they meant. It is humorous in hindsight, however in the moment it was a very humiliating experience as I recall the woman behind the counter looking at me with much disdain and condescension.

### *Understanding Race and Racial Identity*

My quest to understand counseling in a multicultural context continued into my doctoral program at a large public university in the Midwest. Multicultural counseling as a course did not exist at that time in the counseling program, hence I took cultural courses outside of the program to supplement that knowledge. It was here that I encountered a race relations program offered through the Student Life office at the university, where I was a graduate assistant. This experience, it turned out, would be one of the most pivotal and life changing experiences for me. The program was meant to be a yearlong group experience with the purpose of enhancing race relations among the members, and ultimately have a trickle-down effect on the rest of the campus. Twenty one members were selected, 10 white, and 10 African American, with me as the only non-white, non-black person. Here, in this program, I learned for the first time what race and racism meant in America. The concept of race did not exist in India. We identified each other by state, region or religion. Of course, India has its own problems related to caste-ism, however, the concept of race was still a foreign one to me. I began to notice the nuances of racism and its manifestation in society. I slowly came to understand the history and the enormity of the problem in the United States. The program had such a profound impact on me that I stayed on and ultimately became the coordinator of the program. I also conducted my dissertation study - a qualitative and quantitative study tracing the racial identity development process for the participants over the year.

### *Making the Transition from International Student to a Person of Color*

With the transition from doctoral program to my first job as a counselor educator, came also the transition from international student status to understanding myself as a person of color. Now that I had lived in the U.S for several years, obtained a green card and was on the path to citizenship, I found myself having to redefine who I was. For the longest time I had seen myself as an international student from India; now, with gaining a more permanent status I was reevaluating who I was. Suddenly, I felt very lost, and at times depressed. I didn't understand it. I had everything going for me. I had recently found my life partner; I was married, had my first child, first job, and was in a loving supportive relationship. So what was wrong? My job required that I move out once again from the familiar metropolitan city surroundings to a small town in the Midwest – similar to when I first moved to the U.S. I was hired, I learned later, as a result of Affirmative Action initiatives on my campus. This left me questioning – was I hired for my credentials, or was I hired to fill a quota? While I understand and support the need

for Affirmative Action, I find it disconcerting. I felt I had to put a name to my feelings. I had experienced numerous losses I had never went back to India. I felt

### *Naming the Complex*

As I began to name the complex, to create it, and with it came the United States as my address. I claim a permanent status. I constantly straddled two worlds, spoke a different language versus when I was at work. My religious community was a radical feminist in one culture, values in another. At first, I was myself and had to prove myself to recognize me if they saw

Over the years I have found that I am not static or one-dimensional. I have a sense of our own world. I have the same thing for all people. I have raised my two boys, – both of them young adults. I realized that I have an identity, and I have begun to be what I want to be in life. If I abide by different norms, I will be the way that makes the difference. I will be and act differently. I don't have to understand my beliefs, so long as I am myself within all of it. I am in a multicultural society in my

The struggles to define myself are a struggle because I now see our multiple identities. I feel myself, I feel it is okay to be working on observing my



After Affirmative Action, I found for me, being on the receiving end of it was very disconcerting. I felt devalued. This was not the happy ending I was seeking. I couldn't put a name to my feelings and it was then that I became aware of the weight of the numerous losses I had in my life. I felt I did not belong here nor did I belong when I went back to India. I fit neither here, nor there.

### *Naming the Complexities*

As I began to name the feelings I realized I needed to redefine my identity; I had to create it, and with it came the feeling of freedom, and empowerment. I began to see the United States as my adoptive country. I no longer had a temporary status but could claim a permanent standing in the US. This new reality also meant, however, that I constantly straddled two worlds; sometimes three and four worlds. I dressed differently, spoke a different language, ate differently and behaved differently when I was at home versus when I was at work. I even found myself behaving differently when I was within my religious community, which is a very conservative traditional one. I saw myself as a radical feminist in one context, and wearing traditional garb and following conservative values in another. At first I saw this as being incongruent with myself; that I could not be myself and had to pretend to fit into another world. I also believed people would not recognize me if they saw me in a different context.

Over the years I have come to see the above reality in a new light. Cultural identity is not static or one-dimensional; it is multidimensional and contextual. It is how we make sense of our own worlds, and find the best fit for ourselves. It doesn't have to mean the same thing for all people. I came face to face with my values and belief systems as I raised my two boys, – both of whom were born and brought up in the U.S and are now young adults. I realized that they too have to navigate their own journey in defining their identity, and I have begun to appreciate the beauty of living in multiple worlds. I can be what I want to be in the way I want it to be, without losing my sense of self. So what if I abide by different norms in different contexts? I am adapting to my environment in the way that makes the most sense for me. I can weave in and out of the worlds and be and act differently. I can see things from many angles and many perspectives. I don't have to understand or know it all. I don't always need to be in congruence with all my beliefs, so long as I know the purpose of adjustment and accommodation. I can still be myself within all of it. This in reality was what I did when I grew up in the multicultural society in my "colony" in India.

The struggles to define myself continue but now I am more OK with staying with/in the struggle because I now embrace the complexity of my identities. It is a misnomer to see our multiple identities as anything but complex. In my journey to find peace within myself, I feel it is okay to feel the struggles but not get consumed by them. I am working on observing myself and finding the common threads that bind us all,





appreciating, marveling at the similarities, and being more compassionate about the prejudices and ignorance. I'm working on how to engage in social justice, and speak out for what is wrong, but also to approach the struggles with compassion. No longer do I look at the world with righteous indignation, for I do believe that "Here by the grace of God go I". I claim myself – with all the complexities that define me, and have found my own voice. That is the beauty of having a multicultural and multi-contextual identity, something we all enjoy if we seek and acknowledge it.

### *The Real Worth of a*

There is a special bond between us. We were no exception. She was a factory worker, and she had to work. She did not have a college degree. She first started teaching in the 1950s. She taught in schools for 10 years, but she never got a degree.

Erik grew up as a poor boy. He saw the development of his country. He crept slowly into a world of complexity. He categorized and understood it by looking at it.

Erik's mother never could read. She did the best way she could, from what she could. She and reading the new books. She had a brood of four sons and four daughters. In sequence, they became a politician. And Erik learned to read.

His mother imbued in him the same values like so many gay sons. He worked hard at being a writer. He published the same title published in the same title. He was writing under a pseudonym. He was successful, causing