

Tales  
of Cyprus  
HOME TRUTHS

NUMBER

7

CONSTANTINOS EMMANUELLE

# Home Truths

## NUMBER SEVEN

*People used to worry more about surviving and less about their looks.*

It's such a joy to meet people from a past era who have lived lives without the clutter and wastage of material objects and without being consumed with thoughts and feelings dogged by vanity or insecurity. This truth was confirmed to me by the many elderly Cypriots whom I interviewed over the last two years. These charming and humble individuals did not put-on any airs and graces. Nor did they display outlandish exhibitions of vanity or narcissism. These beautiful old souls were not trying to impress me with bold stories about their youth or boasts of amazing feats. They simply spoke of a time when they were young and innocent and spent every waking moment 'just trying to survive' or helping those around them. As one dear old lady confirmed, "We didn't have time to worry about what we looked like or what others thought about us. No body cared about what you had or didn't have. All that mattered back then was - did we have enough to eat - to get by - and did we do enough to help others. That's it." How refreshing to hear about a people who couldn't care less what other's thought about them in terms of their status, their looks and their lot in life. It was just enough to belong to a community and to pull your weight for the common good of the village. Imagine that?

I worry sometimes about this modern day malady that has inflicted our society where people are made to feel somehow inadequate if they don't look or think a certain way or if they don't have certain modern conveniences. Think about it? We're constantly bombarded by messages from the media about how we should have washboard abs or buns of steel, or perhaps we could seek medical help to stop our hair receding or remove

unwanted flab from our thighs. What's more, we have to deal with magazines and TV ads full of airbrushed photos as a constant reminder that we don't look the way we are meant to look. The pressure on young girls is especially brutal. There are many messages that feed a person's insecurity about their body with sometimes tragic and fatal consequences. There is no way on earth that my mother's generation would have endured so much suffering over body image. My mother's main concern growing up in the village was to please her parents and to one day be worthy of becoming a good wife and to raise a family of her own. Most of men I interviewed admitted that they had married the most beautiful girl in the village - but this referred to an inner beauty as well as the plain, simple looks of a natural brunette. People back then were not preoccupied with their looks the way we are today. They also did not feel that they had to broadcast every minor achievement to the village. Think about Facebook. You only have to spend an hour on this social media site to realise how many people need to reassure the world that they matter; that they exist - and more than that - that they belong. Facebook is code for 'look at me, look at me, please God will somebody look at me.' Look at the trouble some people go to ensure their profile picture looks just right - the way their digital cameras intended them to look. Many people use social media and other methods to reassure the world that they are popular or 'out there' or spectacularly cool. It reminds me of that 'wannabe' wearing sunglasses in a nightclub. Or that girl I once saw on a brutally cold night last winter wearing shorts and a singlet because apparently when you have tattoos all over your body - it's against



the law to cover them up. It's a strange turn of events. When common sense is taken over by vanity and a craving to be noticed. It's as though people can no longer rely on their personalities alone to impress (or attract) others. We need a body full of tattoos (with the compulsory singlet), brightly coloured hair, a face full of builder's hardware, a short skirt, a low top or anything that makes people turn, look and notice. So, so much pressure these days to belong - to fit in - to look and act a certain way. We spend a fortune on cosmetic surgery. We live in a disposable, materialistic world. We must have the latest smart phones; big flashy cars; fancy houses; the latest treads and threads; even changing our skin colour is now on the menu.

It's no wonder that in a traditional society such as the one my parents belonged to - vanity did not really exist. Most of the population did not fuss about material belongings or how much money anybody had. Cypriots seemed united in their quest for tolerance and acceptance in their village community. It didn't matter if your head was lop-sided or your legs were too short or you bum

was too big or your hair was receding. No body noticed and nobody cared. All that mattered according to my parents was that you had a kind heart and lived a good, honest life. How nice it must have been to know that you could walk out of your front door and not feel judged or ridiculed by those around you or pressured to dress or act a certain way. Imagined what my ancestors would make of all this modern-day nonsense. It's hard enough for me to digest some of the choices my society has embraced. What if, my grandfather could visit a modern day shopping centre? What would he notice? What would he make of it? First and foremost, he would be bowled over with all the consumer goods on sale, especially the vulgar onslaught and commercial tactics employed by retailers around Christmas and Easter. In fact, he wouldn't even know what the Easter bunny or Santa Claus was? He might be alarmed to see so many shopping trolleys overflowing with packaged and processed food. Or by seeing people carrying bags full of toys and electronic paraphernalia. Of course he would be shocked by the fashion, hairstyles, piercing and body art on display by the shoppers themselves. What if he ventured near the food court? All that processed, deep-fried crap being served to customers might sadden him. He might certainly be a little perplexed by seeing people sitting together but somehow preoccupied with tiny little gadgets in their hands. Who knows? Maybe he would turn to me and say, "Are you kidding Costa? This is fantastic."

I think not.



**C O N S T A N T I N O S**

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