

Tales
of Cyprus
HOME TRUTHS

NUMBER

8

CONSTANTINOS EMMANUELLE

Home Truths

NUMBER EIGHT

We once had a richer community spirit, a greater support network and a better-connected family structure than today.



As a budding 'researcher' I was often blown away by the incredible warmth, hospitality and genuine goodwill expressed by the Cypriot Diaspora whom I chose to interview for this project. It was also quite evident that many of the people who chose to share their stories with me were really quite lonely, and in some cases appeared to be neglected or abandoned by their families and indeed the community altogether. Here I was, at times a complete stranger – and these beautiful old souls would go

out of their way to make me stay longer or come back for a second, or third visit. The obvious clue for me was just how eager these elderly Cypriots were to tell me their story – how much they wanted to share. It wasn't uncommon that I would find myself spending 4-5 hours in their presence and downing two or three Turkish-style coffees and countless homemade sweets while I sat and listened to their tales. "You must come back," they would say as I bid them farewell. "Bring your family – stay for dinner next time."

I feel guilty for not being able to keep in touch. I wish I could. I couldn't help but reflect that if these lonely old souls were somehow transported back in time to their village in Cyprus they would feel less alone and depressed. Many whom I have interviewed had expressed a longing to be back amongst their loved ones and compatriots in Cyprus. They all shared a common belief that they would be cared for and attended to with a greater respect and response to what they are experiencing in today's society. I must point out however that they are reminiscing the Cyprus of old. The fact is, their recollections of village life on the island represent a timeframe of over 50 or 60 years ago.

My own mother, herself nearing 90 years old has spent the best part of her life in Australia (over 60 years of her life) hiding away in her house. She has succeeded in blocking out the outside world and shunning society – because it was easy to do so in Melbourne. Eight thousand miles away from family, cousins and '□□□□□□' the outside world did not come knocking. People are genuinely left alone over here – if that's what they want.

My mother has dementia now. I've read a lot of research lately how in places around the world where there is a greater community involvement or connectedness with others, the brain is stimulated enough to starve off dementia, even the onset of dementia. It's fascinating to contemplate and it makes sense to me. If you have the company of others, if you feel connected with others in your community – chances are you will not feel so alone or so neglected. Researchers in Greece believe that elements of lifestyle are significant in the health and longevity of the people who live and practice a more traditional and rural lifestyle. Rates of smoking are relatively low, mid-day naps are the norm, the pace of life is slow and people socialise frequently with friends and family, drinking moderate amounts of wine. Furthermore, extended families give older people an important role in society. Levels of depression and dementia are low.

Although my mother would admit that she preferred to stay at home or that

she didn't want to go out and socialise, I can't help but think how different her life might have been – if she lived in a traditional village-style community with friends, family and neighbours dropping in for a baklava or Turkish coffee. What I noticed about village life in Cyprus when I was there as a young boy in 1974 was how nobody was ignored or left alone to wallow in self-pity. You were never short of company. My grandparents were surrounded by loved ones all the time. My relatives had an open-door policy. If it wasn't Yianaki dropping by for a quick coffee on his way to the market, it was Thea Maria delivery a basket of freshly baked bread, or Maroula popping in for a chat, or Panikos just hanging around until his father picks him up.

I often think about all those nameless and countless elderly citizens languishing away in 'aged-care' facilities – old people's homes – where no one comes to visit them. My mother is fortunate to have four loving children who take turns to keep her company and look after her. She is never alone. It doesn't matter that she doesn't recognize who we are sometimes – it only matters that she doesn't feel alone in the world.

I read a book last year written by a hero of mine called Jared Diamond. In his book, "The World before Yesterday" he writes how in New Guinea the elderly remain and live in the same hut or a nearby hut to their children. They are regarded as an essential and useful member of the tribe and given responsibilities such as child-care while their parent's go off and hunt or farm during the day. My wife Christina, who worked in the jungles of New Guinea for years, can testify to this way of life and thinking. As an archeologist she often witnessed how the locals revered and respected their aging members of the tribe. "The repositories of knowledge are the memories of old people," says Diamond. "If you don't have old people to remember what happened 50 years ago, you've lost a lot of experience for that society," from communal history to advice on how to survive a cyclone or other natural disaster.

It's a sobering thought.



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

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