

America's Vastness

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In recent months, a writer friend of mine wrote me the reason why she has been living in Europe for the past thirty years. It was a choice that she and her husband made to get away from "America's vastness" after living in the U.S.A. for several years. Having lived in America for the last thirty years myself, I began to wonder whether, if given the choice, I would have gone to another continent happily, or even gone back to Bangladesh? Or, alternately, am I just content to be here? This is not an easy question to answer. I've decided to explore my reasons, as to why so many of us have found it hard to return, and instead made America our home.

What attracts so many of us to stay here for decades? Sure, America, the "land of opportunity", is a melting pot of all nationalities; the independent spirit of Americans is contagious. Why, though, do we decide to stay back after we finish (or don't finish) our mission here? Is it the "endless opportunities" that keep us from going back? For some, it is purely this country's economic freedom, and the option of living a better material life that otherwise would not happen elsewhere, with better medical care and education, that is reason enough. In recent years, the political turmoil and the uncertainty of a stable future in some Third World countries make it difficult to return.

Often, I hear people lamenting: "Had the kids been younger, then a choice was easy. Now we have their education to consider, and returning is not an option." Mind you, the kids were young not that long ago. My point is, there are all manners of reasoning to stay in America, but one never draws the line that leads to a definitive best reason. Such back and forth reasoning continues for many of us until we are much older.

Materially, America may have its distinct advantages. Some seem to (sadly) assert that life in suburban America is where ultimate happiness lies. Some find comfort in the monotonous life it offers, where essentially one can map out one's life for the year by marking all future milestones and happenings on a calendar. Nothing is unpredictable. One's neighbours leave one essentially alone and never get into one's business. America's solace may be its relative "safety". This basic sense of security may overpower, for some, the need to go and rough it out at the very place where our forefathers came from. In America, life may only, I suspect, seem attractive, so much so that we pretend that we truly belong here. Underneath the glossy exteriors of the large cars and homes is very little substance. In my three decades here, I've only seen America become more supersized and hyper commercial. In the mega-malls, one can get anything imaginable - yet most of the products, if checked, are crudely made in China. People spend hours at outlet malls and fill their car trunks with loads of things that they do not need.

Furthermore, I've found the expatriate community's obsession with material well being to be a tragedy. They take the idea of "opportunity" so literally, competing with each other for bigger houses, better brand-name cars, and larger televisions, while ignoring the rich possibilities of art and culture that lie outside their door. Here in the D.C. area, I rarely see a Bengali expatriate take in a showing of Hedda Gabler, or visiting the Smithsonian or the Corcoran, or encouraging their children to take an art classes, unless they are showing "the sights" to visiting relatives from out of town. There's a way in which this country almost encourages such a narrow way of material living, encourages us to keep buying more and keep worrying about material things and ceremonies that we never cared for when we were children in Bangladesh. Sometimes, I see, in the name of the spirit of the season, Bengalis celebrating Thanksgiving by roasting a twenty pound turkey soaked incorrectly in ginger water overnight, and struggling to carve the undercooked meat the next day. I see them decorating their houses, hauling twelve foot Christmas trees so that their children can