

Due Terre: Two Lands, Sicilia e' New England

My nonno said I was American second, but I grew up in America and have lived my entire adult life here. My experiences of Sicily are almost always connected through my mother or through her family. I have returned to Sicily only three times, at age 6, 14, and 43. My aunt Stella, my mother's youngest sister who is only 6 years older than me, visited us in New Hampshire when I was 12 years old, and my nonno visited when I was 17. In 1996 at age 20, I traveled solo and visited my aunt Stella when she lived in Germany. Stella came to my wedding in New Hampshire in 1998. These times with my Sicilian famiglia are when I have felt most connected to my birth land of Sicily.

My young parents moved to the United States when I was around one year old. I grew up along the Connecticut River Valley woodlands of New Hampshire and Vermont, my father's homeland, within view of Mt. Ascutney, which is said to have once been an active volcano. This land that I currently call home was once occupied by the Western Abenaki of the Upper Connecticut River Basin. The Mountain I live near was once called Cascadenac in the Algonquin Abenaki language , which means "that which is a wide mountain" (https://www.eagletimes.com/i-say-ascutney-you-say-kaskadenak/article_9344e1f2-80c5-11e8-8c89-2f4a3263dcf5.html).

The white settlers named it "Mt. Ascutney," which refers to the name of the of the Abenaki village, not the mountain. When my family first moved into our new home two years ago, there was a petition in town to reclaim the Algonquin name of this mountain. My husband and I were at first inspired by this petition and eagerly signed it thinking that there was a progressive movement towards justice within the town. But we quickly learned that many residents were opposed to reclaiming the name, stating that they grew up with this name and they could not imagine calling it something else.

It was disheartening that people in the town were so upset over the possibility of reclaiming the original name. Ultimately the State of Vermont voted against the name change. Reclaiming the Algonquin name would have been an important step towards making amends to the land and to the Abenaki Nation. Situations like this frequently make it difficult to feel like I want to belong to this community.

My ancestral roots in the “New World” begin with the military and war. My paternal grandmother, Lucille Vincent Follensbee, (who is still alive at age 90) studied the history of her family line and my grandfather’s (her husband’s) family line from Europe. Both ancestors were soldiers. One, Andre Jarret came from France and arrived in Canada to fight in the “French and Indian” war in the late 1670’s, and one was a Naval Captain from England (of French descent) named Thomas Follensbee, who arrived in Portsmouth, NH, in 1677. They were both “gifted” stolen land for their service in the wars. There was no mention of how the women, my great-great-great grandmothers, arrived. Their names are simply listed as wives—Marguerite Anthiaume Jarret of my grandmother's line, and Mary Follensbee of my grandfather's line. My male ancestors who came over to the “New World” arrived in service of their careers of war, probably thinking of the ways they could advance their positions and acquire land, something that might have been rare in Europe at that time. There was no consideration of the harm caused to the Indigenous Peoples of this land; in fact these ancestors likely came over under the premise of manifest destiny, believing it was their “Christian” right and mission to dominate the lands of the Earth.

My father, brother, and I are descended from this ancestry, but we do not lay a righteous claim to this past. We are inspired to connect to the natural world and to call out the injustice of our history. As first-generation Americans on my mother’s side, my brother and I feel even less connected to this American history. We grew up with my

mother as an outsider of American culture, and her early experiences in America made her more critical of this culture.

My parents were of low-middle income during my childhood. My father worked full time in the VA Hospital after his discharge from the Navy. He started out as a janitor, then moved on to electrician, and eventually ended up in the computer department in the early 1980's during the computer boom. My mother mostly worked odd jobs because she did not have a high school diploma or GED, and her English writing skills were not developed. She worked a few years cleaning houses, and a few years in a grocery store bakery, but most of her years were spent at home as a seamstress working for a dollmaker. My childhood memories are of our kitchen table lined with hundreds of doll and teddy bear body parts, and I sometimes helped her with this craftwork. My mother also felt a Sicilian responsibility to stay home and take care of the house and children. When she worked, it was usually from home sewing from home, a lifelong talent of hers. We did not have a lot of extra money for fancy toys and clothes growing up, but we always had what we most needed. With my mother's craftwork, and my father's hobby for whittling wood, I grew up surrounded by handcrafted and handmade objects.

My father spoke very limited Sicilian and my mother spoke no English early in their relationship. I often think about those early days of my parents dating. My father did speak enough Italian to communicate within the culture. Though my mother had long dreamed of living in America, there was a period of culture shock and deep challenge when she arrived in Vermont. The weather was one main obstacle, and honestly, I doubt she will ever come to accept New England weather. But her primary struggle was with the language barriers, and with emotionally fitting into rural Vermont culture. She decided that in order to acclimate into this culture that she would focus on

learning and speaking only English, and to not speak any Italian. She says that she was frequently discouraged from speaking her native language, and she sorely wanted to fit into this new American life. This choice resulted in her not speaking Italian to me when I was at a prime age to absorb the language, and I still do not speak Italian. She had pushed her native language away so entirely, that when we returned to Sicily in 1982, she struggled to remember her Italian words. She tells me that after that trip, she made a more concerted effort to find ways to stay connected with her own language and her own culture. She would read books and magazines in Italian, and eventually was able to stream Italian radio and Italian movies. She also spent more time talking to her family back home.

I have attempted to learn Italian at a few points in my life, and I am currently pursuing the language again. I feel driven to use language to reconnect with my birth land. Writer Julie Sedivy was born in the Czech Republic but moved to the US when she was two years old. In an article written for Nautilus, she wrote about how she reconnected with her native language after the death of her Czech father. She spoke to the slow process of relearning language as an unearthing of deep emotional layers of herself. It prompted her to do research into hereditary languages in children. She discovered studies involving children who moved away from their birth countries, even as young as 6 months old, yet retained their original language processing information. These children were able to discern sound structure in the original language phonology, where children not born in those cultures were unable to discern the sound differences. This plays a part in a person's ability to speak without an accent and discern auditory differences in languages. (<http://nautil.us/issue/30/Identity/the-strange-persistence-of-first-languages>)

My mother is fond of pointing out my American accent as I struggle to learn Italian. But as I sit amongst Italian speakers and listen, I can hear the differences in speech and tonality, and I am able to adapt and match my vocals to the word sounds I hear. Even over the course of one conversation, my mother will tell me I have made huge improvements. This has also been true when I have learned other languages, such as German and Sanskrit. When I work with teachers of those languages, they often tell me that I pick up the pronunciation very quickly. I have always attributed this ability to having begun to learn Italian as a toddler, and then moving to America and needing to adapt to hearing new vocal sounds. I have always been able to discern the basics of an Italian conversation. During our most recent trip to Sicily in the summer of 2019, I was surprised at how I could understand an Italian conversation simply by sitting quietly and carefully listening to what was being said. It is as though there is a layer within me that still understands the language. Because I grew up listening to my own mother's Italian accent, I have a very easy time understanding people who speak English with a foreign accent. I also find myself drawn to immigrants and people of different nationalities and different languages. Among my American friends and family, I am often the only one who can best understand a person speaking with a foreign accent. I do consider this listening skill to be a gift.

During my return visits to Sicily, my body has a kind of belonging and a sense of 'coming home' to the island. During our trip in the summer of 2019, all of Europe was experiencing an intense heat wave. My father, my husband, and my daughters were very sensitive to the heat and spent many hours just sitting inside the farmhouse in front of a fan. But my mother and I enjoyed sitting outside under the patio, and we even spent some time directly in the sun. I felt a deep sense of belonging in that Sicilian sun. I do believe my body remembers that land as my first experience on Earth.

However, not spending my childhood years in Sicily and not fully speaking Italian or Sicilian places a barrier to my sense of belonging. Additionally, growing up in rural New Hampshire with a non-American mother created more tension in my sense of belonging to Sicilian culture. Julie Sedivy further describes in her article, how she pushed away the “odd” cultures of her Czech family in order to better fit into the American culture she found herself growing up within. I too felt the dichotomy of culture in my youth. My mother held strict ideas about the importance of family and a girl’s role in the family. I was taught at an early age to clean the house, to do the laundry, and to cook food. I was not often allowed to go over to friends' houses, and it was not, in my mother’s opinion, a girl's place to play sports. She imparted strong ideas about what was right and wrong behavior for a young girl, and I often found myself struggling with this as I navigated being a teenager in the early 1990’s. My mother also holds what my brother calls “Sicilian Superstition.” My friends’ mothers and my American female relatives didn’t worry about people giving their daughters the “evil eye” or creating curses with their jealousy. My mother would often talk, and still talks, of the positive and negative spirits and energy around us, and how we must be careful about what energies we attract. She even spoke of the “gypsies” and how if I wasn’t careful, they could steal me away.

Though I may have struggled finding my place within these “odd” Sicilian traditions, I did feel the intense love that Sicilian mothers have for their children. If we had an issue with a teacher or classmate at school, she wouldn’t stand for it. The teachers in our elementary school used to have my brother sit in a small dark closet during fire drills because he had a fear of the fire alarm. When my mother found out they were doing this, she marched right into that school and gave them the biggest lecture and threatened to remove my brother from the school. My mother can be quite a force. I felt sorry for the teachers that day — it is the “lava” in the blood of women born near

Mt. Etna. After that day, my brother didn't have to go to school if there was a planned fire drill. Even now, I feel that my mother is my biggest advocate and defender in all my actions and decisions.

As a child and a teen, I saw my mother's cultural differences and I often wished she was more like the other American mothers. In my early 20's I read *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan. In the book, Tan writes of many different Chinese American daughters trying to make sense of their Chinese mothers in the context of American culture:

And then it occurs to me. They are frightened. In me, they see their own daughters, just as ignorant, just as unmindful of all the truths and hopes they have brought to America. They see daughters who grow impatient when their mothers talk in Chinese, who think they are stupid when they explain things in fractured English. They see that joy and luck do not mean the same to their daughters, that to these closed American-born minds "joy luck" is not a word, it does not exist. They see daughters who will bear grandchildren born without any connecting hope passed from generation to generation. (Tan, 2006; p31)

Even though this story is about Chinese mothers and not Italian mothers, I felt a kinship with the attempt to blend foreign tradition and custom within the American culture. This challenge was especially difficult for me as a teenage girl trying to make sense of the world within my mother's home traditions. My mother was alone in many regards. We were all there in the house with her, but she did not have a community of Italian people she could turn to during the cold New England days. I remember her calling home a lot, almost every day. Her voice speaking in Italian to relatives over the phone is a backdrop of my childhood. These phone calls and her language are a landline to her ancestry, her place, her home.

Because my mother immigrated to the United States without any of her native family, her traditions and her history were isolated and taken out of context. I could only see and feel how different they were from the American world around me, instead of seeing them as part of a rich Italian/Sicilian cultural tradition. This view changed for me only very recently when I read Mary-Grace Fahrún's book, *Italian Folkmagic* (Fahrún, 2018). Author Mary-Grace Fahrún grew up in Toronto, Canada, in an Italian immigrant family. She grew up surrounded by her Italian parents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Her Italian traditions were carried by the whole group of immigrants she lived with, so her experience was placed in the context of a tradition. She was even taught to speak the language because she lived in a community of Italian Canadians. In the following passage, Mary-Grace writes about collecting recipes from the matriarchs in her Italian family, and their warnings about how one's energy could infuse the food:

What was really interesting were the conversations that would evolve around the recipes. For example, one of my aunts warned: "But don't make this when you are on your period; it won't turn out." "But why?" I would ask. "Because there is too much power in your hands; it will ruin this delicate dish..." Now having been raised by these people, I didn't think anything of their warnings. I was raised immersed in this culture. I was exposed to many regional variations of Italian culture. Praying the rosary and burying a statue of St. Joseph in the ground head down to sell a house, on the same day, was as normal as normal could be. (Fahrún, 2018; p. 2)

As I read her book, I was fascinated to recognize much of my own childhood in her story. I began to see my experiences in the context of a tradition, not simply as the weird things my mother did. In another example, Mary-Grace writes about her family's traditions around food— not just the elaborate recipes and cooking, but also the importance of going grocery shopping as an appreciation of abundance:

In a food-centric culture, grocery shopping is much more than just a chore. I thank my dad for teaching me that grocery shopping is about celebrating the abundance in our life. My dad immigrated first to Canada, then to the United States in 1952. He never forgot what it was like to be hungry and have nothing...There was a whole ritual around grocery shopping. Before going out, the fridge, freezer, and pantry were tidied and cleaned. This allowed for a full inventory of what we already had in the house. The walk around the supermarket was an exploration... The real ritual was when we came home. My dad would carefully unpack every bag with love. He would hold a package of freshly sliced cold cuts to his nose, breathe it in, and say, "Ahhh, beautiful," and lovingly place it in the fridge. "Look at this abundance! We are blessed." (Fahrun, 2018; p. 154)

I recognized how my family had continued this tradition of a "food-centric" culture. Grocery shopping day was always an important day for my family growing up. When my husband first met me in high school, he found it weird that my family would make an entire event out of getting the groceries, including getting dinner somewhere and going shopping together as a family. My brother and I were always allowed to pick out something special as snacks, and when we got home we helped with putting everything away. I now understand this simple act of restocking the food in one's home as part of a cultural tradition and the connection between food, family, and abundance. Though she was alone in her traditions, my mother imparted a sense of identity to place through her rich heritage.

For my father, family traditions have been less important. He is the second child in a family of seven children. I wonder at times if he felt left behind in such a big family. My father seems happiest when walking in the woods, and in being a woodworker. He loves to cut wood, to carve wood, and to build with wood. My father made it a regular habit to take my brother and I along on his fishing and hunting excursions., He taught us to fire a gun and use a bow and arrow, to cross country ski in the woods, to canoe

down the river, and to swim in the local brook. To this day, he takes regular long walks in the woods three times a week. Growing up, my father would start a garden every year and my mother would always struggle with keeping it up. My mother did not have a natural connection with plants and nature. She worried about bugs, germs, and getting dirty from playing outside. My mother is a self-proclaimed 'city girl,' born and raised in the second biggest city in Sicily, Catania, where they dress up in high heels and fancy clothes and dance late into the evening. My father spent his childhood days roaming the Vermont woods in his neighborhood and getting into all kinds of trouble with his many brothers.

My father imparted his sense of wonder in the natural world to both my brother and me simply through his loving presence and willingness to draw us into the land of his birth. In the book *The Sense of Wonder*, Rachel Carson states that in order for a child to see that we are all connected and a part of this natural world, the child needs at least one adult to offer that sense of awe in the living Earth. Carson states:

If I had influence with the good fairy who is supposed to preside over the christening of all children, I should ask that her gift to each child in the world be a sense of wonder so indestructible that it would last throughout life, as an unflinching antidote against the boredom and disenchantment of later years, the sterile preoccupation with things that are sterile, the alienation from the sources of our strength. If a child is to keep his inborn sense of wonder, he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement, and mystery of the world we live in. (Carson, 2017; p. 44)

My father was this person in my childhood, and he succeeded in instilling in me a lifelong love of nature. As a child I would often accompany him on his hikes through the woods. During my summer vacations as a young child, I would spend every day alone in the woods behind our house building forts, climbing trees, and communing

with the plants. In my teens, I would run off with my friends to the local swimming hole where we could leap off a ten-foot or a twenty-foot jump into the brook below. The water was so cold that we would run the heat in the car on the drive over so that we would be hot enough to want to jump into that frigid water. Later, as a young mother, I was excited to share this love of the natural world with my own children. I would strap my young babies into slings, backpacks, and baby carriers and wander outside in all seasons.

One of my first memories of sharing this love of the outdoors with my children was when my oldest was almost two years old and my youngest was a newborn. My new baby was in a front pack carrier and my toddler was in a baby backpack. I trudged out my back door into the snow-filled field behind my house. I got all the way out into the field, a few hundred yards away from my house in knee-deep snow, and both children started crying. I tried to take the baby out of the front pack, and that made the toddler in the backpack very grumpy. I ended up carrying both the baby and the toddler in my arms, all three of us crying as we trudged back to the house. It was stressful at the time, but now I look back on it fondly, grateful that I took the time to get outside with my children on a crisp sunny winter day.