Coming Home for the First Time: History, Family and University in Malta


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Colleges and universities provide a galvanizing backdrop where students continue to forge their personal identities. As an educator, I have assisted students on their journey towards greater self-knowledge, to help them discover who they are and how to frame that moving picture of their own evolving identities. I am able to assist them because I have come to a more nuanced understanding of this question in my own life, exploring life within the many hyphens that link my own multiple identities and roles. This holds true except for one aspect, the country of my mother’s origin: Malta. I have always had some envy when other educators could draw on their ethnic backgrounds to give them their own map and compass when working with students. Throughout my life I have felt the presence of that absence, looming large in the mythology of my own history.

Last summer, I delivered a paper and participated in a conference at Oxford. Going to England got me closer to my dream of going to Malta with my parents. I persuaded them to delay a long planned trip, so that we could see the island together. Given that my wife and I have three young children, it would be unlikely that I would be going to Europe under any other circumstances any time soon.

I knew this trip to Malta was to be a pilgrimage of sorts to find out what, I was not quite sure. But I did know that I would need to search within the web of history, family, and university.

History
Malta is not a country one hears about frequently. It is often left off of smaller maps and for the last 4 televised Olympics, one never saw the small but proud Maltese delegation (“Malawi, Mali…commercial break”). But it does flicker into consciousness every once in a while. Popeye, Cutthroat Island, Gladiator, and Troy were all filmed on the island. Yes, the Maltese Falcon is from here, a yearly tribute from the Knights of Malta to the King of Spain for the use of the island in the 16th century. I have no idea where the Maltese dog figures in.

Malta is approximately 60 miles south of Sicily, an archipelago of five small islands totaling just 122 square miles, about 1/10 the size of Rhode Island. However, because of its strategic location and deep natural harbors, Malta has been a critical player in world history, linking Europe and Africa and the East and the West. It has a Semitic language that bears the mark of those that have invaded or inhabited the island throughout the course of its long history, including the Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Arabs, Romans, Byzantines, Normans, Turks, French, and British.
The Ggantija megaliths, massive stone structures, predate the Egyptian pyramids and Stonehenge. Saint Paul is believed to have been shipwrecked here.

Two great sieges have left an indelible mark on the Maltese people. The first was from the powerful Turks in 1568 and the second was from 1942-1945 when it was the most bombed country on earth during World War II. There is still a saying “O Turks” when individuals are being inconvenienced--hearkening back to the days when villagers would have to travel far to get behind the garrisons of the walled city of Mdina from yet another attack from Suleiman the Great. The Maltese were ill equipped to fight any opposing force that could launch such an offensive. Although they always fought fiercely, the Maltese have survived by their ability to accommodate the invaders without sacrificing their core identity. They are a gutsy, resilient, and improvisational people and no matter who comes to the island they remain Maltese. The ancient buildings that the island is centered upon stand as an accusation and affirmation to the Maltese, a testament to being both conquered and unconquerable. But history is more a reference point than a shackle, and the Maltese people keep their eyes squarely pointed towards the future.

Family
Before this trip I had little contact with the Maltese side of my family. My mother and her family fled Malta after WWII, lived in Tunisia for two months, then immigrated to America. I met my Maltese grandfather once, and only saw my Maltese grandmother a handful of times. She didn’t speak much English, was 4’ 9”, could crush tennis balls with her old world strength, and used to go in our garden and pick snails for escargot (“Mom, what is ‘deadly pesticide’ in Maltese?”). Because my father is Jewish, my mother’s family did not approve of their marriage. To this day no one in Malta knows my mother converted to Judaism. When my grandmother visited us, my mother would take her to church everyday as if she were still a practicing Catholic.

With little biological family (my father never met his own father), we have much “chosen” family. As blessed as my “aunts” and “uncles” were and continue to be in my life, they could never fill my need for a larger past. Somehow I believed the island would connect and accept me into its ancient history. As a boy, my conceptions of the island were very much a romantic idealization (what if I were of royalty?). But as I grew older, I simply hoped Malta could be a balm to my lingering affliction of rootlessness. What did it mean? What did it mean to me?

Despite having little connection with the island, I was reminded of being Maltese in one small way, my appearance. Because I am straight out of central casting for ‘dark males of indeterminate origin’, I have always vaguely reminded people of someone else they know. Sometimes people wonder about my ethnicity—they have guessed everything from Arab, Latino, Italian, Greek, light-skinned African American, and given the location and history of the island, they are not too far off. I joked that any swarthy Mediterranean male with mid-digital hair could be my cousin. But, to be honest I had never seen anybody Maltese aside from my own family. So when our Air Malta flight touched down, I sort of expected all the people to look like a version of myself. I mean, the place is only 14 x 8 miles long. But it was staggering to see the diversity. Olive skinned people with light green or blue eyes, lighter skinned people with dark eyes, and everything in between.
When we arrived in the resort town of Sliema, we were greeted by my mother’s first cousins, who immediately set to taking care of us for the entire trip. They practically stopped their lives for the week we were there. On the first night there was a party with all of my family. Photo albums were taken out, and the room filled with laughter and a delightful euphony of joyous reunion and remembrance. Coming from a family where we were first-generation college students, my Maltese relatives are engineers, hotel managers, dentists, architects, and surgeons. One cousin self-published a treatise entitled *Living and Meaning* when he was 14. I learned my great-uncle Emmanuel was awarded Member of the British Empire for his work as the chief telecommunications officer on the island during WWII.

They took us swimming in the pool blue waters off the island of Comino, introduced us to Maltese cuisine of *pastizzi* (pockets of phylo dough stuffed with ricotta), *ftira* (sandwiches of fresh Maltese bread, capers), *aljotta* (fish soup), *fenek* (rabbit), *bragioli* (beef olive), *gbejna* (homemade pepper cheese) and drinking Kinnie, a local soft drink made with oranges and spices.

Through our family, I learned much about my mother and the context where she grew up. They helped fill in blanks that were never explained, or underscored what was less understandable before the trip. I learned because of the war, my mother did not attend school until 5th grade. I learned she still won’t eat dark bread in Malta because it reminds her of the dirt they put into the bread to create more sustenance during the war. She is terrified of birds because the shadows they cast trigger memories of bombers. I learned what it was like to live with constant hunger. She recalled with shame how her grandmother called her into her bedroom to tell her that she was very ill and may not live much longer; my mom asked for her ration of bread. On our walks, my strong mother wept silently when we came to memorials. In the beginning of the trip there were so many monuments that I often hurried past them. They were still an abstraction. But I realized that they were her monuments, my monuments.

There were also many funny stories. When my father first visited Malta in 1961, people kept giving him whisky, their impressions of America shaped by John Wayne westerns. On their last visit to Malta, my parents went to my great-grandmother’s home. As they approached the front door, a very old man sitting across the alleyway bolted from his chair and asked my mother: “Are you Fabiola from New York?” He wagged a finger at her and said, “You stole fruit from me 50 years ago!” I visited the church in my mother’s village of Balzan. When she was a girl she would knock on the parish priest’s bi-sected door and hold the top side so when he would open it up, he would invariably smack himself in the head. The same priest would continually hear about my mother’s pranks in confession eventually telling her, “If you would stop doing that to me you would have to come in here less often.”

My visit with my relatives was extraordinarily ordinary. I was accepted for no other reason than I was family, and they didn’t understand why I was so grateful. It was what families do. My genetics were my access pass, instantly unlocking the wonders of the island. They were genuinely concerned we spent so little time on the island, and they made me promise I would bring Anne-Marie, my wife, and the kids next time. Before I came here, I never believed I would return. Now I know I must.
University
Before coming to Malta, I did not know quite how to reach out to others that were Maltese. Would I just start accosting strangers once I arrived? What would I say? So I figured if I couldn’t immediately connect as Maltese, perhaps I could as a colleague. Not that I had ever had a connection with my profession and my background before. There has been little groundswell or legitimate need for Maltese Student Unions (or advisors) on our American campuses, and I have never seen caucuses, standing committees, or commissions in our national associations.

Before I left for Malta I looked on the University of Malta website, and to my surprise, they have functions within the institution that are very similar to our student services. Just before I left, I sent a note saying that I was a Maltese-American administrator who would love to chat with anyone who had a moment to speak with me. Once in Malta, I had one shot during my visit to get to the University. I took a vintage bus to the village of Msida. Although this campus was built in 1968, the University dates back to 1592 as the Collegium Melitense, where it is still located within the walled capitol of Valletta. After following a student up the hill to the campus, I found myself in the middle of registration. I am not sure what I was expecting, but seeing the long line of anxious incoming students and their expectant parents, I could have been in Massachusetts as easily as Malta.

As they were closing up to leave for the day, I met Nadia, an advisor in Students’ Advisory Services. After quickly explaining why I was there, she caught Manwel the director, and Noel, another advisor, to chat with me. In Students’ Advisory Services, a two-room office, they cover academic advising and increasingly do career counseling. Because of registration they had to unplug their phones so they could get through the long student lines without interruption, and worked from early morning into the afternoon without even a bathroom break. This was possibly the worst time for an “I happened to be in the country so I dropped by” visit, but they were gracious and patient with all of my questions.

Mercifully, we had much in common. The university currently has 8000 students, a ten-fold increase from 800 students only 15 years ago. They lamented not having enough staff, and the low status that they had where the professors have all of the resources. I was going to tell them that in America student affairs is at the center of the institution, and faculty spend much time wringing their hands wondering why we don’t respect them—but I figured the joke would get lost in the translation. We talked about assessing outcomes, and I shared some strategies for collaborations and creating more powerful learning environments. Throughout this conversation, I couldn’t believe I was talking about student affairs 6,000 miles away in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea.

It is now fall and the students have returned. As a student of my own history, I have returned as well. It is difficult to help a student answer the question, “Who are you?” if you cannot answer, “Who am I?” My visit to Malta allowed me to question the evolving answer of where I came from- to discover my past, and have my past discover me.