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The ‘America effect’: How immigrants fall crazy in love

Immigrants’ passion for America warps plans and bends dreams. My Pakistani parents realized that America changed their approach to life, just as it has changed everything else it has touched. American freedom is even helping (slowly) moderate latter-day Islam.

By Rob Asghar

My father left a mud-hut village in Pakistan to come to America, hoping to receive some technical training. He hadn’t counted on falling for America, but that’s what happens to unsuspecting visitors. And the world is becoming a better place for it.

Dad enrolled at North Carolina State University more than 50 years ago and earned an engineering degree. On a brief return to Pakistan, he met my mother at a wedding — their own. As you might have guessed, it was an arranged marriage.

The prefabricated couple decided to spend “just a few years” in the United States because of the job opportunities here. But they took on more of America than they had bargained for.

That immigrant passion for America was first described to me by a university president who noticed that foreign students are susceptible to a peculiar effect that warps their plans and bends their dreams. If they return to their homeland, they wish it were more like America, and will work to make it so. Often they choose not to go home, or choose to return to America after a while.

Once you’re crazy in love with America, you begin to see life in a cockeyed manner, even if you try to resist it. You begin to believe you can pen the script of your own life, instead of allowing your family or your culture to write it for you. You sulk on your visits back home that life there is too corrupt or inefficient or limiting.

And while you’re concerned about that legendary permissiveness in America, you also sense that these Americans aren’t overly uptight, and something feels right about that. And when your children begin to drift from your heritage, as was the case with me and my father’s other children, you might stay awake late fuming about this country, but you suspect your destiny is tied inextricably with it.

That drifting involves a certain liberty, which has its roots all the way back to the settlement of this country by seekers of religious freedom. That basic value, fought and died for, has protected freedom of conscience to worship — or not — as one will.

Similarly, that freedom is helping (slowly) moderate latter-day Islam, as Gallup and Pew polls of Muslim-Americans have shown.



MIKE SEGAR/REUTERS/FILE

The Space Shuttle Enterprise passes the Statue of Liberty as it rides on a barge in New York harbor June 6, 2012, up the Hudson River to be placed at the Intrepid Sea, Air, and Space Museum. Op-ed contributor Rob Asghar writes: ‘Once you’re crazy in love with America, you begin to see life in a cock-eyed manner, even if you try to resist it.’

America, stunningly, hasn’t witnessed a major terrorist incident succeed on its soil since 9/11. This may be due to luck, prayer, and outstanding work on the part of government workers; but there is another reason that would-be terrorists have failed to make a dent here since that black September day.

“A lot of these guys lose the jihadi, desert spirit,” an intelligence agent told *Newsweek* a few years ago. “They get families, they get jobs and they lose the fire in the belly. Welcome to America.”

Welcome, indeed.

My parents rued that my older brother and I were growing up “much less Pakistani” than they’d hoped, but they made peace with it.

Still, they tried another strategy with their youngest son, sending him to Islamabad to be immersed in their traditional values. In an eerie recapitulation, he decided to come to the US for an education. He returned briefly to Pakistan to take part in an arranged marriage, brought his bride to the United States hoping to spend “just a few years” establishing a career as a physician, and well, you know the rest.

He and his wife realized they're here to stay. They hear me talk about the idea of an "America effect" and they nod. They have caught it, or it has caught them.

Their bright-eyed young daughters, 10 and 7, already display a happy and productive tension between traditional Pakistani values and American individualism. Puberty and adulthood will add to the tension, and will keep their parents awake at night. Their parents will second-guess why they didn't whisk their girls back to Pakistan when they had the chance. And then, like my father before them, they will remember that crazy love that America inspires.

After navigating those teenage icebergs, they will find that America changed their approach to life, just as it has changed everything else it has touched. They will see that America gave their traditions the slack they needed to adapt to a new era.

They will be grateful for America, and so, increasingly, will the rest of the world.

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