

Featured story:

THE GREEKS

Written by Max Neil Maximchuk

You can travel to new worlds even in your own country. I discovered this by going to university.

In my late teens I left home up north in Flin Flon and moved to live on campus while at university. I liked those years I had in residence. There was an impressive variety of people, all sorts of interesting mixes. Although tempting, I'm refraining from using words like range or spectrum as to some extent they bring images of gradients to mind, like red on one end moving towards blue on the other. These people were much more 3-dimensional than that. Even some of the real characters, and there were a number of them, make it seem very inappropriate to simplify them into mere caricatures. It was that richness so ever present that helped me feel at home. If so many different people could get along and accept each other (more or less) being themselves, maybe I could let my guards drop and explore a little further who I really was. I didn't feel the need to put a mask on and treat people differently according to some unspoken rules, like those which adorn most office spaces. I could be equally friendly and/or respectful to my neighbours, the cleaning lady or the director and be 100% sincere about it. I could let ideas out that were inside me, sometimes spontaneously, sometimes airing them out after keeping them within me for so long. There was a lot of trial and error and I even felt comfortable making mistakes sometimes. I felt I was in good company and I easily allowed them their freedom as well.

Along the way people would get frustrated, but people get frustrated anyway. To some extent there was a good amount of tolerance and less need to create even more rules. For example, the top floor, the fourth one, was where the Greeks settled in. It was a Greek-Ukrainian Orthodox seminary, after all. There weren't many Greeks there but they did have something of a little community going for them. I enjoyed their good company just as easily as anyone else's and it was not a rare thing to find a good backgammon player among them to share a set of games with. They were also the ones who first introduced me to the idea of celebrating name days like they do here in Spain. It was wonderful to hear of cultural differences and other ways to interpret our worlds.

Not only do they do something on their birthdays, but every day of the year has its own short list of names of saints attached to it, and when the day with your name comes up in the course of the year, it's time to be with friends and family. Those guys were a long way from home and successfully petitioned the direction of the college to permit them having parties to that effect.

The director was an easy-going and very reasonable fellow. We all liked him. He must have had a difficult task, balancing his good humour with the many politics and surprises that would inevitably pop up. He had more on his plate than a mere college residence full of youth and vigour and the problems that occasionally might accompany them. He also had the Ukrainian community and the religious community to deal with. To us he was typically calm, ready to listen, and good in his decisions. He didn't automatically favour the powerful or the influential as he might sometimes be pressured to do, and he often magically found workable solutions.

So Andrew, coincidentally named the same as the residence he was managing, was approached by the Greek contingency. Their proposal was a simple one. They would like to use one of their rooms as a place to invite their friends to celebrate a name (Saint's) day when it occurred to one of them, as well as the odd other special occasion. This could invoke some scrapes and scratches to the furniture and perhaps the wall or floor but at the end of the academic year they would happily pay for any damages incurred and the expenses to fix things right.

Andrew considered it and in the end he gave them their leeway. Perhaps he threw in the condition that he be invited once in a while but I'm sure he would have been anyway.

Some time later one of the guys announced the following Friday had his name on it. His name was the same as the saint recognized on that day and soon eager preparations were well under way. I was invited and when I entered the room, one I had been in a few times before, I felt a little timid, though I wasn't sure why. Perhaps it was something new to me, and it could be considered an intimate gathering and maybe I wasn't as close to them as I felt I should have been to be invited to such an affair. Just the same, when I entered the room I was heartily welcomed by the people already there and in a very short time I felt comfortable and easy there. The beds were gone and everything seemed so different. One of the girls from the third floor was dating one of the Greek guys and she was rapidly hiding anything that was glass or otherwise breakable. In between some of her frantic trips when discovering an ornament she hadn't noticed on the shelf before, for example, she explained that the party was about to start soon. It was important that we all had our shoes on.

I was a little disorientated but my curiosity definitely had its antenna up and in working order. A short time later two of the guys, one whose name was being celebrated, and another, his good friend, had one arm around each other's shoulder. A bottle, the first one emptied that evening, was proudly placed in the centre with Ouzo spelled in dark clear letters for all to see. The music now playing was not your typical pop rock favourites but something from Greece, traditional and deep within their blood. These two men unashamedly danced together, side by side, first their right legs kicking out in unison, then the left, then the right.

The music picked up in pace and others joined in. Not knowing what to do, I fell in step and started copying the others. We came together, welcoming that day, the young man whose name was shared with the saint, and all of us together. We danced around that proud bottle, standing alone in front of us. We danced faster and harder. Sometimes the circle broke but our continuity didn't. The music got louder, our feet kicking higher, our smiles wider and our eyes brighter. More we danced until at one point, how it was determined, I did not know, but it was deemed the correct point at which a special action was to be taken.

There was a space in front of us, an opening and on our side a strong leg came out. It was a leg that spent much of its life attached to a youth growing up in Greece playing soccer. It was the leg that belonged to one of those guys celebrating his Saint's Day, the country and culture of Greece, and being in good company. It was a leg with a foot attached to it, one which had been in this situation before. With the accuracy and style that only comes with confidence and experience, that foot extended itself onto the bottle, projecting sufficient force to properly strike it, sending it on a short journey to crash into the wall. Now, now the party was officially christened, and we could really settle into it.

We danced. It was a good way of enjoying ourselves and the company of each other. You didn't have to dance with somebody of the opposite sex. You could, if you wanted to, but it meant no more than if you were dancing with a good friend of the same gender. You could dance by yourself. And you didn't have to dance. However you wanted to express yourself, it was okay. Flin Flon was only a ten- or twelve-hour bus trip away (depending on which bus you took), but I felt that I had travelled much further. Here there were no bullies hanging around nearby or the worries of what people at school might think. I liked learning that there were other ways of expressing yourself. I liked that very, very much.

And we talked. We talked of normal things. We talked of intimate things. We made some of our perspectives known. We became closer. It was a good day. A Saint's Day. And thanks to the young man inviting us to his room, who happened to share his name with that particular Saint, thanks to him and his friends who approached Andrew, thanks to Andrew, a down-to-earth saint himself, and to all of us, we opened the doors to each other a little further.

AFTERWORD:

Sometimes we define ourselves in terms of our relations with others. We are not always fortunate to be in the company of people who accept us, no matter what. In relationships, at home, at work, even our neighbourhood, these are all places we fit in, or don't, to some degree. To feel welcomed, accepted, to be part of something bigger than oneself, has always, always helped me come to better terms with who I am. Living in the residence of Saint Andrew's was one of the best sets of experiences I have ever had, and it came at a most opportune time during those formative years of my youth.