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A Spiritual Migration: The Story of my Return Home (Gale Bellas-Papageorge)

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As I was growing up, I was living in a world that neither my mother nor father had a complete understanding or control of, particularly my mother who was an immigrant. Of course, my parents allowed me to participate in many of the same “American” luxuries that the other children in my school took pleasure in, such as skiing and camping. They let me sleep over friends’ houses and have sleep overs. But every weekend, I was asked to leave my “American” world behind and enter

into the world of my extended family and Romanian Orthodox community. Every Sunday, while my friends were often enjoying hiking excursions or visits to amusement parks, I was expected to attend church school and listen to a man dressed in an ornate robe chanting and censing. After the service, we would go home and sit around with my parents' company for the rest of the afternoon, eating Macedonian foods, like Pita and Fasulada while listening to Greek or Macedonian music. I would always rather be at a gathering at my friends house where we could eat hamburgers and hot dogs. I was always amazed at how my friends' cabinets were lined with loads of unhealthy, great tasting snack foods. My mother never bought junk-food and cooked homemade meals daily.

Growing up in a predominately Anglo Saxon neighborhood, I was convinced that there was no one like me among my circle of friends at Timothy Dwight School. The life I lived at home seemed to me a strange way of life, and for the most part, I kept the details of my ethnicity secret from my teachers and friends. It was easier to not bring up that side of my life, when the most I could do was to clumsily explain. When my friends would ask me what church I went to, I would reply, "St. Dimitrie Romanian Orthodox Church," and they would immediately ask, "What's Romanian Orthodox?" with a perplexed, almost judgmental look on their faces. In my neighborhood, you either attended Greenfield Hill Congregational Church, St. Timothy's Protestant Church, or St. Pious Catholic Church.

When I entered high school, the chasm between what I called "my parents world" and my world grew even larger. I pretty much turned my back on my ethnicity and my faith, since I wrongfully assumed the two went hand-in-hand. My Father had given me two gifts for which I am grateful.



One was that he wanted me to be a believer. He wanted me to have faith.

At the same time, he also encouraged me to think for myself and to question the world. But when I was younger, I was not mature enough to allow these two things to work together in my life. One Saturday morning, when I was about sixteen years old, I was sitting quietly at the back of the church after going to confession. I remember looking at the Icon of Jesus at the front of the altar. Without warning, an insight entered my mind. It was very direct: that religion might be a completely human creation, that God could be an invention of the human mind, and that Jesus could have been a wonderfully wise man and nothing more.

It was at that moment I decided to stop attending church. I began to give my parents such a fight on Sundays that they finally succumbed and allowed me to make a decision regarding church. I respected them for not forcing me to continue and for not judging me, because if they had, they might have totally snuffed out the littlest bit of passion that was still present. My mother insisted, however, that I attend Church on Christmas and Easter, and that I take part in confession and communion once a year.

By the time I was in college, I was so intrigued with reading and learning, you could say my mind and soul were held captive by a world of knowledge. The individuals I looked up to were philosophers, teachers and other intellectuals for their ability to dissect the world and put it back together in their own fashion. I was never a proclaimed atheist like many of the people I knew and befriended, and I

continued to believe in spirituality, but more so from a philosophical and theoretical distance. I did not believe in committing myself to any type of practice. Although I was quite happy, successful and able to do many things one could hope to do in a lifetime, something was never quite right and always missing. In short, I realized that what had been missing in my life was inside of me the whole time. I had repressed a part of myself – an important part of who I was, both ethnically and spiritually.

I can't say that the only reason for turning away from my faith was because I associated it with my ethnicity. There was also the seduction of secular American culture. But as a child, when it was so important to fit in, I feel that the biggest factor in my leaving the church was that I wanted to be "more American." But as a result, my two sides did not equal one. In fact, they were often at odds with one another. The result was that I felt short at both ends, and I missed out on a large part of my identity, both my Orthodox faith and my ethnic roots.

I believe that in all of the philosophy I read and studied in college and graduate school, I was always subconsciously looking to return to my ethnic and spiritual roots. I was greatly attracted to literature and philosophy that dealt with Christianity, particularly the Russian authors such as Dostoevsky, Chekhov and Turgenev. Looking back, I can see it was the essence of Orthodoxy permeating their writings that I connected with, whether this Orthodox essence was voluntary or involuntary, since the faith was so intertwined in their culture and upbringing as it had been in mine. Here we were, similarly hiding our Orthodoxy behind a veil.

As I approach middle age, I still have to work at it, but the traditions on either side of my ethnic and American life and my spiritual and professional life, coexist together, one occasionally dominating the other, depending on the circumstances. But mostly, they are forgiving of one another when they are in conflict. What a difference from my earlier life, when I repressed both my ethnicity and faith and there was no such way to identify with those sides of myself. I am once again a practicing Orthodox Christian, having finally acknowledged the presence of the Holy Spirit within myself. But it was also the steadfast presence and example of my parents and a few other key individuals who helped my return to the Orthodox Church.

Having undergone this voyage, I better understand and appreciate what all of our ancestors experienced. The immigrant's journey is founded on departure and loss before it ever evolves into a sense of arrival and success, which has been my story regaining my faith. And just as a migratory bird instinctively returns home when the long barren winter is over, I too, after all of this time, instinctively knew where

my home was. I often feel that I still lack authority in many ways when it comes to being Orthodox, but the longer I practice my faith, the more it seems to gain ascendancy.

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By Gale Bellas-Papageorge

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