

INTRODUCTION: MANY MISSING STONES

My son, James Paul Herman, who is a neuroscientist, has explained a few basics about the brain to me. He tells me that there is so much sensory information impinging on our senses every instant that it's necessary for us to selectively prioritize only a small portion of that stimuli on which to base our moment-by-moment decisions, thoughts, and actions. We're built to respond to stimuli, but we simply can't respond to each and every bit of information that incessantly arrives at the portals of our perception.

He's also explained that memory actually works very differently than we think it does. The recollection of a past event is less like visiting a favorite painting in a museum—the viewing of an unchanging object that we can examine any time we choose; instead it is more like re-creating the painting, and in the act of remembering storing it away with new modifications. Over time, our memories accrue distortions. Although they derive from our original experiences, each time we return some aspects are amplified, others diminished; new details are added, and some lost forever. In short, memories are never accurate recordings of what we have experienced, and are further altered every time we go back to them.

These are the facts.

I point this out because writing works in a similar way to our perceptual processes. Moreover, memoir writing is inherently problematic.

To write anything it's necessary to eliminate much of what comes to mind as we work, so that we can create order out of the plethora of words, ideas,

and images that swim forward as we try to fasten language to a page or screen. Then too, a writer has to create a through line, and hold her focus, which means we cannot and should not allow ourselves to go down every path that presents itself as we work.

There are many missing stones along this path. (Reading my earlier memoir, *Anarchist Bastard: Growing Up Italian in America*, will fill in some of the missing pieces, but only some). Like all memory, it's also distorted, but never willfully. I attempt to be simultaneously as truthful as I can be and still shape the narrative as a writer. Probably that's oxymoronic.

The central question underlying this book is this: can a person born outside of Italy be Italian? This question can't be answered with a simple hyphenation of Italian-American. This hyphenated identity coming from the academy, while technically correct, is for some of us (me in particular) too formal and technical. It wasn't what we called ourselves: therefore, it feels inauthentic when I say it. While I know I am American, I know, too, that I am Italian.

How do I claim such an identity when I am not able to speak the language more than primitively? The voices I heard around me: tones and cadences, the broken English, the letters from Italy being read out loud to my grandmother, the dialects that were spoken, the kinds of jokes and stories we told, the Italian and American songs, the vernacular English, even the provincial accent I carry with me are all a part of the grounding soil from which I came. It's all in the soup of vocal and written words that I call on when I write.

How do we keep all of these aspects of our identity and our questions about what identity means in perspective? An ethnic identity can embrace and give comfort and it can confine and imprison. How do we keep this clear to ourselves as we investigate these questions? If, like me, you are from one of Italy's overseas colonies, at least some of this *Italianità* will be in your skin, bones, and heart: other pieces have to be understood, considered, called to ourselves through study, travel, reading. Some of it is just longing. How do we know which pieces are which?

There are as many ways to be Italian as there are Italians, Italian Americans, Italians in Italy, Italians in diaspora the world over. Moreover, the ways of being Italian have changed radically in all of our homes, along with modern life. Still there are some things that people who have been raised in this culture share, value, and even disavow, yet engage in compulsively.

My ancestral village in America is Waterbury, Connecticut. It's in places like Waterbury, Brooklyn, the Bronx, Queens, Hoboken, Patterson, Boston, Cleveland, Chicago, Detroit, New Orleans, Pittsburgh, South Philly, Kansas

City, Baltimore, Providence, and all the other Italian neighborhoods and communities throughout America where we learned the rules and customs, the recipes and the rituals of our tribe.

It was in those places we learned to be Italian, Sicilian, southern Italian; there where we were in and out of each other's kitchens on a daily basis, helping each other, driving each other nuts, and always there for each other in times of crisis. We not only were well trained in the cultural mores, we didn't know any other way for quite a while, especially, if like me, you were raised in one of the places where relatives live cheek by jowl.

I've tried to set out the stones of the path I've taken from Waterbury out into modern life. I've written about my early life in Waterbury in my extended embracing family, about how important food and work are to people from my culture. I've written, too, about going to college, about what my young working life in New York City was like and what being a lifelong reader and eventually a writer has meant to me. I've written about my long professional life as a teacher, as well as my life with my husband and son. There are essays about travel, and what it has been like to lose people I love. Throughout these decades my original family in Waterbury and Italy have remained central to what is important to me. Each decade changed me; each experience changed me. Therefore, every essay attempts to address one or another of those varied experiences. But many stones are missing.

Therapy hasn't been a single stone on the path, it's been *the path* on which I've tread for years. Yet I haven't been able to write an essay about what a central role it's played in my life. In a sense it's a ghost piece of this collection. It's just too big and complex: the micro- and the macrodimensions of my adult psyche. Therapy has been as essential to me as family, friends, love, reading, writing, and work. It's been much more important than any formal education I've had. It helped me find my way through the labyrinth that has been my personal attempt to both continue to belong to and to be separate from the tribe I come from. Therapy has enabled me to understand what my Italian life has meant to me and how to write about this crucial material.

For now, I leave you with this: Every ethnic community initially is a liminal space on the way to America. But at the other end of such a long journey, I have come to the certainty that wherever we bury our dead inevitably becomes our home.