

THE BYSTANDER —★—

Our American DNA

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West Virginia is one of the most homogenous states in America, but not necessarily due to any discriminatory actions in its past. It hasn't been a major destination for either jobseekers or retirees looking for warmth and geriatric amenities. The mountainous geography, lack of major urban areas, not to mention the circumstances of its birth, all contribute to the 93% Caucasian makeup of the population. But those demographics have not safeguarded it from high rates of poverty, drug-related crime, divorce, poor health and lack of education. Ironically, those are the very statistics we associate with immigrants from inferior cultures on other continents; people we'd like to prevent becoming American citizens.

Evidently, Norwegians are now considered the cream of the crop of gene pools. After they hurled their human exports onto Ellis Island a century ago, Norway is now rated the "Happiest Country in the World." Perhaps it's because they ridded themselves of many of the cranky, flawed Norwegians--like my fathers' family was, still is, and I am---that their Scandinavian society is the envy of the world.

My great-grandparents, who were part of that migration, exemplify the reason why there can never be a formula for predicting success for *anyone*. They arrived in the late 1890's and within 15 years had completely imploded as a family. The mother was permanently committed to a mental asylum in Chicago, and two years later the alcoholic father was found by his daughter, hanging from a door frame after committed suicide. Their seven children were dispersed to state adoption agencies or family friends. Several later died of their own alcoholism. None led particularly exemplary lives, and none of their children or grandchildren did, either.

Being white, my great-grandparents' failure to thrive in America was not seen as an inability to integrate into a new culture, or being from a country of failed culture. Failure is more forgivable when you are part of the

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majority, where it is less conspicuous. The safety net of our white complexion allows failure *itself* to be assimilated into our adopted country.

From my observation, intelligence and ambition are not inheritable characteristics. However, education and opportunity *can* be transferred to our children, just as our US citizenship is, no matter if we deserve it or not. But now we expect immigration policy to import people we did not have to pay to educate, but yet provide us the advantage of their intellect, energy and optimism, coming through the digital Ellis Island as whole, complete, and capable.

Wouldn't we prefer immigrants who are accustomed to adversity and have the stamina to overcome unimaginable obstacles, like most of our ancestors did? When so many of our own citizens seem to have lost their will to succeed either to drugs, obesity, disillusionment and depression, we might ask why the rest of the world is still trying to be "US." We should be flattered, but I suspect we are secretly resentful when newcomers achieve more than we can, once they arrive. Human nature creates the assumption that upward mobility is our birthright, a logical process that shouldn't allow outsiders to leap-frog to the head of the line while we native-born Americans still languish on the sidelines.

We should try to see this country the way our immigrant ancestors did, and remember them when we go about our daily routines, using our indoor plumbing, electric appliances, gym memberships and higher educational systems. What would they think of us now, generations later, on our comfy couches playing video games, sleeping through high school classes, shopping on-line while we're at work, easily irritated while cruising the drive-thru for a Happy Meal, and taking it all for granted while we complain about life not being as good as it used to be?

Perhaps mine would wonder if they should have stayed in Norway.