

TWO LIVES TO LIVE

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[Assignment: Compare and contrast two places where you have lived. This is not to be a study of architecture or physical features except as it applies to specific purpose. What do the places tell you about the people who live there?]

(1) A miraculous event took place in the University of Toronto some twenty odd years ago. Two people met and unexpectedly fell in love. He was a foreign student from Damascus, Syria, struggling to survive university life. She was an average, everyday Canadian living at home and working in the registration office of the same university. A few weeks later, they were pronounced man and wife and began building their future together.

(2) Whenever I tell this story about my parents to anyone, I meet excited faces and bright remarks like: "How fascinating!" or "You are so lucky!" It's true, it is fascinating, and I am lucky to have two such wonderful people as parents. But sometimes I wish I had a normal, unexciting background like everyone else so that I could fit in somewhere in this world. We currently live in Damascus, Syria, and spend the three months of summer in Ontario, Canada. Life is so different in each place. My mother once said that it is almost like having a schizophrenic life, which is a very good description of the lives we lead. The moment we step off the plane in either place, every aspect about us changes. We speak a different language, organize our lives differently, wear different clothes, and sometimes we even think differently.

(3) Of course in both countries people go to work, drive cars, and live in houses. In the homes there are the typical electrical appliances such as refrigerators, televisions, irons, and so on. Police departments and hospitals are always available. Young people go to school and usually begin their individual climbing of life's many steps soon after. All this takes place in almost every country, I think, because these things seem to be the main elements of life in the twentieth century.

(4) However, the differences in life and living between the two places are much more marked. A very obvious distinction would be that when one is in Syria everyone speaks Arabic, whereas in Canada English and French are the dominant languages. Also, in Syria people tend to dress very conservatively. This is not very apparent in men's clothing, but it is clear in women's apparel. Usually women wear long sleeves and skirts and sometimes cover their hair with a special veil. This is partly due to their religion, but sometimes the custom survives mainly due to tradition. On the other hand, people in Canada don't mind baring a great deal of their bodies in front of everyone.

(5) At a deeper level, there are differences in how life is lived and organized. If one spends any length of time in both countries the difference in time management between the two can be quickly observed. In Syria, business begins on Saturday and carries on throughout the week with only Fridays off. Also a workday begins at eight o'clock in the

morning and continues until around one o'clock when people go home for the main meal of the day and sometimes a "siesta." Then they return to their jobs until eight or nine in the evenings. Such a style of living and working is possible because the distances between locations are very short. One could travel from one end of Damascus to the other in less than half an hour.

(6) In contrast, people in Canada tend to live far away from their work places, and a drive of twenty to thirty minutes is a natural, daily occurrence. I presume this is why the work hours are kept in one long spread from nine to five, and why both Saturdays and Sundays are kept free.

(7) Living with a Syrian family and a Canadian one in turn will make one realize that the whole mentality of both peoples is divergent. In Damascus, there are many social levels, with distinctive families like "the fine Syrian families" at the highest rank and the rest of the families at a lower rank. Social affairs and gatherings take place separately within each level. Marriages are arranged among families according to monetary and social standings. As a result, most people turn out to be related to one another in some way. Such close-knit relationships foster conservative thinking. Thus, there are specific and elaborate rules for what one, especially females, may or may not do. Most daughters of the higher families would be severely reprimanded if they wanted to get a job, for example, or they might be tolerated and allowed to work for awhile as an indulgence by a soft parent until they were properly married. In other words, marriage is the goal looked to for young ladies. Also, family members have strong bonds linking them to one another, and decisions on social and financial matters relating to an individual are made by the family as a unit. Money and possessions do not have distinct ownership among brothers, sisters, parents, and cousins. Of course, people do have their own belongings, but hospitality and sharing play an essential role in everyday life. Furthermore, parents are treated with great consideration and respect and older persons in general are looked after by the younger generation. Children remain at their parent's home until they get married, and even after children have moved away, the parents' house is considered a main meeting location where everyone can be found almost daily.

(8) When I return to Canada, I find that family members care for one another but in a distant kind of way. Children leave home to study or work right after they graduate from high school and only remain in touch with their parents by phone calls and infrequent visits on special occasions. There is also the social activity of dating that begins at a very early age and which I have little understanding of. Marriage is rarely arranged by families; each person is expected to find a spouse alone. Careers are a common goal for many women who are usually treated in the same manner as men are by family and society as a whole.

(9) Obviously, Canada and Syria are very different and I have experienced them both fully. But it is virtually impossible to pronounce that one is better than the other, or that I prefer one over the other. I have spent a large part of my life in both, and the only effect I know of is a sort of dissatisfaction with my life; whenever I am in one place I wish I

were in the other! Therefore, I have come to the conclusion that one should not get attached to a place but rather have the ability to be content wherever one is.