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IMMIGRATION
FACTORS: TRACKS OF
AN AFRICAN
IMMIGRANT:

CONFRONTING
INTEGRATION FAILURE

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(B.A., M.A., POST GRAD DIP., PHD)



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PART ONE

PROMISE OR RUSE?

Chapter One

The Grand Arrival

March 30, 1996. That day I landed at Pearson Airport in Toronto. Finally! I had travelled Business Class from Accra, Ghana, via London. On the trip from Ghana to London, an airhostess behaved in a somewhat aversive manner, asking everyone around me if they cared for a cup of tea, or some other service and, each time, just ignoring me as if I were a non-person. This was due to the fact that she had failed to understand my response to a question she had asked me at the start of the flight. I guess my accent was a bit too difficult for her and her solution was to avoid me all together, which was easy to do, since I was in the window seat. This prompted the lady in the seat next to mine to urge me to report the discriminatory behaviour. I thanked the kind passenger and informed her that I was not in position to pick that particular fight, as my mind was preoccupied with some higher priorities.

Among my priorities were transit issues that I might encounter in the U.K., given that we were to transfer from Gatwick Airport to Heathrow. Even though, as a Business Class passenger, I was booked in a room for the transit period, my mind was fixated on my ten suitcases. Would they all make it safely to Canada? Even more, I was preoccupied with how the immigration process at Toronto Pearson Airport would go. Even though my Canadian Permanent Residence Status was guaranteed, the thought passing in my mind was, “until the immigration official hands me those papers, says

good bye, and wishes me good luck, I will not be sure I am in.”

Finally, that moment arrived. “Hurray! I am in! I’m in! Hurray!” Unfortunately, I had no one to hug. I looked at the woman who was standing ahead of me in the queue. She was smiling away. She, too, had got her papers stamped. I turned to the man behind me. He looked a little worried, just like I had been. He, too, would *go through*, I was sure of that. Canada was a fair country. If you came in as a professional by the *front door*, you got your landing papers stamped at the airport with little hassle, provided you fulfilled the entrance criteria prior to arrival.

The realization that there was still some place on the planet where I could feel safe and be free, and the realization that I was now in that place, made my world stand. I was still lost in that world, thinking about the new God-sent dreamland, when I heard the immigration officer’s voice: “That’s it! Congratulations! Please proceed to the next counter.” I moved on, still having slight apprehension. But the entry to my New World was real.

At the next counter, I was handed a large envelope containing a set of written material relating to the settlement process. I was confident that the information would help my integration into Canadian life. This documentation included a list of addresses and telephone numbers, including information on where to go for the Ontario Health Insurance Plan (OHIP) card and for the Social Insurance Number (SIN) card. In addition, there was a list of places to go to look for

housing. This was exciting. The official hospitality seemed great. I was surely in for a bright and happy future.

In the airport baggage reclaiming area, I looked around me, counted my ten big black suitcases, and observed that they were all there. Having previously travelled in over fifteen countries, and having, on a number of occasions, got delayed or received damaged baggage, this was a sign. I had chosen the right country for my new home.

My world, however, started crumbling the very next week. I had had no trouble opening a bank account and registering for the health and social insurance cards. But that was where the smooth process had ended. I had great trouble finding housing. I have cut the very long complex house-hunting story short. Because I was not working, getting an apartment to rent was no easy process. “Can I see your employer’s letter?” and “Ask your guarantor to sign this form, please” became the resounding and hated phrases. I was dismayed each time I heard any of them repeated. Finally, among others, ‘the somebody who knew somebody’ chain of events led me to secure an apartment in downtown Toronto.

Being Canadian an Art Form

The next and worst process was job-hunting. I could no longer take job offers for granted as I had done prior to coming to Canada. It soon became clear that, in Canada, I was really *nobody*. I would have to rebuild my image and my presentation, ride higher in self-esteem, and develop higher resilience, to be able to become *somebody* again, if ever.

More importantly, I would have to work at new skills, modify my résumé and learn to accept a different kind of work environment.

This was the only way that world, that had stood still when I arrived, and that had started to fall apart in front of me, could become my world again. For this reason, any assistance given to me and to others like me, whose dreams were becoming shuttered by joblessness, would be welcome. As I tried and failed to get perfectly integrated in the Canadian community, my greatest discovery, I figured, was that there was a trick to success – and the trick was to learn *the Art of being Canadian*.

Chapter Two

I am Now Canadian - Levels of Pain that I Feel

The Yes and No Answer

At 1.30 p.m. today, April 7, 2000, I was sworn in as a Canadian Citizen. At last I am. But am I now *somebody*? I am not seeking to become a 'big shot'. It is all left to fate to show me how to live. I knew that some people would ask me the question: "Is it not the happiest day of your life?" Indeed, a Canadian-born and close friend, who was the first acquaintance that I had a meeting with an hour after the citizenship swearing ceremony, did ask me that question.

"It is the best day of your life, is it not?" he asked.

"No! It is not! It is not!" I said.

"What!" he asked, horrified.

"No, this is not the happiest day of my life," I repeated, laughing. One of the happiest days of my life was when I got news, while still in Africa, that I was going to get Canadian Landed Immigration status. That was four years back, in 1996, when I was a Ugandan, working in Accra, Ghana, in West Africa. On that day, I had jumped, danced, prayed. Thanked God! Little did I know then that, nearly four years later, on the day of my swearing as a Canadian citizen, I would be looking at what had started to unfold for me as a harrowing experience. It was important that I document the events culminating in this career downturn.

Canada Land of Wasted Talent?

Once in a while, I had had enough courage to protest some of the ‘things’ that I had found ‘bizarre’. Indeed, two years after my arrival in Canada, I had taken the decisive step to go to talk to one of the editors at Canadian Human Resource Reporter, a Canada-wide newspaper for Human Resource professionals. I had requested him to allow me to “write a column.” With some trepidation, he had said he would allow me one article. The article published was entitled: “Canada Land of Wasted Talent? – Experience of a New Immigrant.”

In that article, I lamented the wastage of manpower in the form of the pool of highly trained and experienced immigrants who could not get jobs in Canada, and a system which seemed to ignore their presence or the predicament in which the qualified newcomers found themselves. I bemoaned the fact that the grave issue was seemingly being addressed through résumé writing and job-search-focused workshops that did help a lot, but, due to absence of jobs at the time, did not promise much to many, nor, get many very far in their job search.

Even as a “Canadian citizen,” I have never really stopped grieving. I have always wanted to shout out. To say something, to do something.

Levels of Pain

To summarize, as I write this section in 2000, I have pain on several levels.

First Level of Pain – Professionals at Half-Price – A Certificate for a Homeland

On one level, there is the pain of seeing so many less developed countries so completely incompetent in the way they nurture and make use of the manpower that they spent so much money developing. Even though immigrant source countries in Canada include developed countries, such as France, the U.K. or the United States of America (U.S.A.), a sad reflection of the manpower management incompetence in many less development countries is the extent to which highly qualified professionals have to leave their countries, an often painful thing to do, just to be able to reward their personal efforts and their personal struggle by going to fend for themselves in other countries. On the same level, I am deeply dismayed at what I perceive as the total lack of recognition or even acknowledgement by the leadership in many of those 'home' countries of the fact that their countries are losing valuable resource. I keep questioning myself, "what are *they* thinking?"

Second Level of Pain – Mad Rush for the Professional

A second level of pain is the pain of seeing the same resource so eagerly grabbed at official level by the leadership in many developed countries. Shamelessly reciting the need for skilled people for economic growth, some of these countries have, indeed, become extremely good at measuring their gain in terms of saved training dollars and cents. But that snatch, often in the form of aggressively enticing skilled individuals, is

at the expense of the less developed countries that so heavily invested in developing this manpower.

I am not surprised that, in some world circles, there is now some degree of disdain of this practice after observation of the terrible irony that, on the one hand, we have developed countries 'assisting' the developing countries with hard cash in development aid, as the less developed countries struggle to develop manpower, yet, on the other hand, we have the same developed countries eagerly enticing the cream of human resources from elsewhere to their own countries, as part of their long-term strategic development plans. This is the year 2000, four years after my arrival in 1996. "Will this situation ever improve?" I keep asking myself. "What, the hell, are *they* up to?" And, on second thought, "What are *those* developing countries up to?"

Third Level of Pain – Skills Overload – The Illusion of Need

The third level of pain, perhaps the most ironic of all, is observation of how, despite the rhetoric relating to the *need* for skilled manpower, the current economies in the developed countries seemingly do not have the capacity to absorb and to integrate most of the new skilled professionals that have been so easily acquired from all over the world. As I write this in 2000, I ponder the paradox that some developed countries have themselves proven impotent and inept at utilizing the human resources they so aggressively seek.

Fourth Level of Pain – Misstep to *Green Grass*

I can only say that, in my first four years in Canada, I have witnessed the terrible pain felt by many of these Canadian newcomers who, like me, have undergone long periods of un- or under employment, as they slowly become deskilled and find it very difficult to get integrated in the economy in their new home country. Having family and friends who immigrated to some other developed countries, I cannot say that the sad story is confined to Canada. However, those individuals are best placed to tell their own tales of what they have achieved or suffered in their various new homelands.

Fifth Level of Pain - My Own Internalized Pain – Experience and Education Coming to Naught

To appreciate the pain I feel in this respect, you will have to read about my life before I immigrated to Canada. Prior to my arrival in Canada in 1996, I had spent fourteen years lecturing to managers of all types in Uganda, my home country – district commissioners, immigration officers, bankers, factory and other managers, doctors, nursing officers, managers from the prisons establishment, even police and army officers. I know from my own experience that I had not only enjoyed, but that I had also risen to the challenge.

In the U.K. at Bradford University, I had had the opportunity to give some sessions to civil servants from different developing countries. Furthermore, in my work on the African continent, I had spent three years, not only advocating for higher education, but also taking a lead in planning and

implementing conferences and workshops for managers in the African university system.

Prior to immigrating to Canada, therefore, through interaction with managers from different walks of life, I had an appreciation of their potential role in their respective countries. Prior to immigration, I had 'moralized' about the importance of human resources, and had 'sang' this 'tune' from the bottom of my heart on a daily basis. As civil service trainers in Uganda, we had thoroughly enjoyed what we did, despite those economic and other hardships that we experienced under the numerous military regimes that had reigned supreme in my homeland for at least fifteen years prior to my departure.

Despite the chaos that existed then, we had relished the fact that we were part of that community that was resolved to hold the country together, in the hope that, one day, there would be some democratic government to pick up whatever remnants we held together and to help gear the country to the prosperous road it was on prior to its socio-political and economic derailment. While we continued to train others and to spend nights marking scripts, writing new case studies, and preparing role plays for trainees, we knew we were being abused by the military regimes, just as much as most of the civil servants that we were training.

For example, military governments continuously eroded the integrity of civil servants through harassment, often forcing civil servants to take decisions without regard to established civil service policy and protocols. This had created a two tier

system. In this system, one group was managed and promoted strictly in accordance with the very tough civil services rules and regulations. The other group consisted of individuals that were planted in the system, holding positions and power in accordance with the whim and desires of the government in power and their cronies. It was the former that kept civil service functions going while the latter generally worked to self-preserve, knowing they would be gone with the next military coup.

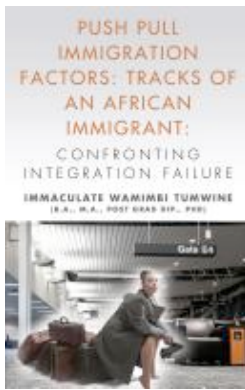
While most Ugandan civil servants were being paid less than three US dollars per month as salary at the time, cynical tales spread like fire that a gun bullet coming into the country was costing the country as much as five US dollars. Very luckily, in my case, as was true of many colleagues who were lecturers, apart from the very interesting and very challenging work that I did, I was able to undertake local and international consulting, usually in my own time. This more than compensated for the uselessly low civil service salary. In addition, the very hard work that we did as civil service trainers was rewarded in a symbolic and structured manner. Civil service regulations required us to undertake postgraduate courses, which we undertook overseas.

This led to structured promotions, provided we attained all the academic and fulfilled all other conditions at several points in our career. In my case, for instance, throughout my career, I attended numerous relevant courses overseas and subsequently got promoted from the rank of Assistant Lecturer to that of Lecturer and, eventually, rose through the ranks of Senior Lecturer, Principal Lecturer, Course Director,

and even to the position of Director, Management Development Division, in two government training institutions.

The private sector employees fared much better, financially. The civil servants that we trained were also obliged to undertake postgraduate courses as well as a wide variety of in-service programs. Despite being poorly remunerated, they, too, enjoyed the rewarding opportunities they had to apply knowledge from their training to their individual jobs and responsibilities.

The pain I have experienced since my arrival in Canada has related to the loss of ability to participate in meaningful change and development initiatives, and to loss of ability to fully utilize the skills that took time and resources to acquire and which yielded the required Points for immigration to Canada. I have sadly discovered that the mere fact of being Canadian does not totally quench the thirst in relation to one's location in the *green grass* arena.



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