

Immigration

It's not just about compassion. It feeds in to our prosperity in ways that really matter.

1969.

First day back from Christmas break, and walking to school in an unusually snowy and icy pathway in North Vancouver, I was joined in the journey by the new girl, who I immediately disliked for no good reason. Her skin was dark brown. In my sheltered suburban Vancouver life, I honestly didn't know they made them like that.

The snow along the pathway had frozen hard, making the walk an adventure. Her feet were adorned with red rain boots, which fit her badly. Probably her mother's, she was lost in them. They didn't hug her feet quite right, more like dangled around her ankles like seal flippers with a really bad rash.

I hoped to leave her in my wake but much to my surprise, she was not about to be surpassed. Barely able to get a foothold, she leaned forward and met my every accelerating step with one of her own. My footholds were sure and confident. Hers, probably among her very first steps in the snow, were fierce, fumbling, but still pressing forward. Some sort of competitive gene welled up inside her and caught fire, when, seal flippers and all, she passed me.

I ran and caught up to her, walked right beside her, and looked at her face again. Baffled by the deep colour there. She may have been frightened, but all she showed was determination, returning my gaze with: "What!"

And to make matters worse, she was good at math, which was kind of my thing. Math and climbing trees. And she was not meek like some of the other girls. She held her head aloft, as if was some sort of inner strength catapulted her somewhere out of reach. And... the teacher adored her. Her name was Baljeet, which meant: "mighty, victorious." Well no kidding. She proved a worthy classmate, with a solidly constituted heart and mind. I have absolutely no doubt that she is an asset to our community today.

2005.

When he went back to his old home, many years later with his wife, they both felt uncomfortable there – and that discomfort was evidence of their massive victory. Anyone would have felt that way who had become accustomed to the relative peace and comfort of life in North America for 40+ years.

The eldest of 12 children, the first time he left home was at age 13 to work in a factory at a faraway place. He worked two shifts a day, washing the managers' cars on his lunch breaks, sleeping at night in a motley tent city, where he penned letters home to his struggling parents, along with a money for food and rent.

After 4 years of this he stowed away on a cargo ship to Canada, where he lived illegally in the back of a restaurant in exchange for cleaning and odd jobs there. He learned a few cooking skills and eventually won landed immigrant status with the help of the restaurant owner who was impressed with his work ethic. He became a gifted chef, but that wasn't enough for him.

He moved away from the big city in southern BC and started up his own construction business, and later became an owner of several different successful enterprises. He was functionally illiterate, having worked since he was barely big enough to hold a screw driver, but nothing intimidated him (other than maybe the occasional lawyer). He would enter complex business deals by having a friend read over the contract. Then after questions, questions, more questions, he would sign it and begin slugging through the job.

If everyone somehow managed to improve their own plight to the extent he did, the world would not know hunger. He made more of himself than most Canadians who are fed and educated in much more advantageous conditions. Born in extreme poverty, he took himself from the 99th to the 1st percentile,

advantaged not by birth or education, but by hunger and the sheer drive of a relentless entrepreneur. Today he has dozens of employees who rely on him for a living.

Clément Gignac, a senior vice-president and chief economist at Industrial Alliance Inc., and vice-chairman of the World Economic Forum Council noted that: “Immigration (in 2012) explained two-thirds of Canada’s population growth of 1.2 per cent, well ahead of the 0.7 per cent and 0.3 per cent seen in the United States and the euro zone, respectively.”

Without these hungry newcomers, our birth rate could not produce the demand for goods and services that generates a growth economy. So, yes, our schools and communities are welcoming immigrants. That’s a good thing overall.

Gignac goes on to explain: “Why is this so important? Because without this immigration flow, Canada’s population aged between 20 and 44 years old would be *declining*. That cohort, which constitutes most of the labour force, is the one that creates new households, buys new houses, has children and pays the greater part of taxation revenue. Without immigration, Canada’s natural population growth would not be enough to sustain economic growth and welfare. Canadians need immigration just as much as immigrants need a destination such as Canada. Immigration, as it turns out, is most likely the key to Canada’s prosperity.”

My impoverished English, Irish, and Acadian ancestors might even agree!

Where opinions are expressed, they are those of the writer, and not necessarily RBC Dominion Securities.

Mark Ryan is an advisor with RBC Wealth Management, Dominion Securities (member CIPF) and can be reached at mark.Ryan@rbc.com.