

## “Legal alien unauthorized to work”

Before I start writing, a massive anxiety, which is one of my strongest features under stress, literally freezes me when I think about this dissertation. The anxiety increases with other external factors of uncertainty, following my thesis's choice: changing countries, home, habits, language. In Houston, Texas, I stay in the anguish. I avoid writing. I avoid my computer. I excel at convincing myself that it is way beyond what I am able to do. I repeat like a litany: “I cannot do that.” I blush every time, a colleague, learning that I am a doctoral student, shows interest about conducting a “European” dissertation. I feel shame and self-blame often when I think about this dissertation. I blame myself for freezing. I mock this whole neurotic labyrinth. I have come to the USA especially for this dissertation. I am not doing it. I can already imagine the complete disappointment of my friends and the one that I am projecting onto my director. He has given me a fantastic opportunity and I waste it. I cannot stand the thought of it. What a complete failure! Welcome into the so-much-hated land of procrastination. I judge myself hard and abusively.

Following the well-known principle of the paradoxical theory of change (Beisser, 1970) these critiques and intrusive thoughts fade away as I allow them to appear on this piece of paper. They are in the back seat now. I breathe more freely. They do not govern me. I am more in charge. I just shut them down by allowing them to be. I am amazed. I am relieved. I have made one more attempt to shut down the destructive critique. I know by now I never will. Self-doubts and self-critiques will always be a part of me wherever I go, whatever I do. This is a fine feature, I guess, that keeps me within the boundaries of reflexivity. Self-doubts are the drive that brought me this far. I learn to tame them so that they do not become destructive. They always haunt me at the core of my vulnerabilities. That is fine.

What I do not see at that time is that I am planting the seeds of my research. Looking back, the research project started before. The seeds mature slowly. They create roots for strong ideas to emerge later. In Houston, I complete a research project in the field of Family Therapy with Harlene Anderson. I observe the process and learn what I like and what I do not want to reproduce. I learn. Then, I move back to California in September of 1999. In Santa Monica, California, I am back on a very restricted budget. I live on the few savings accumulated during my three years back in Switzerland. I am reminded of uncertainty, daily, physically, I feel the lack of safety, the vulnerability of my position: “legal alien unauthorized to work”. I am allowed to stay only at the boundaries, not to participate. I long for belonging. Yet, I get so used to being an outsider. I live in a dark, smaller than small humid and rather insalubrious single apartment, in the middle of a paradisiacal city. That is what my husband and I can afford at this time. Without an income or a working visa, I feel like a pariah. I am immobilized and gagged. I feel hopeless.

I console myself with the close access to a spectacular beach. The financial and acculturation issues have a tremendous impact on my mood. My sense of basic safety is shaken. What is the space in which I can freely allow myself to study? What is the space left in my brain, as I constantly obsess on: “how I am going to make it to the end of this

research”? How am I going to avoid the invitation of insanity in this tiny and dark studio for two doctoral students? How do I make sense? How do I belong? Where do I belong? In that financial constraint, the choice of the United States adds a significant problem. I cannot fight. I do not hold the keys to change my current situation. I cannot even wait tables because of the visa. My non-immigrant visa proudly announces my desperate status of a “legal alien unauthorized to work” (*sic*).

Again, I find, I have resilience. Instead of sinking in the abyss of depression, I start writing, like a maniac. I write with my earplugs in, most of the day, to isolate myself from any noise annoyances since the building is not insulated at all. I write. I write and I run. Running is almost like an incantation. It is has a long history of success, of a forbidden, impossible activity. I started running at the age of twenty-five. Before, I thought I *could* not run, not even a few steps. It was an impossibility. I suffered from asthma during my childhood. That narrative of a sick and rather overweight child has defined me. I knew that I could not run.

At twenty-five, I suddenly feel the urge to try the forbidden and dangerous activity, to run against all predictions. It was the day, I found myself for the first time in the mystic megalopolis of L.A. I ran. I remember the feeling of flying. I can still re-live today this sense of exhilaration, power, and mastery. This was my little miracle. I did something I never thought I could. Now, I can. With the dissertation process, I start talking myself into running again. I want to run more. I want to run past my limit. The equation is simple: If I can train for the impossible a full marathon, I stand a chance to complete this dissertation.

So I write and I run. My stamina is high. My brain is clear. It is easy to focus. I feel alive. I drug myself with endorphin. I feel young, beautiful, energetic, and strong. I challenge myself, physically, emotionally, and intellectually. I complete the marathon on March 5<sup>th</sup> 2000. I shall remember this day forever. It was the day of my thirty-third birthday. I run the marathon, under pouring rain. The news says: “That is the worst storm of the year, for the LA marathon’s runner”. Never, have I seen that much rain in Los Angeles. I do not care about the rain. All I care about for that day is running. So I run. One foot after the other, I keep running to the final line. That is it. I have completed this marathon. All it took was putting one step at a time, one in front of the other and a lot of strong will and commitment. Discipline and commitment are the best allies of success. I discover again that my mind is strong. I can succeed great things. Now I can move on with my project.

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