At What Price the American Dream?

I have always been a full-fledged believer in the American dream. However, after hearing the stories of several of my English as a Second Language students, I wonder today whether the journey is worth it for everyone.

My grandmother, Oma, had cooks, housekeepers, a debutante party and university ahead of her when she met an ambitious young German earning his Ph.D. in America. Just a few months later, with World War II on the horizon, she married my grandfather.

She left all she knew and landed in a tiny apartment in New Jersey. He worked long hours, and she knew no one and spoke no English. She had her challenges, but by the time I came along, Oma was the beloved foundation of a happy, successful American family.

For her, the American dream was further magnified by the contrast of her family in Germany, most either died or nearly starved to death in the war.

Confident in the power of the American dream, I entered the ESL field full of hope and compassion. The students, brave, bright and motivated, have always charmed me.

One student from Siberia played Cossacks and robbers as a child. A Mexican student described how he carried his chair in the heat for long distances to school. A Vietnamese student told me that when she was 10 years old her father lost his job, so she made and sold brooms to pay for her tuition.

A Korean student explained that he was the 52nd generation of his family to live in his small town, and that he, as the oldest son, had a recorded family history of births, deaths, marriages and other events for the last 500 years.

Though the students’ stories have always left me spellbound, lately I think we have switched roles. They are teaching me a new perspective of the American dream.

At the end of one of my evening classes, Alena from Palestine and Alejandra from Bolivia stayed to talk with me. Alena, who always wore a head covering, lamented the fact that she was missing her brother’s upcoming wedding.

She’d communicated via Skype and seen the bubbling action she couldn’t take part in, but no one had time to talk with her. After a five-minute exchange, she wondered if she would ever again feel the sense of belonging she had in Palestine.

“If I were home, I’d be there with the crowd, and we’d all be laughing and grumbling, helping each other prepare food, caring for the children, getting dressed up, and organizing the wedding,” she said, tears welling up in her eyes. “Here it’s just me, my husband and my children.”

Alejandra, a Bolivian who typically wore sleeveless tank tops, replied gently, but with conviction.

“You know, my family was the same,” he said. “You don’t fit in at home anymore. You need to embrace your life here. You’re different now.”

This last comment cut right to my heart.

Another evening, Jordan, an excellent student, told me the story of her family’s immigration.

Though they had plenty of food and were supported by extended family in Tunisia, her father wanted more opportunities for his children.

His hopes were realized; his sons earned soccer scholarships to college. Jordan earned a master’s degree and became a restaurant manager.

Her daughter is flourishing: she plays soccer assertively, plans to attend a great college and will pursue the career of her choice — atypical realities for Tunisian girls.

However, Jordan’s mother struggled tremendously. She missed her supportive family, had great difficulty navigating through American life and grieved over losing her Tunisian traditions and culture.

When she returned from a visit to Tunisia after 20 years in the U.S., she concluded that she did not feel Tunisian any more, but certainly was not American either.

Alena, relatively new to America, wondered what her beautiful house, secure job and bright future for her children would cost her.

“In Palestine, as children we played with sticks, rocks, paper bags and wire, but we had fun. My schoolroom was practically empty, but I was happy,” she said.

She admitted, however, when she took photos of her children’s American school room back to Palestine, some of her nieces and nephews cried at the sight of so many books and computers and begged her to take them back with her.

Alena, Jordan’s mom and others pass on the benefits of the American dream to their children.

But it comes at a high cost — their own isolation and disconnection from their culture.

For some ESL students, the scar of immigration stubbornly refuses to heal.