

SPEAK MILK. DRINK WINE.

The Year Italy Redefined the American Dream

By Denise Hummel

AUTHOR'S NOTE

A Few Things That Matter

*Life is sacred; live on purpose.
Be intoxicated with this world and
astonished with the world you imagine.
Growth is a journey ...
Success doesn't require arrival.
Want what you already hold.
Give no place to public opinion.
Delight in your friends.
Practice the art of doing nothing.
Embrace moments of grace.
Give the child in you a wide sky.
Understand that laughter is prayer.*

-- Anonymous

We all have dreams. Sometimes these dreams take the form of things we want to accomplish for ourselves, or experiences we want to share with our children. We let those dreams slip away each time we make decisions based on self-doubt, complacency, or the flawed thinking that we will always have more time to execute them.

It's easy for the sparkling eyes of the child in us to turn dim when faced with the routine, security, and responsibility of the "mature" adult. We live our lives governed by a culture that demands success, and while that success may not yield happiness, we may feel trapped by it. It was from just such an existence that the Hummel family escaped. We were living the American dream and had it all, except the time to be a family and the time simply to be.

We decided to take a break from the over-achieving life-style we had established and immerse ourselves in another culture. At the very least, we felt, it would be interesting to experience life outside the United States. And who knew? Perhaps the change from our familiar existence might give us some perspective about what wasn't working at home.

As discerning adults, we try to calculate our risks: pros and cons; addition and subtraction; downside risk versus upside gain. But in this case, we shunned that analysis and took a leap, with the hope that a net would magically appear. The outcome of our experience exceeded our imagination, and I expect that when our journey on this earth is ended we'll be able to look back at our lives and realize that in choosing less, we ended up with more.

I've heard it said that dreams are like the horizon, the longer you walk toward them, the further away they seem. But sometimes, when we embrace a risk, we *become* the horizon, and this voyage was one of those times.

CHAPTER ONE

How to Escape the Take-Out Life

The fact is, that to do anything in the world worth doing, we must not stand back shivering and thinking of the cold and danger, but jump in and scramble through as well as we can.

-Robert Cushing

What exactly is the American dream? To me it has always been an economic model of success and a claim to the unfettered ability to climb that proverbial ladder to the very top, no matter how humble your origins, even if it kills you. And killing me is almost what it did. Maybe not in a literal sense, but with an Ivy League education, a career as a trial litigator and a subway token, I bought myself an ulcer, stock in half the pharmaceutical companies producing depression medication, a flailing marriage, and exclusion from competition for any potential parenting award for which I might have otherwise been eligible.

Is it a cliché to say that money doesn't buy happiness? If so, why is it so hard to detach ourselves from the stressful lifestyle that is so often required to stockpile the cash, and buy the fancy clothes, car and home? I, for one, couldn't reject it. I knew what going after the American dream was doing to my life, my marriage, and my kids, but I couldn't excise myself from it. It took me years to gain a reputation as a lawyer, to obtain the experience, the clients, the lucky breaks. No one walks away from that. It would be insane.

But insanity is a funny thing, and depending on which side of the funny-farm fence you're standing on, your perspective changes. For example, my day often started with screaming toddlers dribbling on my suit and vying for my attention while I was memorizing my closing statement for the jury and passing off the kids to the nanny at arms-length. Is that insanity? I'd go to work and pound on the steering wheel while some old lady took her sweet time crossing the street. How sane is that? I'd come home and negotiate a business call while giving the kids a bath, paying a modicum of attention not to drop the receiver into the tub thereby electrocuting the children. My discipline for excessive splashing was executed by putting my hand over the receiver and stating, "I will need to cancel my commitment to review the condition of your three-wheeled transportation, if I cannot procure your cooperation until my call is completed." Now, let's be real. In what chapter is that behavior defined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders?

* * *

I still have the drawing that was the impetus to explore whether living in Italy for a while, far from the society that defined me, might help me to see myself and my place in the world, more lucidly. I made it in kindergarten at P.S. 102 in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn. On the left side of the page is a blob that remotely resembles the shape of New York City. It is labeled "Brooklyn" in fairly legible handwriting and is surrounded by a sea of blue crayon. On the right side of the page is another blob in the shape of a boot, the same size as the blob on the left. In the approximate location of the Apennine Mountains the word 'Italy' has been laboriously scribed. I was a five-year old, and this was my world.

On school days, we lived in Brooklyn. During the summers, we were off to Italy, where my father, the proudest of Italian-Americans, showed us fallen-down rocks called the Roman Forum and more fallen-down rocks, amidst big, fat pillars called the Valley of the Temples. I didn't mind all the run down sights so much because the ice cream was really great. Besides, according to Dad, Rome was the bedrock of all future civilization, the Renaissance was the single most important event in human history, Galileo, DaVinci, Michelangelo, and Caruso were the four most important men to have walked the earth, and pasta in its myriad forms was the most important source of sustenance, globally.

In time, my sisters and brother and I became aware that there were other States in America besides New York -- in fact, there were entire States where you could not find a calzone -- and that the world was not comprised solely of the United States and Italy. Nevertheless we nurtured a lasting pride about our Italian-American heritage and a love of the warm and embracing people we met during our vacations. "Travel is the best education," my mother used to say, and I think she was right. Of course, my Mom is also the one who said that she could tell that I had advanced analytical abilities by the fact that I could compose a complete list of picnic supplies, including salt and pepper shakers, at the age of ten, so her assessment skills may be a bit subjective, but her point is well taken.

When Steve and I met in college -- Steve at Columbia University and me at sister-school, Barnard College -- he asked me my goal in life and I told him, "to have as much fun as possible," not then a very trendy goal for a female co-ed. His, at the time, was to get a good job, make money, and although he would not have phrased it this way, to obtain and maintain a strong socio-economic status. In many respects, we could not have been more different, but he had cute legs and made a good running companion in Morningside Park. He, on the other hand, was intrigued by my rather Bohemian style. Somehow, that connection led to love, and love to marriage. In the meanwhile, I went to law school (just to be on the safe side) and Steve rolled in the snow naked one winter (just to show me he had a wild side) and over time, each influencing the other, I became a little less impulsive, and he, a little more so, until our relationship arrived at the happy median of suburban bliss.

When we married, I convinced him to vacation on the island of Sardinia. Our accommodation was an *Agriturismo*, a modest farm, where we met two Italian families who were fated to change our lives. Giampiero and Susanna Soru were vacationing with their two beautiful boys, Tommaso, aged 4 and Vanni, aged 2. The Sorus were accompanied by their friends, Laura and Domenico Stragapede.

Rarely in my life have I been envious of others. I know enough to realize that the slice of life I observe is often only a surface glance and that there might be demons beneath which would make my own life glow by comparison. But this was

different. These people had something I wanted. They weren't thinner or prettier. They didn't have more money or a more glamorous job. Their marriage wasn't better than mine.

They did, however, have a certain something that I now characterize as 'extra.' The definition of this 'extra' is not easy to put into words. They clearly were not wealthy people; by their own description, they lived a modest existence. Yet, they appeared to have everything they wanted -- everything worth having in life -- and the 'extra' was just spilling over the side. It was spilling onto me, onto Steve, onto the owners of the *Agriturismo*, onto complete strangers.

I'm not speaking of extra *things*, although sometimes it seemed that way when Laura brought back extra bread from the bakery just so Steve and I could try it, or Susanna gave me the last of the sun-screen squeezed from an already overly-squeezed tube. It was their availability to discuss things spontaneously, without weighing the utility of a conversational diversion that was not on a list of things to be accomplished that day. It was the way they gave of themselves to others in a way that didn't seem to burden them or take away from their stock-pile of emotional resources. It was a stark contrast to my own life, where I never felt that I had enough time left over to sit still, let alone to take the few extra minutes to do more than was actually required of me.

I can't say that it was a type of generosity, although that clearly was part of it. It was more a capacity to share that came from deep inside. It was the extra time that Domenico took away from his vacation to accompany Steve to the mechanic to fix our car, waiting with him for hours in the hot, sweltering sun in case he needed a translator. It was the extra minutes it took to try to understand our halting Italian. It was the extra thought it took for Giampiero to map out with meticulous detail a route we could take when returning to the ferry so that we would see more of the beauty of Sardinia. And every act of kindness was performed in a way that we never had the sense that it was an imposition of any kind. Quite to the contrary, it seemed to bring them joy.

Careful observation throughout our time on Sardinia led me to believe that this way of being was not unique to the Sorus and the Stragapedes. Many of the people we met in Italy had that "extra." I wondered if it was something about being Italian or living in Italy that brought it out. They were so tuned in to the things that matter -- listening to Grandma's stories about the old times as if it were the first time hearing them, treating every grandchild as if they were the first in the family to arrive, or drinking wine as if it were a fourth food group.

At the same time, they had such clear perspective about the things that don't matter much at all.

"The *Agriturismo's* website said they had air-conditioning!!!" I complained to Susanna indignantly, with sweat dribbling down my face.

"*Pazienza!* (Patience!)" she told me.

"Why don't the toilets flush after 10 pm?" Steve grouched to Giampiero, with a discernable air of entitlement.

"*Pazienza,*" he responded.

"I understand there are certain staples in the Sardinian diet," I announced one morning while the rest of the table ate with delight, "but I draw the line at eggplant for breakfast."

Laura smiled and at once passed across her plate of *prosciutto* and melon; her own patience gentle and generous.

Pazienza, pazienza, pazienza. It must be the most utilized word in the Italian language and it is a patience that endures through just about anything beyond the risk of imminent death, or worse, a bad meal.

With genuine tears of sadness and promises to keep in touch and see each other again, we said goodbye to our new friends, and returned to our lives as young American professionals. But the experience was to linger. I spent a lot of time after that looking for that extra, but my search took the form of scrambling up the ladder to secure my piece of the American dream. I was looking for the 'extra' in the form of a high salary, a big house, and a fast car. In the end, what I had was a lot of extra space for all of our extra things. What I didn't have was time, or any sense that my human spirit was full enough to spill 'extra' onto others.

When our son Matthew was born, joined two years later by his baby brother, Alex, Steve and I created spreadsheets to manage everything from whose turn it was to pick up diapers and baby food, to whose turn it was to put the kids to bed, but even Excel couldn't keep up with us. The best laid plans still left us jockeying for position in our own home.

"Hon, don't forget you'll need to leave Tracy money for Matthew's baby-bop gymnastics class tomorrow."

"What are you talking about, I'm taking the last flight out to L.A. tonight."

"Are you kidding me, I have the Anderson case next week. I'll be at the office from dawn to dusk."

"You'll have to figure it out; I emailed you the dates I'd be gone."

"I faxed you the whole trial schedule last month."

But there was no point in being right, because it was all wrong. Our life together, that had started with such exuberance and promise, was teetering on the edge and functioned only when we managed to optimize every second of the day in the most efficient and accurate manner possible. There was no margin for error.

In desperation, I turned in my litigation briefcase, for a stay-at-home-mom Lego Carry-Case and Playschool Medical Kit complete with actual working stethoscope. But far from being different than my life as a lawyer, my days as *just* a Mom were *just* as packed; the only difference was that no one was paying me. I drove the kids to school, to the grocery store, to their play-dates, and after-school activities. I was always stuck in traffic between trips from Baby Gap to Gymboree, and overbooking myself such that I was a presence in my kids' lives without really 'being' there.

"What's that incessant chatter in the background?" a client asked.

"That's the Barney Song," I responded, "Let him just finish loving you and me and the chorus will be over -- Listen, can I call you back; Alex just fell off the trapeze."

I continually cancelled the yoga class which I specifically joined in a desperate attempt to do something for myself. Then, if I managed to get to class, afterward I took my sweet, spiritual self right over to the nearest roasted-chicken chain and sometimes even managed to put the char-browned fowl in a roasting pan for that genuine home-cooked look.

"This is quite the improvement over Chinese food, right, Steve."

"You betcha; I was thinking that we should go for the flash-frozen biscuits on the side next time."

Life did not improve as a result of the fact that I left my job, because despite the change to my day-to-day routine, my way of approaching each day did not change

one iota. By the time the children entered elementary school our lives were a harried mess. I was an expert at blaming Steve for the downward direction our privileged lives had taken us, but this kind of expertise only served to create more distance.

"I did not sign onto this relationship to be alone day after day and raise these kids as a single-parent."

"What would you have me do? Want to send a note to my supervisor excusing me from tomorrow's presentation?"

"I can't live like this. We've got the money for a vacation and you're more likely to get time off to get a triple-bypass."

Steve was powerless to make a career change that might be less stressful, but would be construed as a step down, and the fact that I was no longer working as a lawyer only meant that he was under more pressure to maintain the lifestyle we had established. The only way the "extra" green in our bank accounts was likely to benefit us was to provide an excellent divorce attorney for each of us.

As the kids grew, I was there to help them with their homework. They rarely were in the mood (okay, they were never in the mood). Tired after a full day of school followed by after-school activities, their fatigue made them cranky. I was just as tired as they were – perhaps crankier – unable to reap the rewards of my "job change," which was supposed to have the fringe benefit of quality time with my children.

"No Rachel," I said, in one particularly iconic conversation with the mom of one of Matthew's friends, "He's got baseball on Tuesday and drum lessons on Thursday ... No, that won't work ... Oh, Jimmy's got chess team on Wednesday. I see. Well, let's try next week ..."

Steve usually returned home late, missing both dinner and seeing the kids, who were already in bed. If we did have a moment to talk, it was usually about how much he hated his job -- the rigid atmosphere, the cut-throat mentality of life as a Management Consultant in a large firm, the futility of creating something that was nothing more than hundreds of words and graphs that would take up space on a client's shelf.

He had chosen engineering over his great love, photography, as a college student. He knew that a photographer's life, even that of a person who could combine artistry with technical precision, was likely to be one economic struggle after the next. But his choice had exacted an enormous toll. For many years, I saw him experience the depression of a man watching his life slip by. We fought a lot. I didn't want to live day after day with a man who hated his life, and he didn't want to live with a woman who wasn't supportive of his choices, or at least quietly grateful for the life he was providing us.

More often than not, he had an early meeting in the morning. He would take a plate of re-heated chicken carcass (or some other delicacy) up the stairs to his office. An hour or two later, exhausted myself from another endless day, and too tired to climb the stairs to Steve's office, I shouted upstairs that I was going to bed.

"Goodnight," he shouted back, and that was often the end of our daily connection.

The love we had for each other had grown in depth year after year, but the wall we were building between us was growing equally high and wide, and seemed to take on a life of its own.

One night, during one of our many marathon discussions about our life, the state of the world, our children's futures, and our fears related to our struggling marriage, I asked Steve whether he felt it was time to step back from our lives for a

while. I suggested that we take a year off and spend it in another country. We might begin to change all those things about our lives that weren't working. We could have the time and space to re-examine our dreams, our beliefs, and our values. The kids would have the opportunity to meet people different from themselves, and to be positive ambassadors of our country. We could shake up our lives a bit and see what would fall out.

I could not believe it when Steve looked at me with calm, serious eyes, and nodded his head, yes. Perhaps the idea was palatable to him because it might provide a brief respite from his unfulfilling life, but, he clearly would be risking more than the rest of us if we went, and Steve was not a risk-taker.

I was so thrown by his casual agreement to my suggestion that I began blathering like a four year-old in the throws of chocolate over-dose, "Can it work? Where could we go? Could we take the kids out of their school for a year? What about the house? What about your job? Do you think we can take the dog? Will we have to spend many expensive weeks at a hotel before we find a place to live? Would we even get approved for a visa? Could the kids go to public school in another country, even if they don't speak the language? Would there be an international school? Should we home-school?" I asked him, with very few breaths in between.

"Too many questions for one night," Steve yawned. "It's just the first step. We're not leaving tomorrow." He was half asleep when he kissed me gently and turned over.

I have never been able to understand how he does it -- how he turns the "thought switch" to the 'off' position and just falls asleep. I lay awake for a long time that night, watching him sleep, his chest raising and lowering in calm rhythm. He had a sweet expression on his face that resembled the Steve I knew in college when he was spending every spare second behind the lens of a camera and I was spending every moment scrawling the latest opus for my literary professor. We were so young, so passionate, not a thought in the world about paying a mortgage, career growth, annuities, or developing anything more than our grades and our sex life.

His head was shaved now, in deference to his receding hairline, but with his high cheek-bones and square jaw-line, he could pull it off. Grades hadn't mattered for a long time, and our sex life – sadly, had taken a back seat to a never-ending 'To Do' list. The snoring serenade started, followed by the leg-twitching show, leaving me alone with our epiphany, his snarfling, and a pillow wedged between us, to protect me from the stray thought that wandered down and was being processed by his right foot.