6 Life on the Two Sides of the Pond

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“I’ll do that during my sabbatical!” I was having a Scarlett O’Hara moment time and again in my pre-sabbatical years. That was quite broad: a project with one colleague, a paper with another, a grant application . . . . The list kept getting longer and longer with each passing year. I do not think I am alone in this experience. Many in academia might say there is nothing strange in this thinking and wonder why I am making a point of it: we are all equally time-deprived and worry excessively about tenure, promotions, publications, performance reviews, teaching, and life that goes on outside of academia. Normally, I would agree, but writing this reflective chapter about my sabbatical journey in an attempt to understand my experiences has led me to believe there was something else there. But first, let me introduce myself. My name is Anahit Armenakyan, I am an immigrant from Armenia, and this is my sabbatical story.

I spend my everyday emotional life on two continents, North America and Eurasia, I guess, since Armenia, my motherland, is situated on the border of Europe and Asia, and there is no consensus on where it belongs. I find it ironic that I come from a country that is difficult to pin to any specific continent because I have difficulties understanding where I belong and what country (Canada vs. Armenia) I call home. When I came back from my sabbatical leave and was asked how it went and what I did, I heard myself
telling the story of my journey using the phrase “back home” whenever I was talking about Armenia, yet I vividly recall thinking of Canada as back home when I was in Armenia. To further confuse the issue, I was quite selective during my sabbatical overseas travels on which country was home, quite an interesting phenomenon for a researcher who started her academic career with country-image and country-of-origin research (Heslop et al., 2010). As I kept reflecting on my sabbatical experience, I could not help but think how the years leading to it influenced my sabbatical plans and experiences. Putting on my researcher hat, I decided to narrate and capture possible interpretations of the nature of these experiences while trying to make sense of them. As I was thinking about the structure of this chapter, I tried to visualize my experiences and came up with a diagram that brings together the main themes around which this whole journey evolved (figure 6.1). There was a fluidity of theme and experiences so intertwined that it was impossible to draw clear borders between those personal, professional, and social experiences (Onorato & Turner, 2004) affecting my journey.

Figure 6.1. Anahit’s sabbatical.
The Beginning

*To choose is also to begin.* —Author Unknown

Whenever I introduce a new concept to my students, I like finding its roots or historical meanings. In the same vein, I cannot speak about my sabbatical journey without reflecting on the experiences that led to it.

I never thought I would build my career in academia, though I had experience teaching in post-secondary institution long before I moved to Canada from Armenia. I taught computer science in the National Polytechnic University of Armenia. However, at that time I was not sure that this was the path for me. After a brief break from teaching, which led to a career switch from IT to business management and some in-field work experience, I realized that I missed being in the classroom: I loved challenging students and being challenged by them; I loved the interaction, and even that strange performance-like feeling. So, about fifteen years ago I applied for doctoral studies in Canada with the intention of building an academic career. I had already visited Canada before—while studying at the University of Pittsburgh, I drove to Montréal and Québec City as a birthday gift to myself and I felt strangely at home in this new country. I had no hesitation that Canada was my destiny, and, thus, I was not surprised when Carleton University accepted me into their doctoral program.

My plane landed in Toronto on a late December evening in 2005. Freezing rain and Christmas decorations in the airport welcomed me. The flight from Toronto to Ottawa was delayed, but a stranger—an immigrant himself, from Guyana—who sat next to me on the plane to Toronto arranged for his sister to come and pick me up so that I did not spend the night in the airport. I had a soft bed, a warm shower, and a wonderful family that took me in. In many ways it felt that they were Canada herself welcoming me. My whole trip from Yerevan (Armenia) to Ottawa (Canada) through Moscow, Frankfurt, and Toronto was full of kind people that stepped up and made my journey as pleasant as it could be. I took it all as a sign, being in Canada was meant for me. My goal was clear—I had to do whatever it took to become an academic in Canada.

In my first years of doctoral studies, I transitioned from being an international student to a Canadian citizen. I put in efforts to become fully integrated into Canadian society and yet I was still
experiencing otherness (Badenhorst, 2017). Those years were full of struggles that are well known by any doctoral student, and particularly by any immigrant doctoral student. Questioning and doubting every single decision made, fighting with data analysis and thesis writing, balancing life and work—these are the daily battles for any doctoral student. There was another layer for me, though—I did not have the means or flexibility to go home—Armenia—and be with my parents, siblings, aunts and uncles, and cousins (have you seen My Big Fat Greek Wedding? Substitute Greek with Armenian and you will get the picture of a typical Armenian family!) At the end of the first year of my studies, I lost my uncle to a heart attack. We were very close. It hurt deeply that I could not attend his funeral and say my final goodbye. I did not realize how the lack of closure impacted me until two years later when I visited my family on the occasion of my first nephew being born. I took a month off my studies and hugged the newborn member of my family on his thirteenth day of life. It was an amazing experience, yet somewhere in the back of my mind an annoying thought was whispering that being so far away will rob me of playing an active part in his life, and in the lives of my other family members for that matter. The thought of becoming the other by those who were mine was unbearable. I decided that I would use every single opportunity to be with those who matter so much to me.

I had to find ways to be or feel closer to them; I showered them with gifts (Komter & Vollebergh, 1997), scheduled weekly meetings via Skype to keep in touch despite their reluctance to use a new technology at the time (Vroman et al., 2015), and looked for conferences that allowed detours to visit my family (Davidovitch & Eckhaus, 2018). When I shared my thoughts with Canadian friends, they did not understand the issue. “Why can they not just come to visit you?” Indeed, why can’t they? That’s where I had to remind my Canadian friends how privileged they are to have a passport that opens up many borders. I had to remind them that I am an immigrant from a country that is not a part of the Commonwealth. I am from a country whose citizens cannot just buy a ticket and join their families abroad whenever and wherever they want, unless they are granted permission to do so—a visa is required, which has to be applied for and paid for, with no guarantee that it will be granted. Besides, the cost of travel was too high for both my family’s income and my student income. My dream was that once I graduated and found a position with stable income, I would be able to apply for my family members’
visas and support their visits to Canada, or travel to visit them more often. I consider myself lucky—almost immediately after my thesis defense I became a full-time tenure-track assistant professor in the School of Business at Nipissing University. The first milestone was reached! I was full of optimism that everything from there would be smooth sailing. I had my stable income, I bought a house, I leased a car, and I arranged for my mother’s visitor visa and had the pleasure of showing her Niagara Falls. I made a list of family members to visit me in Canada and developed a timetable for their visa applications. I had everything planned. Or so I thought.

My clear sailing ran into storms and excruciating winds. In the midst of the first ever Nipissing University Faculty Association strike, I received a late-night call from my brother. My aunt, who was like a mother to me, had suddenly passed away. I was devastated, I felt guilty for not inviting her to Canada first—after all, she was the one who would have been able to fully appreciate my achievements being herself the head of a geodesy department in her university. But how could I have foreseen her death: she was younger than my mother, she was healthier. I flew home to say my last good-bye to the person who supported and inspired me so much. I reached my little town in the south of Armenia, after more than twenty-five hours of travel, just half an hour before the funeral. I had my closure; I had my good-byes. She gave me so much while she was alive, but she gave me even more when she left: she gave another closure that I needed—as I shed tears for her, I felt I also finally said my goodbyes to my uncle. My aunt left something else for me, a reminder that one must cherish those one has, never taking them for granted; a reminder that life is short and every single moment counts; a reminder that plans can change in a second. As I returned to Canada a week after the funeral, I started putting together my application for tenure and promotion, and began thinking about my sabbatical—I wanted to be prepared for something that was still two years away even though I knew that things could change.

The Sabbatical

*It does not matter how slowly you go, so long as you do not stop.*
—Confucius

Nipissing University defines a sabbatical leave as “a leave from a tenured Member’s normal responsibilities of teaching and service
to focus on research and scholarship” (FASBU CA, 2015–2019, p. 92). By this definition, I was expected to increase my knowledge, further my research, stimulate intellectual interest, strengthen my contacts with the worldwide community of scholars, and, thus, enhance my contribution to the university on my return. When, on February 1, I received a letter from the dean granting my first twelve-month sabbatical, I was excited. It was the result of significant preparation, where I connected with colleagues in Canada and other countries for collaboration, applied for conferences, arranged with friends to host them in Armenia and for them to host me in Europe, and I started on visa paperwork for my family to join me in my travels. I was thrilled—the sabbatical was promising to be full of new places and cultures, while doing what I love and sharing those experiences with people I love. Everything was clear and simple. Or so I thought.

Although my sabbatical officially started on July 1, it felt like I started it when I landed in Vilnius on May 17. In only four days my first course of Integrated Marketing Communications in Vilnius University would start. While this was a teaching experience, by all counts it was not normal. Not only was I entering a completely new cultural environment, I was also to experience a new teaching delivery approach—an intensive block teaching. Not surprisingly, I was nervous. However, the friendly atmosphere in the marketing department in the Faculty of Economics and Business made the first hours very welcoming. As I entered the classroom full of mature students, I realized that they were as curious about me as I was about them. We spent the first half of the lecture time getting acquainted, and I quickly learned that I had a very mixed student body as the class was comprised of Lithuanian students, international students, and participants of the Erasmus Programme. The challenges were similar to any other diverse class of students I had in Canada: I needed to find something that interested them all on an individual and a group level, and I also had to make sure that the long, 3.5-hour lectures at the end of their busy day were enjoyable as much as educational.

I discovered very early on that my Lithuanian students were very shy to speak up, so I used a few games to create a more relaxed atmosphere (jumping ahead, I used these game experiences to develop a conference paper closer to the end of my sabbatical). By the end of the second week, I had full-force in-class participation. The two weeks of daily lectures flew in a blink of an eye. To celebrate a successful end of the course and, coincidentally, my birthday, I
decided to do something daring and challenging—a hot-air balloon ride over the city. I was always afraid of heights, yet somehow I was filled with a calm sense of pure joy as I was flying above the city that I was becoming fond of. As I was telling this story to the head of the marketing department in Vilnius University, he shared in his turn that students’ feedback on the course was extremely positive and he would like me to come to Vilnius for the next year. I readily accepted the invitation as this was most definitely a fulfilling experience. Not only had I acquired an amazing experience teaching in a new cultural environment, and learned about the specifics of marketing and advertising in this Baltic country, but I also put a new teaching delivery method into my teaching toolbox. I like experimenting with different modes of teaching as it allows for a better understanding of the pros and cons of each, and so I considered my Lithuanian experience to be a useful and promising start to the sabbatical, and then headed to home—Armenia!

*Health comes before making a livelihood. —Yiddish proverb*

As I was making exciting plans for the rest of the sabbatical, my increasingly annoying breathing problems were getting worse. Sleepless nights and constant tiredness were becoming overwhelming and taking a toll. I have always had breathing problems because of a deviated septum, but they had worsened in the years leading to the sabbatical. Ignoring this was no longer an option and it was becoming clear that my grand plans for the sabbatical needed to include some smaller (or so I thought) but important adjustments. My family doctor in Canada informed me that these issues were considered non-life threatening and low priority in Ontario, which could mean an uncertain schedule for surgery and a long wait time (Fraser Institute, 2017). Such uncertainty was not an option for me as the required procedure also needed several weeks for recovery. Besides, while in many cases patients are allowed to go to work a few days after such surgery, given the public nature of my work—lecturing in front of students—I was uncomfortable with the idea of standing in front of students with a swollen, bruised face. While the procedure was considered straightforward, I was concerned about being alone, on my own. Who knows what kinds of complications there might be? Not surprisingly, I was waiting for my sabbatical to deal with this issue while I had time away from teaching and closer to my family.
Therefore, upon my arrival to Armenia from Lithuania, I arranged for a consultation with a doctor. The consultation and a few tests revealed that I would also need some facial plastic correction, which meant that the recovery time would eliminate any possibility of travel for at least two or three months. Initially, I thought that I would only need a couple of weeks for recovery, and, hence, I was planning to have the surgery in July, between two conferences I already planned for June (one in Armenia, one in Portugal) and a planned trip to Montréal in September to continue working on one of my research projects. However, with this new information, I had to revise my plans, and revise them drastically. The surgery had to be postponed until the end of November and, luckily, the sabbatical allowed for that flexibility. However, it meant that I had to renovate my Yerevan apartment: the heating system was broken. Winters in Yerevan could be severe even for someone who is used to -40 Celsius in North Bay, Ontario. This renovation was not something I had planned for—as I was hoping to spend the winter of that year with my parents in my hometown in the south of Armenia—and it was forcing major modifications to my plans.

Completely taken by the upcoming surgery and the necessity for renovation, I could not fully concentrate on my existing projects. I felt guilt for not paying due attention to my planned research and was also overwhelmed by the anxiety of the surgery and the disruptive nature of renovations. To cope with this stress, I did the only thing I knew would help—I put on my researcher’s hat and dived into readings related to the upcoming procedure. I learned that my desire to be with family and my anxiety in such a situation are not unusual: family support was found to be particularly important for health and recovery among females living alone (Okkonen & Vanhanen, 2006). The more I read about the procedure, the more curious I became of the phenomenon of medical tourism. One day, during a breakfast meeting with a friend of mine—a young Canadian Armenian fellow who expatriated to Armenia—I learned that he is a founder of a medical-tourism firm and has clients who come to Armenia from Europe and North America for similar procedures. That was an unexpected and, frankly, exciting discovery. As we discussed his business and my surgery, we made plans to work on a case study that would present his digital concierge company—GetTreated.co—and the Armenian medical-tourism industry. Jumping ahead, by the end of my sabbatical leave, I had our first draft ready and tested in the
classroom by a Nipissing University colleague. The case study was positively accepted by the students and generated good discussions. It also had another benefit that I discovered later when I was back to my teaching duties in Canada. You see, being away for so long created a gap and many of the students whom I was teaching upon return did not know me, yet they linked my name to the case study they were exposed to a year earlier, which made the transition from the sabbatical to full-time duties smoother.

As I returned to Armenia from the June conference in Portugal, I immediately started the renovation works, which were required for post-surgery recovery stay in Yerevan. I was naive in my assumption that I would be able to work on research projects while the contractors were making changes in my tiny bachelor flat. The noise, the dust, and the summer heat were unbearable. This renovation was becoming excessively disruptive when an unexpected call from a university classmate and a close friend brought news of her visit to Yerevan, together with an invitation to stay with her. It was a welcome escape: while at her place, not only was I able to work on some of the research projects but I also spent some time with her and absorbed the offerings of my favourite city in the world. I knew there would not be another chance for a long stay for another seven or so years, so I took the opportunity to immerse myself into the cultural and culinary atmosphere of this vibrant city that I missed so much. By mid-September, about a week before my departure to Montréal, the renovations were sufficiently completed, which meant that I was prepared for the surgery scheduled for early December. Most importantly, I finished the draft case study on medical tourism, completed on-field data collection for my ongoing ecotourism in Armenia project, and conducted interviews for the Armenian part of a cross-cultural study (involving Canada, Armenia, Italy) on organic-produce purchase behaviour.

As I returned to Canada in the fall, I knew that I had to do as much as possible before the downtime imposed by the upcoming surgery. Those two months in Montréal were packed with networking and work on the research projects I had already lined up. Since I had accepted an invitation to give a talk at HEC Montréal—the graduate business school of the Université de Montréal—within the seminars organized by the Groupe de Recherche en Affaire Internationales in November, I decided to stay in Montréal, where I could continue my project on organic-produce purchase behaviour,
this time interviewing Quebec residents. Simultaneously, I applied and secured funding for a project on youth sport participation within the context of the rapidly approaching 2018 Summer Youth Olympic Games. I also had a chance to participate in a conference organized by the Sport Canada Research Initiative, where I presented my earlier findings from the 2016 Winter Youth Olympic Games.

In late November, I returned to Yerevan for the surgery. The evening before the surgery I was comforted by my mother’s and sister’s support. As I took some photos of my face, I caught myself thinking that I am engaging in a classic divestment ritual I referred so many times while delivering lectures on consumer behaviour—I was preparing to part with something that had been part of me for over forty years, something that contributed to my identity and self-concept (Lastovicka & Fernandez, 2005). The surgery was a success and the recovery went well. The doctor was surprised that the bruises were completely gone in only two weeks, but I was still not allowed to travel. Those couple of months, as expected, were very slow in terms of research productivity because of the medications I was prescribed, but I took that time to explore a couple of online courses I was curious about. By the time the doctor cleared me for travel, I had completed an online course on First Nations principles of OCAP (ownership, control, access, and possession) offered by Algonquin College, in Ottawa; two online courses on artificial intelligence from Helsinki University; and a digital marketing course from the University of Illinois. I am convinced that the support I received from my family was the major factor of my fast recovery (Cardoso-Moreno & Tomás-Aragones, 2017); they were the reason I was able to do at least some professional work during that recovery time. They were the reason I felt strong enough to continue the sabbatical on my own and head to Università Politecnica delle Marche (Ancona, Italy) in April, where, in a position of visiting researcher, I supervised the Italian stage of data collection for the organic-produce project and delivered a guest lecture on service marketing within the context of medical tourism.

_Family can make you or break you. —Armenian saying_

Family is everything to me. Even though I have been independent since early adulthood, no matter where I go or what I do, the bonds with my parents, siblings, aunts/uncles, and cousins remain strong. We keep in touch, supporting and pushing each other. However,
physical distance and markedly different cultural environments were slowly corroding our relationships. Studies in psychology and health have documented the impact of physical distance on frequency of contact, intimacy of relationships, and psychological well-being between grandparents and grandchildren (Taylor et al., 2005; Nesteruk & Marks, 2009; Liu et al., 2018), spouses (Copeland & Norell, 2002), and extended families (Segal & Marelich, 2011; Bevan & Sparks, 2011; Bevan et al., 2012). The findings show that physical distance contributes to social distance as family members grow apart while going through separate cultural experiences; additional relationship efforts are required to stay in touch.

With each visit to Armenia, I heard with increasing frequency phrases like “you have forgotten how things are done here” and “you are not in Canada.” The growing disconnect was contributing to the increasing sense of otherness in my homeland and my family, while maintaining that identity was contributing to the same feeling of otherness in Canada (Badenhorst, 2017). I was given a “licence to leave” (Baldock, 2000, p. 209), with full family support to advance my career in Canada, yet I still felt guilt and frustration for being so far away. I thought I was not doing enough to be emotionally closer to my family as my years in Canada increased. I worried about the health of my aging parents and, living in the safety of Canada’s stability, was apprehensive about the possibility of military escalation (that occurred after this chapter was submitted) on the border of our homeland. Thus, I used the sabbatical leave as an opportunity to reconnect with my whole family. I knew that by the end of this academic leave I had to produce a report highlighting my academic achievements and research, so the question was: How could I dovetail family and research?

One benefit of academic life is that it allows for conference and research travel. Not surprisingly, similar to many of my colleagues, I chose conferences based on my research interests, but also based on the destination (Dann, 1997; Davidson, 2003; Davidovitch & Eckhaus, 2018). Usually, I would arrive to a conference host country a week earlier or extend the stay for another week to explore the destination as a tourist, which, I believe, adds to my understanding of place branding and tourism—among my research interests. The conference in Porto, Portugal, presented a perfect opportunity to take my parents and my sister with me (luckily, they were granted visas to enter Portugal). I have never travelled with them before, and I was anxious and thrilled
at the same time. The flight was long; by the time we arrived, we were tired and hungry. As soon as we settled in our rental apartment, we went out for a bite. As we were dining, our waiter surprised us all with wishing bon appétit in perfect Armenian. We learned from him that Porto had a long history of Armenian connections and that there is even a little street called Armenia. We took that serendipitous moment as a sign that our trip would be wonderful. (Now that I am writing these memories, I cannot help but think that my whole sabbatical was full of similar signs that in one way or another connected me to one of my homes, Armenia and Canada.) That week before the conference was filled with moments that brought our family closer together, recreating connections and re-establishing supportive relationships (Durko & Petrick, 2016; Yoo et al., 2016). Together we went to the famous Livraria Lello bookstore, enjoyed amazing fado performances, visited museums and galleries, and tried Portuguese food and wine. But the most wonderful experience was watching World Cup 2018 football (soccer) games on the huge screens erected on the squares of Porto with my father: that kind of father-daughter quality time was precious.

On our last day in Porto, we saw a sudden increase in the number of people on the streets; they were walking everywhere and hitting each other and everyone else with big plastic hammers; this was supposed to bring good luck for the year to come. By pure coincidence we were in Porto during its annual São João festival. There was a lot of joy and happiness on the streets; people were making long tables in the neighborhoods, frying sardines and inviting passersby to enjoy them, as well as dancing and celebrating. Closer to midnight, lanterns and fireworks ornamented the sky. Such serendipitous moments cannot be planned and they brought a new level of experience to our family reunion (Shaw, 2010; Yoo et al., 2016). For the past fifteen years, I dreamt about sharing my travels with my family and it was amazing to experience these moments together. However, family vacations are indeed a double-edged sword (Chesworth, 2003). I needed some me time to prepare for the conference, but struggled while performing multiple duties as caregiver, negotiator, translator, daughter, and sister. I also made a note for future family travels to make sure to arrange for time for each member to be on their own (Yoo et al., 2016), and that meant that travels would have to be in countries where my family, fluent in Armenian and Russian languages, could navigate on their own.
Such an opportunity presented itself closer to the end of the sabbatical. During the conference in Porto, I had successfully pitched the idea of a special session in sport marketing to the organizers of the 2019 World Marketing Congress, in Edinburgh, and I had already accepted the invitation for a second round of teaching in Vilnius University. So, I gave my family two options for another family getaway: Scotland or Lithuania. While both destinations were very appealing and exciting, I was relieved when my father announced that their choice was the Baltic state. When I asked my mother why they chose Vilnius over Edinburgh, she confided that while she thoroughly enjoyed Portugal, at times she wished she could be on her own, and that is why they decided to join me in Lithuania for a week before the start of my second teaching session in Vilnius. Just like in Portugal, we explored wonderful museums and castles, took a daytrip to Trakai, and, just like in Portugal, while walking along the Constitution Wall in the self-proclaimed Republic of Užupis, we stumbled upon an Armenian factor: there, on the wall, was an Armenian version of the Užupis constitution. On our last days in Vilnius, we enjoyed an amazing performance of a young talented Armenian cellist, Narek Hakhverdyan, with the Lithuanian National Symphony Orchestra, and his out-of-program performance of a song by Komitas brought tears to our eyes. Music has such a way of steering emotions—I could also see, while my family enjoyed their trip to Lithuania, they were ready to go home.

As wonderful as catching up was, I still had the feeling of guilt: my brother and his family were missed in those travels. Milardo (2009) points out that while there are many studies on contemporary families, the focus is usually on marriage and parenting, leaving aunts and uncles out of the scope. Yet my aunts and uncles played pivotal roles in my life, and I intended to do the same for my nephews. In some ways, the desire to be closer to my nephews was self-serving. I do not have children of my own and looked for ways to strengthen my relationships by engaging in different activities with them (Langer & Ribarich, 2007). While it was easy to be the holiday-fun, foreign aunt in their early years, and they were excited to talk to me on Skype, the closer they got to the teenage years, the more difficult it was to maintain the bond. So, amid my travels, work, renovation, and surgery during the sabbatical I made many trips to the town where my brother lives. A New Year’s celebration was the first in almost twenty years when we had a
family gathering with all eight of us being physically together—I could not wish for more!

*Do not have 100 rubles, have 100 friends. —Russian proverb*

Throughout my sabbatical journey, I was blessed with the support of my wonderful friends and colleagues: whether it was an escape from construction or a connection that led to a guest presentation or development of a case study! There is a word in Armenian for a network that reflects a person’s social and professional connections and environment in its totality—*shrjapat* (ʃɾd͡ʒɑˈpat/). The larger the *shrjapat*, the more social capital one has. *Shrjapat* is not something that could be easily defined. One person may belong to many *shrjapats*—familial, personal, professional, social—which might or might not overlap. These leaderless groups define who you are (Lourie & Davtyan, n.d.). The professional aspect is not dissimilar to networking, which is essential for developing research collaborations. In many ways, it could be translated to the expression “you are who you know and who you know defines who you are.” This suits me well being an extrovert with a strong need for social connectedness and belongingness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

I have always appreciated the value of these *shrjapats*. As long as I can remember, I have liked meeting new people and establishing friendships or collaborations. In many ways, this desire for connectedness developed to compensate for being distant from my family in my early years of studies and continued as I moved to new cities, new countries, and new universities. I cannot recall any stage of my life when I did not tap into my *shrjapat*: family members, friends, colleagues, and acquaintances. They helped during my academic studies, they provided a shoulder to cry on from a broken heart or homesickness, they pointed out potential jobs, they assisted in navigating new cultural environments, they contributed to my well-being; the list is endless (Lee et al., 2008; Yoon et al., 2008; Hendrickson et al., 2011). These connections are not something I take for granted. There is a saying in Armenian: “One hand cannot clap alone,” and in a hope to bring value to the table, I gladly invest in maintaining these relationships (Blieszner & Roberto, 2004). In many ways, my *shrjapat* shaped my individuality (Deutsch & Krauss, 1965) and, most definitely, it influenced my whole sabbatical leave.
The sabbatical introduced something I was always dreaming about: hosting friends and colleagues in my homeland. I already had friends visit me in Canada, which in many ways made me feel like an ambassador of Canada and helped me in reassuring myself that I am a full member of Canadian society (Griffin, 2015). However, my previous short visits to Armenia did not allow for the privilege of showing friends and colleagues the beauty of my homeland. So, when I made my sabbatical plans, I sent an invitation to my network of friends and colleagues to join me in Armenia.

One sunny summer day, when my renovations were close to the end, I received a call from a friend in Ottawa inquiring about the possibility of visiting Armenia. I was curious how she would feel in Armenia: being ethnically Armenian, she had never visited the country of her ancestors. I made a long list of places I wanted to take her. I wanted her to taste the real taste of apricots kissed by the Armenian sun and try lavash—traditional Armenian thin bread—baked in a tonir (also known as a tandoor). It was a rewarding experience: while seeing how she connected to the spirit of the land, I was reconnecting with it myself. Once again, the moments of unplanned discoveries elevated our experiences: while admiring the carvings of crosses and the architecture of the medieval monastery of Geghard, we suddenly heard heavenly sounds of sharakans—Armenian chant liturgical songs—performed a cappella by a female quintet. When I was taking my friend to the airport, she announced that she is returning to Armenia next summer. The visit was a success! I felt an accomplishment in being an ambassador of Armenia and felt reassured that I have not lost touch, in all these years living abroad, with the land that brought me up.

Closer to the end of my sabbatical leave, when I was back to Armenia and working on the presentation for the upcoming Armenian Economic Association conference and data collection for the study of ethnocentrism and country image, I received another call. This time it was from a close Turkish friend who had been my roommate while studying in the University of Pittsburgh. If you know anything about Armenians and Armenian history, you know about the genocide of ethnic Armenians in the Ottoman Empire during the First World War. Despite all warnings coming from our respective circles about Turkish–Armenian friendship, we developed a close bond, finding lots of similarities and likings (Berg, 1984). Being a university professor herself, she had many conference travels,
and I already had a chance to host her in Canada a few years earlier. Now that I was in Armenia and she was teaching in Turkish Cyprus, it seemed to be the perfect opportunity to host her in Armenia.

Very soon we both discovered that strained relationships between our countries, or should I say the lack of any diplomatic relationships between them, introduced some challenges. Until her call, I did not realize how many place names in historic Armenia, and nowadays located in Turkey, we have in modern Armenia. Moreover, the two-headed Mount Ararat—the most sacred and identity-shaping national symbol of Armenia and Armenians—was overlooking the Ararat Valley and was visible from every single corner of the city as a painful reminder of the lost land and lives. I was lost and did not know how I could show her Armenia while sheltering her from possible unpleasant experiences that might offend her Turkishness, for she was also a patriot. Because we were close to each other and always direct with each other (I believe that helped us navigate those dangerous waters before), I shared with her my fears and hesitations. To my surprise, she told me that the first place she wanted to visit was the Tsitsernakaberd (meaning swallow’s fortress) Memorial Complex—the Armenian Genocide Museum and Memorial. In that very moment I realized that I had a lot to discover about my friend and learn from her.

It might sound surprising or strange, but this solemn place of commemoration of the victims of the genocide was, for me, also a place of recharge and meditation. Sitting next to the eternal flames, surrounded by twelve stabs representing the lost provinces of Armenia, somehow always brings peace to my mind, filling my soul with hope. Yet, I could never force myself to visit the museum that was located right next to the monument. I could not explain why I was so hesitant to visit it. After all, I had no similar hesitations when I visited the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC, or the Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights, in Vilnius, or the Jewish Ghetto in Warsaw; yet, somehow, something was keeping me away from the Armenian Genocide Museum. My Turkish friend was the reason I overcame my indescribable anxiety, and for that I am eternally grateful to her. On our last day, we raised glasses of delicious Armenian wine in the restaurant on the top of a high-rise building while enjoying the songs and dances of the fountain in the Republic Square. She confessed that she did not expect Yerevan to be such a vibrant city and that she would love to come again. It was a tremendous joy to hear those words, and it made me proud of who I am as a friend and as an Armenian.
My friends were truly helping me to rediscover myself and reconnect to my identity. Truly, this sabbatical was proving to be a journey that shed light on my life divided between two continents, two countries, and two homes, somehow bridging the two pieces of my divided identities into one complete piece.

Sabbatical Aftermath and Post-Sabbatical Shock

*When things change inside you, things change around you.*

—Author Unknown

In many ways, having the teaching course in Lithuania, along with conferences in Portugal and Armenia lined up in the beginning of the sabbatical, set the tone of the whole journey despite of the uncertainly introduced by unexpected adjustments along the way. Keeping that focus on research and professional development (while having my family close by and friends around me) was important. Nevertheless, if there was any one single feeling that accompanied me through my sabbatical journey, it was the feeling of guilt (Milambiling, 2016). No matter how much time I spent reconnecting with family and friends, it felt like it was not enough. No matter how much time I invested on my research and professional development, it also felt not enough.

Fortunately, I kept a record of my activities. I completed three grant applications (two were successful); delivered nine papers at seven conferences in Portugal, Armenia, Canada, and Scotland; successfully pitched and chaired a special conference session in Scotland; conducted twenty interviews in Armenia and Canada, as well as supervised the collection of ten more in Italy; collected online data for two projects on ethnocentric consumer behaviour and youth sport participation, and conducted field data collection for ecotourism; delivered two seminars in Canada and Lithuania and a guest lecture in Italy; developed and submitted for publication a case study on medical tourism; and peer-reviewed seven journal submissions for a number of leading marketing journals. On the professional-development front, I completed three online courses and audited two others, which were instrumental in the development of a new course on digital marketing that I was scheduled to deliver upon my return to Nipissing University. I also taught two sessions of a marketing course in Vilnius University, which prepared me to contribute first-hand insights to a discussion of the block teaching
approach we were considering adopting in our School of Business. My experiences deepened my understanding of the topics that I was already involved in, but also opened new opportunities. I would not have imagined that my health issues would lead to researching medical tourism or that visiting and hosting friends would spark a curiosity in “visiting friends and relatives” research (Barnett et al. 2010), which I am currently exploring.

My academic activities are those as noted by Sima & Denton (1995) (i.e., conducting research, developing scholarship, learning new techniques and procedures), and while overall I was satisfied with my accomplishments, my lack of publication was generating a feeling of failure. I realized that, similar to so many of my colleagues, I was comparing myself to my peers using their sabbatical accomplishments as reference points (Kahneman, 1992), and that was not a healthy approach. The more appropriate approach would be to compare my activities against the Nipissing University’s definition of the sabbatical: I increased my knowledge, furthered my research, stimulated intellectual interest, strengthened my contacts with international scholars, and enhanced my contribution to the university on my return. Most of all, I realized that all my travels, work, and connections with my family and shrjapat—friends and colleagues—affected me on a much deeper level than I expected. Every single interaction I had was filled with serendipitous moments that reinforced my understanding of who I am as an individual and as a professional, and where I stand in being and living on those two sides of the Atlantic ocean. My heart pounded with joy equally when I discovered “Niagara Falls,” a stalagmite formation resembling cascading water, in the depths of magnificent Frasassi Caves of Genga, Italy, and when I heard the sounds of Armenian music at a street performance in Ancona, again in Italy. I felt accomplished being able to host and present both countries I call home to my friends who visited me in Yerevan and Montréal. Those were not accomplishments I could submit in my sabbatical report, but they are accomplishments in my assessment as they filled the void of connection and confusion of where I belong that I was experiencing in these years leading to the sabbatical.

Good (1959) defines the sabbatical as an opportunity for self-improvement through a leave of absence. Truly, my sabbatical was a journey of self-improvement at every single step. Reflecting on it, I have come to realize that it was a classic case of progression through
Maslow’s (1970) hierarchy of needs: to be able to reach self-actualization (i.e., satisfying academic research and scholarship record), I had to ensure that my physiological (i.e., health), safety (renovations), love and belongingness (family and shrjapat), and esteem (self-identity) needs were satisfied. If sabbatical is meant to be a “pause that refreshes” (Reynolds, 1990, p. 90), I definitely had that pause. I was recharged. I was rejuvenated and ready to return to my normal workload at Nipissing University with a better understanding of who I am as a researcher, as a pedagogue, and as a citizen of two countries I call home.

Postscript

As I write this chapter, Ontario goes through stage 2 of the gradual reopening of its businesses, services, and public spaces shut down or restricted in the COVID-19 pandemic that put the world in lockdown. I cannot help but feel lucky that my sabbatical happened in what now seems another world and another time—the time and the world when my travels were unrestricted and plans were unlimited. I feel lucky that I was able to have quality time with my family and friends. While I am happy here in the “gateway to the North” (North Bay), with public-health measures mitigating the spread of COVID-19, strangely enough I am also back to my pre-sabbatical feelings of separation from my loved ones as Armenia struggles with the vicious and unpredictable virus, undergoes tremendous political changes, and reckons again with war with Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh region.

Endnotes

1 A Scarlett O’Hara moment is a simplistic decision to postpone worry. In the classic film Gone With The Wind (Fleming, 1939), Scarlett has a habit of scheduling difficult decisions: “I can’t think about that right now. If I do, I’ll go crazy. I’ll think about it tomorrow.”

2 Vilnius University, founded in 1579, is the oldest university in the Baltic states.

3 Block teaching has been defined as “a daily schedule that is organised into larger blocks of time (more than sixty minutes) to allow flexibility for a diversity of instructional activities” (Cawelti as cited in Davies, 2006, p. 3). My course was organized into 3.5 hours of intensive lectures for eight consecutive business days, with the final exam scheduled on the eleventh day.
4. The Erasmus Programme (EuRopean Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students) is a European Union student-exchange program established in 1987.

5. A case-study method is a “discussion-based learning methodology that enables participants, through the use of cases, to learn” (Herreid, 2007, p. 50); a case is a “description of an actual situation, commonly involving a decision, a challenge, an opportunity, a problem or an issue faced by a person or a person in an organization” (p. 50).

6. As concerns the Nagorno-Karabakh region. Heavy fighting broke out in the fall of 2020 leading to a full-scale Nagorno-Karabakh war between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Right now the future of my motherland—my other home—is more unclear than ever; see Council on Foreign Relations (2021).

7. Lithuania, as a former Soviet republic, had seemed to make efforts to distance itself from its recent past. Yet there is still a significant part of population that speaks Russian, which would make my family less dependent on me.

8. You can find the Užupis constitution at Republic of Užupis (2012).

9. Komitas (sometimes Gomidas; 1869–1935) was an Armenian priest, musicologist, composer, arranger, singer, and is recognized as the founder of the Armenian national school of music.

10. Geghard, a UNESCO World Heritage site, is a medieval monastery complex founded in the fourth century by Gregory the Illuminator. It is believed to be the place where the lance that pierced Jesus was kept for about five hundred years (Armenia Discover, n.d.).

11. On Armenia’s relations with Turkey, see Republic of Armenia (2021).

12. Article 301 of the Turkish Penal Code states that any person who publicly denigrates “Turkishness, the Republic or the Grand National Assembly of Turkey, shall be punishable by imprisonment of between six months and three years” (Algan, 2008).

References


Fleming, V. (Director). (1939). *Gone with the wind* [Film]. Selznick International Pictures.


