



About the Author

The Rev. Alfred Stefanik recently published his second book, *I See Your Belly Button: Immigrant Lessons in American Compassion*. Set in World War II and onward into the 1960s, the story is about his go-getting grandmother confronting societal structures and supporting the American mix of cultures, lifestyles, and beliefs. Al and Claire live in Palm Coast, Florida, where they extend hospitality to children, grands, and great-grands and friends. Al's email address is alstefanik@cfl.rr.com.

About Vintage Voice

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VINTAGE VOICE



Story-telling on a Full Sea

By the Rev. Alfred Stefanik

Ubi Deus est? Certainly in learned precedents. The Biblical ones, stories that validate feelings and behavior with crosses and resurrections. In addition, thank God for serious literature. The kind that clarifies human experiences; my retiree's experience. For instance, Steve tests the heavy-duty window balances he just installed. He opens the window. The repair works; it stays open. Hot, humid Florida air overruns my room. Steve closes the window and locks it. On the way out he points to a picture. "Where is this?"

"Our home we left in Vermont."

Steve studies the brown-stained house partially shadowed under our silver maple. Fifty yards east, the garden. Two week-old sunflowers start to hide three rows of well-established onions; and beyond them recently seeded chard, bush beans, and two rows of broccoli transplants. To the left by the asparagus bed, my mechanized muscle, the John Deere diesel, gleams green and yellow. In its bucket I remember a shovel stuck into a load of manure.

"You left all that to retire *here*?" He points out the window to row on row of sanitized houses in our gated community. "Why?"

How to answer? Shakespeare or W.C. Fields?

"There is a tide in the affairs of men,
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.
On such a full sea are we now afloat;
And we must take the current when it serves,
Or lose our ventures."

(Brutus to Cassius in *Julius Caesar*, Act IV, Scene III.)

Or maybe better:

"There comes a time in the affairs of man when he must take
the bull by the tail and face the situation."

(W.C. Fields)

My answer is "both" but also weighted to the poet brooding in Babylon writing "*super flumina*." His remembered Jerusalem is my Vermont. His Babylon looms outside my freshly fixed window. Rosa sees it well.

“It seemed to Rosa Lublin that the whole peninsula of Florida was weighted down with regret. Everyone had left behind a real life. Here they had nothing. They were all scarecrows, blown about under the murdering sunball with empty ribcages.”

(Cynthia Ozick, *The Shawl*)

A stark scenario, close to a Psalm 130 experience. Yet, and most honestly, that’s sort of what the Vermonter in me experiences. Even so I pack my 46-year-old green Churchill fins into the gym bag and walk under Ozick’s sunball to the community pool. On the way I remember the frigid mountain wind, one of those Vermont body blows that mix living with struggle. Northern New Englanders are meant to wrestle weather. Wouldn’t it be nice to put on snowshoes again? Instead I descend into the pool. Water temp is 89 and it’s only nine o’clock.

Cynthia Ozick is asking: “So, you wanted to retire to Florida? Sure, it’s nice in winter. Come here in July and August and September. Then see the truth.” In fact in 1982 and 1987 I had done that. Even so and three years ago, after she had fallen on ice, I promised Claire to go where she wanted to live out retirement. So two years plus a few months ago, in June, we I-95ed forever south from the Green Mountains. So abides love. Not the sentimental kind, but the kind willing to pay love’s price.

Rosa stands up and accepts the price. Very late in the book with eyes opened she rises from her regrets and makes Florida work for her. Reborn she ponders an invitation to revive her life within loving relationships in Florida. She seems to heed Oscar Wilde:

“To regret one’s own experiences is to arrest one’s own development. To deny one’s own experiences is to put a lie into the lips of one’s own life. It is no less than a denial of the soul.”

(Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis*)

No regrets. Time for immediate action. Time to kindle new relationships. Claire reads under the umbrella. I fish on Flagler Beach, purposely a short walk across A1A to the men’s room at The Golden Lion. There my eyes open to women and men clustered around separated tables. They comfortably lunch with known friends and family; like little klatches at church coffee hours. The bar contrasts from the table groupings. A single free-standing table, it welcomes a ring of individuals not yet connected; those maybe on the pilgrim’s way. Claire and I take seats among stools neatly clustered around a mosaic countertop. Who will take that empty stool on my left? I am reminded of no-walls, wide-open Holy Innocents’ Church in Lahaina. Under the finches flying in and out of the church, what strangers will sit in that empty pew? Tourists? Locals? The homeless who slept the night on the beach? This bar could undoubtedly host such a church.

Robin, the barkeeper, serves as her unrelated patrons connect and share “real lives left behind” in Indiana, in Massapequa, or (*en français du Québec*) in Trois-Rivières. I listen.

Jean, next to me, points at my drink. “How on earth did somebody from Vermont learn about mojitos?”

“My daughter told me to try one when she lived in New York. She was always getting me to try new things. I occasionally order one to respect the fun we had.”

“What do you mean ‘we had’?”

“She died four years ago.”

Jean tears up and pats me on my shoulder. She leans across me to touch Claire’s hand. “Bless your heart. Both your hearts. I am so sorry you had to go through that.” Now Jean opens her life. Like so many she, a widow twice over, had walked the desolate valley. And for this moment in her telling I think she finds this a place of springs. Are we pilgrims at The Golden Lion or at Chaucer’s Tabard Inn? So this Peninsula has story tellers; and, better, story listeners. Florida too floats us on a full sea. *Deus ibi est.*



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