

Living in the New World, Choosing from the Old

Maria Laurino (May 03, 2009)



How Old World Ways Are Circling Back into 21st Century Life

When I was in college and wanted to sound like an English Major (in capital letters), I'd enjoy musing over the complexities of narrative structure. In my youthful enthusiasm, I even wrote a paper that included a Mobius strip, which is formed by taking a rectangular piece of paper, giving it a half-twist, and then connecting the two ends. The strip produces a continuous surface, as the inside becomes the outside and the outside the inside.

More than 25 years later, I better understand why that mathematical metaphor had so intrigued me.



As the granddaughter of Italian immigrants, I am curious about time's continuous loop - how the Old World customs of my grandparents, who settled in Maplewood, N.J., at the beginning of the 20th century, are circling their way back into 21st century life.

At first glance, Maplewood's tree-lined streets seem a radically different place from my grandparents' home, a three-story apartment building they owned along the town's busy Springfield Avenue. It's hard to imagine that an ancient Mediterranean culture - where women gave neighbors who had wronged them *mal' occhio*, the evil eye, and chased pigs escaped from backyards up Springfield Avenue - once laid down its roots in a suburb now filled with SUVs, Hondas and minivans laden with children's car seats and athletic gear.

But in the essence of how we live - from how we raise our children to the food we eat - Old World ways are refurbishing our homes, like a retro sofa that's suddenly become *de rigueur*.

The door has been re-opened, for example, for grandma to enter as primary child-care provider. Our new First Lady, Michelle Obama, brought national attention to this idea when she asked her mother, Marian Robinson, to move into the White House to continue to help raise her grandchildren. As more women work long hours and traveling for their jobs, the "old-fashioned scenario" of a grandmother serving as the primary caregiver is "cycling back into favor," the New York Times recently reported.

This arrangement - one that also has deep roots in African-American tradition - brought me back to the Maplewood of the early 1940s, when my mother's siblings began to have children. With my grandmother as matriarch, all the women pitched in (child care never fell to the domain of Italian men), running between apartments, and up and down the stairs, to help rear the children.

By the postwar 1950s, life had changed as my mom and her three siblings, by now all married and with children, sought the American dream, and moved out of their parents' building to buy their own homes. With no one living within walking distance, and my mother and her sister unable to drive, the cousins rarely played with, or even saw one another or their grandmother. By the time I was born in 1959, the insular nuclear family became the New World model that my family had fully adopted.

Yet, how naïve of us Americans to believe that grandma wouldn't be needed any longer. That model only worked because my mother stayed home to raise her children. Then 70s feminism came along and helped to radically restructure the American work force. As a society, however, we never figured out how to adequately help families with two working parents. So here in the 21st century, the New World reacquaints itself with the ways of the Old.

The above story is part of an essay I recently wrote for the [New York Times](#). [2] which talks about some of the themes from my new book, *Old World Daughter, New World Mother: An Education in Love and Freedom* (Norton, April 2009). To see the full version of this essay you can click on the following link: <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/19/nyregion/new-jersey/19Rgen.html?scp=13&sq=Maria%20Laurino&st=cse> [2]

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