

To Be or To Have...March 2, 2006

I met local journalist Gourgen Khazhakian. He writes for *Noyan Tapan* (Noah's Ark) *The Highlights*, a weekly newspaper that will cost you 1,000 drams (450 drams = US\$1.) He's a deep thinker and a little crazy – like all us writers need to be so we can see the real world even through our rose-colored glasses. About a week ago, Gourgen had a long look on his face and I asked him, “Inch ka ch'ka?” (What's up?)

“To be or to have,” he said to me. “What do you pick?”

I answered in about five seconds: To be. Then I went into a short philosophical explanation – believe me, it *was* short – but he had already retreated into his own thoughts and said, “To have.”

His question is stuck in my head, so I explore it with you. Which one do you pick: Be or have?

I understand Gourgen's selection.

During Soviet times, everyone had a job. The quality of your job or if you climbed a corporate ladder through your own hard work were not considered. Pay raises were meted out according to a different schedule. Education was valued and the more you had, the better your position, perhaps. People could travel anywhere in the world for a few weeks of guaranteed vacation – as long as their destination was another Communist country. They had thousands of rubles, an apartment or house or both, water, heat, food, medical care. There were pensions for the elderly. There was security for all because the Communist community took care of everything. You didn't have to worry about anything other than making sure you were always working.

You just lacked the freedom to choose, to go, to get more than your neighbors, to listen to non-Communist ideas, to worship, to get letters from America.

When the walls tumbled down and people woke up to nothing except what they possessed at hand, life changed. Dramatically, awfully. It will never be the same. And some people are filled with worry because they know they cannot – nor they necessarily want to – turn back the clock to those more secure times, yet they struggle with life as it exists and are filled with regrets about tomorrow.

To have is so important in a country the size of Maryland where half its 3 million people live in Yerevan, which has 30% unemployment. Outside the city, unemployment runs 40%. Underemployment is rampant regardless of education and experience, and the worries these people shoulder are overwhelming. Sometimes, I try to help some of them carry their burdens, but my soul gets sucked out of me and my chest literally aches with their pain.

Orphanages, special schools and boarding schools are filled with children whose parents simply cannot take care of them and work the typical 12- to 14-hour shift to earn an annual average wage of about \$90 a month. Those lucky enough to have relatives abroad enjoy a stipend wired each month to make ends meet. Youth with bona fide disabilities – not just living in poverty, which is a “disability,” of sorts – can be virtually locked away by society and sometimes even by

their own families. Childless couples don't know who will care for them when they're old, which is anything after age 50. Healthcare can be inexpensive, and you sometimes get what you pay for. (For example, Marcia and I heard a story about a person with pneumonia who had their spleen removed to clear the lungs. I dunno. I'm not a trained medical person. Maybe this is the right thing to do.) I have students whose parents have literally mortgaged their apartments to pay tuition – and the parents have no jobs.

My students who helped me clean my old apartment this past weekend before I moved to my new one watched some *MTV*-type program in which one of our infamous, young rap singers was showing off his mansion. A couple students went crazy watching, coveting all of it. If they could just have, they felt their lives – and those of their extended family living in a two-bedroom apartment – would improve immensely.

I understand wanting “to have” when you possess little and you cannot see a better future. I understand Gourgen, who apparently once had it all, but now feels he has nothing at all. Yet, I defend my answer that it is far better “to be.”

I just finished reading the book, *The Art of Abundance: A Simple Guide to Discovering Life's Treasures*, by Candy Paull. My friend Sheryl Meshke from AMPI in Minnesota gave it to me a few years ago. It's a combination of the author's thoughts, Abundance is... (fill in the simple joys in life), quotes by famous people and Bible verses. While you might think it talks about “having,” it actually leads you on a journey of “being.” It supports what I talked repeated about with my third-year students during fall semester's Public Speaking class and what we're discussing this semester in Business Management Ethics for fourth-year students.

You can have everything in the world and never be happy, never be a good or ethical person, never be concerned about anything or anyone but yourself, never be with a best friend. You can have everything and still be empty spiritually.

I know there was a time in my life when I wanted to have it all. In a way, I still do and I'll never deny that I love money in my pocket. But I think my experiences have proven to me that being is much more important to me. And my love of money has become a way in which I can try to help make other people's lives a little bit better, if even for another month so the heat stays on, there's food to eat, a winter coat to ward off the cold or a pair of shoes so their child can go to school.

Maybe I'm smug in valuing “being” over “having.” After all, I have a plane ticket back to America where I have everything and I can be whomever I want, depending on my mood when I wake each morning. Maybe that ability to escape this place is a safety net that doesn't give me the deep, personal insights Gourgen and every other Armenian has lived through. I hope not because that would make my answer of “being” too cavalier.

To me, being is about character and how you conduct yourself. It's about who you are on the inside and what you let out for the world to see. Being is who you are when you're sitting alone in a living room in a foreign country with CNN, two space heaters and a cup of hot lemon water to cure your headache...and being able to enjoy it despite not having much at hand. To be or not

to be is not the question. The question is, who are you? Who do you want to be? Who is God leading you to be?

I choose to be...

...as kind and considerate to others as I can possibly muster, even when I'm sick and frustrated and worried and busy.

...good and gracious, both in my conduct towards others as well as in my work for others.

...a ray of sunshine even on cloudy days for people who worry about the cold, cruel world they live in and cannot find anything about which to smile.

...full of smiles, cheerfulness and laughter because it's too easy to frown, be grumpy and never see humor in life.

...adventuresome on my journeys because even a wrong turn leads you somewhere and that place may hold more wonder and surprise than the place you originally planned to go.

...thankful for all the big things people do for me as well as all the teeny, tiny little things they don't think warrant even a simple "thank you."

...helpful – sometimes to a fault and my own sanity – but doing what I can when someone else needs my time or my talent.

...a good, loyal, honest friend to anyone who needs a shoulder to lean on, a hug when they're down, a word of encouragement when they're tired of trying, someone else's opinion to clarify their own.

...generous with everything that God has given me – money, time, talent and all the other gifts I've listed here.

...happy with where God leads me and to grow spiritually where He plants me.

Let me share a few of my favorite "famous people" quotes from *The Art of Abundance*.

Be not anxious about what you have, but about what you are. – Saint Gregory the Great

He who is plenteously provided for from within needs but little from without. – Goethe

Great men are they who see that spiritual is stronger than any material force; that thoughts rule the world. – Emerson

It is not how much we have, but how much we enjoy, that makes happiness. – Charles Haddon Spurgeon

Nine requisites for contented living: Health enough to make work a pleasure. Wealth enough to support your needs (my words...not your *wants*!). Strength to battle with difficulties and overcome them. Grace enough to confess your sins and forsake them. Patience enough to toil until some good is accomplished. Charity enough to see some good in your neighbor. Love enough to move you to be useful and helpful to others. Faith enough to make real the things of God. Hope enough to remove all anxious fears concerning the future. – Goethe

Were there no God, we would be in this glorious world with grateful hearts: and no one to thank.
– Christina Georgina Rossetti

Life begets life. Energy creates energy. It is by spending oneself that we become rich. – Sarah Bernhardt

A man wrapped up in himself makes a small bundle. – Benjamin Franklin

Most folks are about as happy as they make up their minds to be. – Abraham Lincoln

So which do you choose...to be or to have?

Peace!

Written by Pamela J. Karg

P.S. Today is Gourgen's 44th birthday. I want him to BE HAPPY today and HAVE every day be filled with wonderful surprises that convince him that we're glad he exists...that he is! ☺