

Editor's Perspective



By Michael L. Sensor, Esquire

It Grows Like a Weed

*"Kriste aghsdga mkvdretit,
sikvdilita sikvdilisa,
damtrgunveli da saplevis shinata
tskhovrebis mimnichebeli!"*

The three-part harmony faded out, minor fourths and augmented fifths colliding with the canvas of the outdoor dining tent, echoing back to our ears. The Svanetian trio sat back down to the table just as the *tamada* stood up to propose another toast.

"These mountains which you see behind us," said John the Painter, gesturing to the cloud-decked peaks glowering at us from the distance, seeming to burst from the valley, "these lovely crags are old, older than ages. Some say that civilization started here." And, indeed, it seemed that could well be the case, as John repeated those sentences in the land's native tongue, full as it was with strange-sounding glottal stops, plosives, and fricatives. John's words made me think back to our first night in the country, when the father of our host family tried to teach me the name of the region we would be visiting: "Kakheti! Kugh-kugh-kugh-kugh-kugh!" he gulped, pointing approximately to the region of his uvula while a rough clicking-like sound emanated from somewhere deep in his larynx.

"Some of the songs you have heard tonight," John the Painter continued, "are likewise old beyond ages. Musicologists have traced them back thousands of years, before this country was converted to Christianity, perhaps to the dawn of man in these very mountains. It is this spirit that imbues this land, where I have chosen to settle and raise my family. That

spirit is one of generosity, of the love of life, of an appreciation of life, and all its triumphs and tragedies."

"So, I raise a toast to this land and its people, the brave, strong people who have endured so many depredations over the centuries, whose land has been destroyed and swallowed time and time again, but like the phoenix, have always risen again from the dead to rebuild and live another day. That is why we say the word that we do when we finish a toast—*Gaumarjos*. To our victory. When warriors and soldiers would meet and drink the night before a battle, they would toast each others' victory, not knowing if the next day they would see their friends and family ever again, or even if they themselves would remain alive. So to that spirit, and to you, my friends, I say—*Gaumarjos*!"

Wine glasses resounded as the party all repeated the word and drank—*Gaumarjos*. Clink. *Gaumarjos*. Clink. *Gaumarjos*!

This summer, I was privileged to travel to the Republic of Georgia with my wife on a nearly three-week tour of that country's many amazing sites—its monasteries and churches, wineries, historic cities, and, most of all, its warm, welcoming people.

Never have I been in a country that felt more connected to its roots, where the past and present walk together hand in hand, the future beckoning in the distance. Beyond Tbilisi, which is striving mightily to become a European-style capital—as well as the cell phones which every Georgian seems to favor over the antiquated telephone system—modernity is hard to find in Georgia. Farmers ride haywains

behind horses down pockmarked roads, bartling for supremacy with ancient Fiats, Ladas, second- and third-hand delivery trucks late of German and French companies. Wine is still made in places the old way, by picking grapes and stomping them. 1,400-year-old churches resound with ancient liturgical chant. Men and women make crafts by hand, with loom, and knife favored over factory.

Georgia has suffered immensely over the centuries. Constantly beset by invaders from the south, east, and west; speaking a language unlike any other tongue in the world; singing songs with unique melodies and tunes; Georgians developed an insular, self-reliant mind-set. Fortified monasteries were built all over the country, places of refuge to which towns and villages could flee in times of attack. One such town even turned itself into a huge fortress in its own right—Signaghi. It's perched high on a hillside near the Azerbaijani border in the Kakheti region in the shadow of the Great Caucasus Mountains; its steep streets ringed by a huge network of walls studded by twenty-four towers, one assigned to each of the villages in the region, where food and weapons were stored for use when the region came under siege and the villagers had to flee to that place of refuge.

Hoping to find salvation in an alliance with the Russian Empire in 1798, the nation soon found itself annexed by Russia, its monarchy abolished in favor of the Russian Tsar, followed by a wave of Russification that threatened to destroy the nation's unique culture. Georgia suffered little better under the Soviet Union, which left the nation with a mixed legacy:

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thousands of highly-educated writers, poets, artists, and musicians who were supplied with generous state-subsidized positions and now jockey for jobs in Georgia's new market-based economy.

Indeed, our first host family in Georgia consisted of a architect, retired at the age of 50, and a classically-trained musician who is now selling cosmetics for the European equivalent of Avon. We learned this on our first night in Georgia, staying up until five in the morning after arriving from Turkey on a late-night flight, drinking glass after glass of sweet red Georgian wine, fumbling for words we had in common—all of us frequently referring to a dictionary of Russian, the *lingua franca* of the Caucasus region, to communicate.

Yet, even their small fourth-floor flat offered a glimpse of just how beautiful Georgia can be, looking out as it did on a scene which could only be called pastoral. Just behind Tbilisi's busy Chavchavadze Avenue, our bedroom window opened onto a valley through which a stream ran, frogs singing lustily at all hours, dusty dirt roads down which children led sheep and goats (and the occasional dog), flanked by small huts made of tin and wood. And throughout our stay at the apartment, warm winds blew from the West, off the Black Sea, occasionally punctuated by cooler breezes from the Caucasus Mountains in the north.

"In Georgia," said one of our companions on the tour, "beauty grows like a weed." And, indeed it does. One night in Signaghi, my wife and I stood on the balcony of our guest house, looking over a small valley to the hills beyond, lit by a full moon. A rooster crowed, early by many hours, and below us a mother drew a bath for her children, filling up a large porcelain tub with warm water, illuminated by candlelight. (Our guest-house was one of the few in the town that actually had running water.) And all at once, from beyond the valley, we heard faint murmurs which soon blossomed into a full-throated melody, the

unusual harmonies of Georgian song floating through the air, punctuated by the cock's crow.

As dissonant beauty scented the air that night, I began to think—what if we had to give it all up? What, or who, would we become if we had to live without our Internet access, laptops and computers, PalmPilots, iPhones, iPods, e-mail, Bates stamps, privilege logs, objections, motions, briefs, soccer games, play dates, and mortgages? What if our lives centered upon family, friends, villages, and the simple art of surviving each day and drinking to victory?

Our nation is dedicated to the sanctity of individual rights and private property. In a sense, that is what has made this country one of the greatest in the world. But, by the same token, as was written a few thousand years ago, *what shall it profit a man if he shall gain the world but lose his soul?* In becoming the richest, strongest nation in the world, purportedly the last superpower, have we mortgaged our souls? And if we have, what does that say about us as a nation?

All is not lost, though. In our complex 21st century society, we can and must take time to find moments of beauty and simplicity in our lives. We cannot allow technology and the tools of modern life to destroy the very thing that makes us human: our ability to love. Whether the love is for our families, children, parents, spouses, or significant others, that love, and our ability to reason and realize where that love may be found, is ultimately all we have that separates us from the animals.

Just like in Georgia, beauty is all around us, growing like a weed. It's as close as your child's face, your spouse's hand, your mother's voice, your father's arm, your dog's bark. Can you find it in your lives? You can, and we all can.

Dare to reach out beyond the veil of technology and electronics that surrounds all of us, and find that weed. Water it, nurture it, let it grow, let it flower. *Gaumarjos!* ☸

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