Are we missing the forest for the trees?

Tell me, just who are we trying to appease
Oh and remove that faux camouflage
And open up your eyes and you can plainly see
Life is a forest, we are the trees
Let’s be aware the foliage is but you and me.

(Aztlanquill, excerpt 6-10)

How many times have we found ourselves in a situation where we felt there were no ways out? Or wondered to ourselves, “what is wrong with these people?” “Why can’t they see it the way I do, and how long are we going to debate the same issues?” “Why can’t we just reach consensus or take a vote and get it over and done with?” Sounds familiar?

So often we are so focused on our own agendas that we place all our energy into arguing, or defending our position in the hope of getting our way. Maltese people are known for their tenacity, their fighting spirit or is it stubbornness? And oh yes for keeping their voices down when they argue.

How easy it is, to lose sense of what is really important because we are too consumed by the perception, image or even our ego? It would seem that certain situations would warrant us taking a step back, to look at the bigger picture and ask ourselves, what is really important? What is the bottom line? And what is it that we ultimately want to achieve.
Look around you. Take a moment, to think of all those who wished to be here this morning, but for one reason or other could not. Today you are in the company of people who, like you, and others who could not be here, have spent countless hours over the course of many years pouring out their energies in an effort to continue to find ways how to improve the quality of lives of Maltese Living Abroad. We are all here this week because we care, and because for us it is not simply a matter of doing well for ourselves and for our immediate families; for us it is not a matter of blending in, losing the accent from our native tongue, and succeeding in our adoptive countries. We are here because Malta is as much a part of our lives as is the country where we currently live, work and raise our families. For us, it is a matter of promoting, supporting and furthering the cause for Maltese culture, heritage, food, customs, language, history, food (did I mention food?), education and a Maltese way of life, throughout the different countries and communities of Maltese living abroad and beyond. At the same time, we seek to find a balance between the culture of the various countries and regions we live in, and our Maltese identity.

It is for these reasons, that we now create programs, organize clubs, and establish groups, committees and organizations. It is in the spirit of assimilation that we plan and participate in activities, parades, gatherings, learning centers, training facilities, and a plethora of other creative and inspired ways of maintaining our connection with our Maltese roots. For many years we enjoyed healthy levels of success, participation, enthusiasm and funding. The all important voluntary help was available at our beckon call. And life was good. Years passed and the original Maltese population living abroad, aged. In many sectors the energy level declined, many were burnt out, membership and participation levels dwindled, and the younger generation was not ready or willing to replace the older generation at the same rate. The balance shifted heavily towards older contributors who had no choice but to continue filling certain key managerial and leadership positions.

Maltese Youths Living Abroad: How many times have we heard that the younger generation does not want to be bothered with Maltese groups or organizations? Youths are so hesitant and reluctant to participate in Maltese related activities that have been crucial to sustaining our connection with Malta for all these years. It is important to point out, not that it solves anything, that this phenomenon is not unique to Maltese youths. Maltese organizations are not alone experiencing difficulties transitioning and implementing sustainable succession plans. Other ethnic groups share and feel the same pains. In fact, many organizations have had to close their doors as a result of insufficient memberships due to lack of interest, and new blood willing to take on the responsibilities from the old guard.

CMLA 2015 – Louis Vella (United States of America): Are we missing the forest for the trees?
The sad fact, that other ethnic organizations have had to close shop, should by no means be perceived as any indication that Maltese cultural groups are facing the same fate. On the contrary, we remain strong, but there is still a need to somehow re-invent ourselves. We need to accept that if we continue to host the same events, organize the same activities, and sustain the same approach while expecting different results, we are in turn hastening our paths to extinction.

Have we ever considered taking a step back to look at the big picture? Have we considered letting our youths dictate the change that they themselves wish to see? This reminds me of a famous quote that says, “Be the change we wish to see in the world”. Well our world is constantly changing. Perhaps it is now time to let the younger Maltese generation get involved in a capacity that is conducive to the change they wish to see.

A recent non-scientific survey conducted by a local radio station in California polled a number of young people ages 25 years and up, most with a university level education. These were mostly highly intelligent young men and women working at some of the elite high tech companies in world, such as Google, Intuit, Yahoo, Microsoft, Facebook, headquartered in California. You need to also keep in mind that these young people are highly intelligent, and can navigate and create computer applications just as easily as we can get around in a car.

The question they were asked was very simple and straightforward. The question was, “Can you name the two senators that represent the State of California in the US Congress” As some of you might know each State of the Union is represented by two Senators in Congress. The State of California happens to have two Senators with a lot of seniority and two who are very popular and well known throughout the entire United States.

77% of those surveyed could not name the senators. 77% did not know who is representing them in Congress. Shocking one might think!....Well, not so fast.....What is significant here is not the fact that such a high percentage did not know the answer to the simple question, but the blatant realization as to what is really important for these brilliant young minds who have never experienced a world without e-mail or cell phones.

These young people are undoubtedly engaged, but what is it that interests them to become involved? Likewise, what is it that interests young Maltese living abroad and rives them to become involved? What will motivate them to participate in their own way, at their own pace and with their own style and methods in things Maltese?

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Time is of the essence. It is imperative that we find ways to make a change to our course of action. If we do not, we stand to lose a generation of up and coming Maltese, which would also mean the loss of subsequent generations living abroad. It is time that we take a step back and look at the bigger picture, before there is no picture to look at.

Teaching of the Maltese language: The Maltese language schools in the State of Michigan in the US, the Province of Ontario in Canada and the States of New South Wales, South Australia and Victoria in Australia and maybe others in other areas deserve our greatest admiration and applause for doing the impossible with so little. Still one has to ask, if it weren’t for the very few dedicated and committed people who keep these schools going what would happen to these schools? Who will carry the torch once the current teachers and advocates can carry it no longer? So the question poses itself, why are Maltese language schools and Maltese programs abroad struggling and how long can they continue to struggle before they cannot struggle no more? If Maltese language schools become such that they are not in a position to teach the Maltese language anymore, are they equipped to continue to provide a learning environment about Malta, at the location and in the language where they are currently situated?

Can Maltese culture, heritage, history and Maltese appreciation be thought in languages other than Maltese?

Hundreds of Maltese living abroad come back to visit Malta as tourists every year especially in the summer months. Why can’t we have a Summer school in Malta where children and grand children of Maltese living abroad can for a few hours a week learn some appreciation of things Maltese while they are vacationing in Malta?

Isn’t it time that we step back and take a look at the big picture and possibly take stock of what we have been doing for so long and maybe look at things with a fresh set of eyes. Maybe even ask ourselves “If it’s not broken why not break it?” Let us not be afraid to go out on a limb….That is where the fruit is usually found.

A Greater Malta: The concept of a greater Malta has been around now for several years. Thousands of people of Maltese descent who were born outside Malta embraced the privilege of obtaining Maltese citizenship with warm enthusiasm. I have on a number of occasions personally seen people crying for joy when they obtained their Maltese citizenship documents. A young man who was originally born in Malta and left for adoption, ended up in California as a very young child with his newly adoptive parents. The child grew up as an American Citizen and did not know
any different at the time. About a year ago, after a very lengthy process his Maltese
citizenship papers arrived. When he received the documents in his hands this now
big man fell down to his knees, kissed the documents multiple times, and with tears
in his eyes said to me. “Thirty eight years I have been waiting for this day, thirty eight
long years, I dreamed and longed for this. I feel like I am born again. This is truly who
I am. I have never been so happy”.

People can feel connected with a country in many different ways. Certainly some of
the more meaningful and gratifying ways to feel a sense of connection and
belonging to a country are citizenship documents and passports. Why then, does it
take so long for a person of Maltese descent living abroad to obtain their Maltese
citizenship?

For a Maltese citizen living abroad, obtaining or renewing a Maltese passport is such
a hardship. Very often costing 30 times more to a Maltese living abroad than it does
for a Maltese citizen living in Malta. The main reason being that Embassies or High
Commissions are located so very far away from the many Maltese communities, and
outside of physically visiting the Embassy or travelling to Malta, there is no other way
to obtain a new passport. Why does it have to be this way?

When are we going to sit back and look at that big picture and decide that these
issues need to be driven not only by policy, but more importantly, by what is
reasonable, and truly needed by our Maltese customers living abroad? The concept
of a greater Malta can only be realized if more Maltese can identify themselves as
such. We live in a world of limitless wireless connections, why build boundaries, in a
world that knows no bounds?

Certainly we cannot say that these issues are new. They have been presented and
debated in many different forms and forums in the past. It is the hope that we will
discuss them no more as they would have lost their place in the “To Do” list and were
elevated to the realm of the achievements.

It is our sincere hope that we will never miss the enchanting forest no matter how
camouflaged by trees.

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