

It's curtains!

Whenever we told anyone we were taking a year off and going to Turkey we invariably got one of three responses. The first was, "Oh wow, I wish I could do something like that," to which there wasn't much we could say except, "Well, maybe you could."

The second was, "Will you be safe? Aren't you afraid to go there? Didn't you see 'Midnight Express'?" Here we would heave a heavy sigh and say, "Yes," "No," and "No," and wonder if Turkey would ever live down the damage done by that old movie.

The third response was an incredulous, "Really? What are you going to *do* there?" Our usual reply to this was a joyful, "Nothing; we're just going to *be*," which often left our interrogators nonplussed. How could we possibly spend a year doing nothing?

Well we couldn't, of course. But we could spend a year unfettered by the "musts" and "shoulds" that crowded our working lives at home. For one year we were free of the need to earn a living, and early in our stay we discovered we could enjoy activities that back home were simply chores, done without heed on the way to doing something else. Shopping, cooking, and washing dishes became ends in themselves and could be surprisingly pleasant. Our days were filled with supplying basic needs and enjoying simple pleasures: We did the laundry and vacuumed the floors. We read, wrote, and visited. We played with Dodo, Huseyin's dog, and made minor repairs to the apartment. We strolled the promenade, hiked in the hills, swam in the sea, and rode our bicycles everywhere. And when we got bored with Göcek we boarded a bus or rented a car and went someplace else.

Our year without shoulds and musts included an agreement to avoid until spring the topic of what we would do when our year-long stay was over—a topic that friends and even just-met acquaintances found irresistible. The harder we tried to avoid it the more often the question was raised. The truth was we had no plans and didn't know what we would do, but others found that answer unsatisfactory and the query dogged us throughout the year.

August 5

You will cease bemoaning my laziness and inactivity when you learn that what occupies much of my time these blisteringly hot days is the crucial work of shifting curtains. Our apartment occupies the east half of the building, and the sun's first rays shine directly into the north and east windows of our bedroom. This necessitates, at sunrise, the first shifting of cream-colored curtains, from open to closed. On rising a few hours later I see the sun shining through the office windows and I close those curtains on my way to breakfast. All the curtains are the same lightweight cotton, and they hang from wooden rings that make a comforting clunk-clunk sound as they slide into one another across the round pine poles. About 9 a.m. I close the curtains on the east side of the living room, followed a few hours later by those on the southeast side, and finally, in late afternoon I pull the short, single panel across the kitchen's southwest corner window.

The earth's rotation naturally produces shade on the earlier sunny windows, and it takes careful watching and exact timing to reopen curtains that were earlier closed. Sometimes a test opening reveals a still-sunny ledge and the curtains will need to be redrawn. You can well imagine that with the added complication of opening and closing the windows, a conscientious curtain shifter can stay mighty busy.

This exercise is imbued with religious overtones, since the shiftings often occur during one of the five daily prayer calls that issue from the loudspeaker on the nearby mosque. It also provides an excuse to observe the eucalyptus trees. I've always liked the feathery elegance of these trees, though unless they are grouped tightly their habit of turning leaf edges to the sun means they block little light and are worthless to the shade-seeker. There are lots of eucalyptus here and they dominate the view when we look directly out. Looking down produces quite another picture.

On the northeast side is the “farm,” really a large, unorganized garden containing tomatoes, cabbages, beans, eggplants, and more. It is owned by the family who own this apartment building and various family members contribute to its care. The woman we call Grandma is the one we see most often. She marches through the garden at all hours, pounding a stake here, leading the black cow to a new dining location there, or watering or harvesting the melons or tomatoes or beans; always with a cigarette dangling from her lips. She dresses traditionally in a full, gathered print skirt over wide pantaloons, topped by a tee-shirt or sweater. Her hennaed gray braids are tied together at the ends and droop daringly below the traditional white scarf that is twisted precariously atop her head. How she bears this layered costume when it’s 95 and humid (and I’m suffering in a tank top and shorts), is beyond my ken.

Further from the house is a stand of corn that is the Baba’s domain (*baba* means father, or head of the household; in this case he’s also the *büyükbaba*, or grandpa), and he’s often there shifting water hoses around. He’s a tall, handsome man with a thick, white, droopy mustache, and he looks quite distinguished when he’s dressed for town. It’s rumored the Baba “likes the ladies,” and it would be no surprise to learn they also like him.

Beyond the corn is a rough dirt road-in-progress, and its creation has brought lots of noise and dust into the apartment. These dirt roads are showing up all over the village, cut at right angles across the fields in a way that reminds us unpleasantly of subdivisions. We hope they are nearly finished, but constant construction is a hallmark of the Turkey we know. Noise, dust, and debris are a given, and one never knows when or where the next project will appear. There are no notices from the city planners here; in fact there are no city planners. The bulldozers and backhoes just show up.

Beyond the road-in-progress is another stand of eucalyptus and to the north are the high, steep, gray rock cliffs that provide a dramatic backdrop to life in Göcek. Looking south the view is not as pleasant—a wide expanse of dirt and gravel leading from the main village road to our building. The hill on the right is where the rock for the road-in-progress comes from, and our view expands as the cliff is gradually and noisily carved away. To the left is the new covered market that is not yet covered. A school is planned for the spot next to the main road, but that will happen long after we’ve moved on.

Grandma and Grandpa live in an older house behind this one. They are the parents of Yuksel and Mehmet, brothers who run a tourist restaurant in a cove called Deep Bay, about six miles out. Much of the garden’s produce is destined for the restaurant, shipped there in Yuksel’s old blue and white wooden dinghy.

Yuksel is unmarried; Mehmet and his family live in the one-bedroom apartment just above us. Aygul, his wife, works as a nurse at the hospital in Fethiye, and Grandma takes care of three-year-old Ipek. I sometimes see Grandma working in the garden with Ipek clinging to her back, held solidly in place with wide, woven straps.

This family might be called transitional, with the grandparents representing the older village values, and the younger generation working to gain a toe-hold in Turkey’s growing middle class. In traditional, extended families like this one, income is pooled and everyone, supposedly, works toward a common goal. This age-old arrangement appears to work well and extended families, which may also include aunts, uncles and endless degrees of cousins, rely on one another in all kinds of ways: finding jobs, raising children, working the land, even choosing a mate.

Many of the locals are land rich but cash poor and, like the family who owns our building, they are erecting rentals on their land; new houses and apartments are going up all around us. Our six-unit building will reap benefits for the family as prospective new residents and wealth move into town.

Aygul’s job as a nurse takes her away from home during the day, and though we’re told nursing is looked down on by some in this country (because, among other things, female nurses touch strange men’s bodies, an act disapproved by traditional Moslems) it is a distinct step away from being a peasant farmer, and another indication that women in Turkey are slowly moving out of their traditional sphere into the world of work.

Unlike her mother-in-law, Aygul and her daughter Ipek wear western-style clothes. This is not unusual, but the sight of older women in traditional village garb accompanying daughters and granddaughters clad in the latest Turkish chic, dramatizes the changes underway in Turkish society. These variations in dress are not limited to generational divisions, but reveal class and religious distinctions as well.

I find myself puzzled and fascinated by the Turks’ apparent indifference to these differences. I have watched young,

conservatively dressed Moslem women in head scarves and full, flowing coats sip tea and share giggles with other young women in tight jeans and midriff-baring tee-shirts, with no obvious tension or even recognition of what appear to me to be glaring differences in their outlook. This tolerance, which is a common Turkish trait, is refreshing, and one of the things I like about the country.

But, I can hear you muttering, what about the intolerance of some conservative Moslems? What about the religious fanatics we hear so much about?

So I must confess that yes, some intolerance does exist. Turkey is not immune from backward or conformist thinking. But acknowledging that minority— which is nowhere evident in this community—I can still say it is pleasant to live amongst such diversity and to enjoy the spirit of cooperation it engenders. And as long as I'm here I'll keep trying to understand how these women live and what these differences mean, if you'll keep trying to remember that I'm really working very hard here, shifting curtains.