

Upfront

My friend explained a scientific experiment that suggests the experiences of our ancestors can be imprinted on our genes. I Googled it. A 2013 study found an intergenerational effect of trauma associated with scent. Researchers blew acetophenone – the scent of cherry blossom – through the cages of adult male mice, while zapping their feet with jarring electric current at the same time. Eventually, the mice associated the smell of cherry blossom with pain. These males bred with female mice. When their pups smelled the scent of cherry blossom, the juveniles became jumpy and nervous compared to pups whose fathers hadn't been similarly shocked. To account for nature-versus-nurture, the little ones were raised by unrelated mice with no cherry blossom experiences. The grand-pups of the trauma-laden males showed heightened sensitivity to the scent, too. Neither of the generations responded unusually to smells other than cherry blossom, indicating that the inherited predisposition was scent-specific. In other words, it's likely that there are elements of ourselves that are, simply, "in us," for better and for worse.

My above-mentioned friend has Roman roots. Her father was born in the Eternal City. I trace my family history along adjacent lines. My grandfather lived his early years in a hilltop village about 60 miles southeast of the Colosseum before boarding a boat for New York. I've visited Rome many times since my first trip in 1989. I see things that are both ancient and completely new to me during each sojourn. But it's the inexplicable familiarity that lures me back. A sense that I am, in some way, of the place. That it is "in me," as it was in those who begat the ones who begat the ones who begat the ones who begat me.

When I finish this essay, we're heading for the airport. We're flying to Rome. It's my favorite moment to visit there, smack in the middle of artichoke season with the tourist count at its annual low. This year is different, though. It's much more than a pilgrimage searching for and honoring my past. It's a celebration of the present and the future, too, blessing our wedding by feasting to it with plenty of pasta and 20-plus friends. It's something I couldn't have imagined a couple of years ago. Now, it's something that I couldn't imagine living without.

If I were a philosopher, I might have coined a phrase to the following effect: The tear of each sadness waters the soil for a hundred happinesses to come. (Forgive me...I just made it up on the fly.) Indeed, this trip is a happy, happy thing.

The pictures on this page, taken over the years, represent Rome to me. Weighty history, spiritual grace, and earthly joy. The place is "in me." By the time you read this, I will once again gratefully be in it.

Scott A. Lauretti



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