

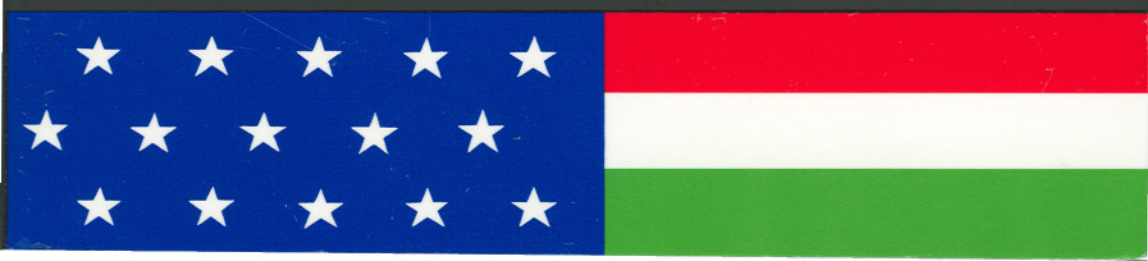
BEYOND

*The Godfather*

ITALIAN AMERICAN  
WRITERS ON THE REAL  
ITALIAN AMERICAN  
EXPERIENCE

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E D I T O R S



Claire Gaudiani

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## Of Cheese and Choices

No matter how quietly I tried to replace the spoon and glass top of the container of freshly grated Parmesan cheese on Nonna's dining table, one or the other always clinked. If I was lucky, the animated conversations in the living room masked the clink and no adult voice called out to inquire who might be in the dining room tasting the cheese. My earliest memories of irresistible temptation involved the pursuit of Parmesan, soft and nutty, sitting like a sacrament in its sacred vessel on the linen cloth. The challenge was never walking by silently enough; it was getting the cheese out of the container quietly enough. The sin was not mainly in sneaking the cheese (my family never begrudged its children food, even purloined food); the real sin was in eating it from the cheese spoon, covering the spoon with my germs and putting the germ-ridden spoon back into the cheese server that everyone would use. I knew better. Both of my grandfathers were doctors, but I couldn't help it. I really loved the taste. I knew all about germs and the potential danger I posed to my family. Luckily, even by age six, American pragmatism was shaping me as fast as my Italian taste buds. Bringing a spoon from the kitchen was, I reasoned, out of the question. Nonna's kitchen drawers were very heavy and too noisy for me to open and close alone. Taking a pinch of cheese from the container manually would leave telltale droppings on the tablecloth and finger germs in the server anyway. No, using the little serving spoon was unfortunately the only way to satisfy my temptation.

But as I grew a little older, I continued to worry about the germs and learned to work out moral dilemmas by using the laws and traditions from our Italian culture and the rational pragmatism of our American culture. The combination has served me well. I used what I know now was the grammar schooler's version of Thomistic theology, *lex dubia, non lex est*,

roughly translated "where there is doubt (or lack of clarity) there is no law." I reasoned, primitively, that if I was not told specifically on the day we visited Grandma not to spoil my appetite, I was under no direct obligation not to sneak spoonfuls of her Parmesan cheese from the table as often as I could. There was, however, no avoiding the moral responsibility my germs posed. So by age eight, I had developed a germ-free technique. I learned to load the little spoon, throw my head back, and drop the cheese directly into my mouth the way a bulldozer discharges its contents into a dump truck. No contact, just direct delivery of the goods.

A lot of life since then has been about satisfying personal drives and goals while mindful of the well-being of others. And a lot of success has come from the synergy I have experienced between our Italian culture and American values. The stories I heard as a child illustrated this synergy that shaped me before I knew myself and resonated powerfully through my conscious life experience.

My family—maternal, from little towns on the Amalfi Drive; paternal, from Laurino and Rome—created this synergy. My grandfather, Augusto Rossano, arrived in the United States as a boy of nine in 1889, passionate to become a doctor. As children of his youngest, most beautiful, and most spiritual daughter, my five siblings and I heard the stories of how hard he worked in school, how Augusto came home every day to aunts and uncles because he had bravely left his parents to live in New York with relatives who had an import-export business. His parents in Italy expected him to study hard. He wanted to make them proud. He went to Columbia College of Physicians and Surgeons and in 1906 was the first Italian American to graduate first in his class. His personal goal fulfilled in triumph, he chose to practice medicine in East Harlem where he could do the most good among the poor and immigrant people he had grown up with, and whose language he spoke.

His commitment to the poor and to social justice constituted an important weight-bearing structure in the building of my sense of self. I remember hearing how he had returned to his parents' home several years after his graduation from medical school and helped an old workman struggling to unload a horse-drawn wagon full of luggage. The young doctor worked with the old man until the wagon was empty. The town buzzed for weeks. In Italy, educated people, doctors especially, did not do manual labor, did not work with peasants. My mother's interpretation of this text was that in America he had learned that class does not matter, that people help each other when the need arises.

This was not an easy lesson for Italians, as my mother noted when she

recounted how her father had explained life in America to his young bride, courted and wed in the summer sojourn he spent in his village. Rosa Cosenza, a young woman from a cultured family in the next town, became the doctor's wife. Once in the United States, he explained, she would have to feel comfortable shaking hands and speaking English with all kinds of people, doctors and lawyers, fishmongers and fruit sellers, gypsies, Jews, blacks and Anglo Saxons. Everyone lived in close proximity in New York, and, unlike in Italy, in the United States everyone she met, regardless of their economic or educational level, would expect to shake her hand.

And so Rosa did shake hands and spoke accented English once she was outside their five-story brownstone on 116th Street between First and Second Avenues, but inside that home she and the family spoke and ate and prayed Italian. The six children she and Augusto raised spoke perfect English and either became professionals or married them. Their son attended MIT in 1935.

Family values were Italian; civic values were American. The connection to both value sets made us Italian Americans. We came to understand without verbal explanation that it was not simply geography, a family from Italy living in the United States, that made us Italian Americans. Rather, it was two carefully integrated value sets that made us Italian Americans starting first thing in the morning. My mother had always told us that her parents began their day by having espresso in bed together, saying the Rosary together, and reading the *New York Times*—physical, spiritual, and intellectual comforts coming from both cultures. When Augusto served in the U.S. Army in World War I, Rosa proudly had a coat that matched his captain's uniform made for her own tiny frame, and she wore it selling war bonds all over East Harlem. She also wrote for the local Italian-language newspaper. Papa helped young Italian immigrants get into the university and medical school. Both of them worked with Mother Cabrini and the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart to start schools in New York for immigrant children and to help found Cabrini Hospital. Papa and Mama were sustaining Italian culture but were active, patriotic, volunteering Americans to the core.

Other stories we were told suggested how both cultures created synergies between our Italian Catholic spirituality and American pragmatism. When Nonna Rosa caught pneumonia one winter and lay dying at home, well beyond the reach of pre-penicillin medicine in 1919, she kissed her four children good-bye. Then she and Augusto prayed to the Blessed Mother, promising that if, by some miracle, her life was spared, they

would both return to Italy, to her village, and give her most prized possessions, her diamond solitaire earrings, to the dressed statue of the Virgin Santa Maria delle Grazie. Their connection made fast to their Italian culture and spirituality, they called in Augusto's best friend, a brilliant young Italian American surgeon, who had received his medical degree from the University of Rome and had studied in Germany with the doctors who invented the catheter, before immigrating to America in 1911 to practice surgery and continue doing research. Dr. Vincent Gaudiani affirmed that Rosa's condition was terminal but offered the slender chance of a most risky experimental operation, opening her chest cavity to relieve the massive pulmonary infection. Faith and pragmatism induced them to go forward. Too sick to live through transport to the local hospital, Rosa's bedroom was draped for surgery. With makeshift lamps but with all his surgical tools at his command, Dr. Gaudiani opened the chest of his best friend's wife and saved her life.

Rosa and Augusto fulfilled their promise to the Virgin several years later. The summer they returned to Italy with the earrings for the statue, they conceived their last child, Vera, who grew up to marry Dr. Gaudiani's only son, Vincent, and to bear him six children, continuing his name and line, including another Dr. Vincent Gaudiani, also a surgeon like his grandfather. As the oldest of this family of six, I remember these stories reinforcing the synergy between prayer and professional expertise.

My father's father, Dr. Gaudiani, dominated as a model of a perfectionist. He was widely recognized as so demanding in the operating room that others feared working with him. Patients from all over sought him for his skills but also found him difficult. Even though he died in 1938, when his son was only seventeen, the stories of Dr. Gaudiani's skill and pursuit of excellence were constant models to his grandchildren of the most hard-hitting, no-nonsense achievement. I always remember his being called Dr. Gaudiani by everyone in the family except my father. Respect for his achievements somehow excused his legendary difficult personality. Through stories about him, my father shaped high expectations of his six children. I remember, when I was very young, coming home with a 98 on a test and my father asking me if anyone had gotten a higher grade and how many others had gotten a 98. I quickly learned that it was not the grades themselves but their distinctive character that would bring him satisfaction. He expected me to achieve at the highest level, to succeed beyond others. A West Point graduate, with a Columbia University master's degree in engineering, he had great impact on my sense of order, striving, focus, and intensity. Of course, sixth-grade history and geography

detailing the glorious achievements of ancient Rome simply reinforced the notion that my parents proposed. We were descendants of people who had always achieved at the highest level, and we were responsible for carrying on that tradition.

The stories about Augusto and Rosa Rossano made them our models of social justice and optimism. Nonna Rossano's pastoral approach to his patients in his general practice and stories of Nonna Rossano's optimism and celebrated generosity told me how to be with people. Papa Rossano never refused a patient all through the Great Depression and his fifty years of practice of medicine in East Harlem. He accepted whatever payment his patients could bring. My mother told us it was sometimes fruit or fish. One time a Gypsy mother did magic tricks for him with his handkerchief and his quarter after he saw her baby. He was a listener and a healer, a gentler William Carlos Williams. At Christmas, when fruit, vegetables, chocolate, and pastries came from grateful patients, Rosa would make up baskets and take them around to poor families in the neighborhood as quickly as the goodies came in. "God can never be outdone in generosity." "What you do for the least of my brothers you do unto me." The recounting of these stories always closed with what sounded like a perfectly rational explanation for the kindness of both Rosa and Augusto.

For Rosa, life was a celebration, and life in the United States simply meant twice as many holidays to celebrate. She made pumpkin pies for Halloween and stuffed turkey for Thanksgiving, and she decorated the house in green for St. Patrick's Day. She maintained every Italian holiday, religious and otherwise, including March 19, St. Joseph's Day, a celebration of fathers and husbands, a day I have continued to celebrate for my husband in our own family for our own children. Italian and American holidays offered perfect excuses to draw the family together, make memorable meals, and tell stories from old times and new times.

Just as my father always underlined the idea of achievement in the world and competition, my mother would gently remind us that the faith we were given had been likewise handed down, generation after generation, for two thousand years, and we were responsible to draw on its strength and to hand it down in vigorous condition to our own children.

As a child, I felt responsible for a weighty heritage, but the family stories convinced me that I had good models in my family and could expect a lot of help from prayer. The power of prayer and spirituality infused everything we did as children. Prayer connected us to a world of heavenly expertise that we could draw on like senior partners or consultants. Saints and angels were there to help with all our needs, from lost mittens to lost

causes: Saint Christopher when we traveled, Saint Francis when the cat was sick, and Saint Anthony and Saint Clare when material desires outpaced our allowance, because they had rejected materialism and chosen simplicity. My dramatic patron saints, Clare and Theresa, gave virtue and learning the kind of dazzle the Material Girl gives vice and vogue. With such helpers, from my guardian angel to our saintly relatives deceased but still watching over us, I never remember feeling the devastating loneliness and powerlessness that can afflict children. My mother helped us understand how to pray. Her devotion to Mary drew us to her to say the family Rosary each day. Fifty-four-day rosary novenas read from a little blue book brought us to her king-size bed to snuggle together in prayer. Hail Mary after Hail Mary, we mediated on the life of Christ and of course daydreamed and babbled too, when we got distracted. Our mother never got distracted. Her focus taught us all the meaning of self-discipline, single-minded devotion, and loyalty.

The meditations we read on each event in Christ's life gave me my wildly vivid imagination, strong powers of concentration, and a deep sense that other people's stories could convey meaning for my own life. At the end of each decade the closing prayer asked for a specific virtue appropriate to the mediation. After the Annunciation we prayed for humility. After the Visitation we prayed for charity. After the Agony in the Garden we prayed for resignation to the will of God. After the carrying of the Cross we prayed for patience in adversity. For years, I had no idea what adversity was, but I knew I needed patience and of course I still do—in adversity and otherwise. But the larger message that I now see from this carefully categorized referencing of events and virtues is that good and bad things are going to happen but that specific personal virtues can be prayed for and developed and will create the power to cope and even triumph. No one ever said this exactly, but prayer like this created a network of connections between God and self to manage life.

Although our mother never worked outside our home, my brothers and sisters and I always felt she had great power through the simplicity and persistence of prayer, to which she drew us gently with her just as she drew us with her to Mass and to making spiritual bouquets as gifts. I felt that whatever she asked God to help me with was going to work out perfectly for me. Our mother's prayer life, anchored in her parents' faith, created an awesome example of a powerful woman as I looked back on my childhood. Actually, my Nonna and my mother were often the most visible signs of the invisible helpers we had been taught to pray to when in a catastrophe. Like the saints and angels they came to the rescue. I must

have been four or five, visiting my grandparents, when I was scolded for some now forgotten failing or disaster I had caused. Nonna arrived, taking my hand, and she led me across the marble terrazzo dining room floor, searching for a key in her pocket as we walked. It emerged, shiny and important, and we approached a little door in her massive sideboard next to the dining room table. The key opened the chocolate cupboard—I knew that. Soon I held a Nestle's crunch bar big enough to savor, small enough to eat alone and not to have to share as the oldest child usually must. All problems were over. The world was right, no questions asked, no lessons reviewed, just happiness.

Nonna took control of all disasters with optimistic resolutions. If any one of us spilled anything at her table, even red wine, she exclaimed with joy that this was a sign of special blessings we could all expect. She transformed a child's embarrassment and fright into a strange stillness, the soul's equivalent to a deer caught in the sudden flood of headlights. No one could get angry at a child who had just brought sudden blessings down on the whole family, right? Like the chocolate bar, Nonna's blessing pronouncement stopped the oncoming problem dead in its tracks and well away from her grandchild.

My mother worked that way as well. On Valentine's Day eve in my first-grade year a snowstorm prevented my parents from driving to buy Valentines for our card exchange. I went to bed very worried but prayed to my guardian angel. I awoke to find my mother had hand-made a whole set of little cards and fashioned a little mail bag from a lunch sack and ribbons. When the bus came for me, my problem was over; the day would be a success. As I grew up, the striving and achievement were clearly as important as spirituality, social justice, and optimism. In fact, they were connected. For us, the focus on faith, food, and family, especially tenderness to children and the poor, were as strong as the focus on premier achievement in American society—Italian Catholic spirituality in the context of American striving.

As I grew into adolescence, more stories from this dual heritage prepared me for a good marriage. I had always known how well my maternal grandparents and my own parents had taken care of each other, loved each other, and even remained romantic, for goodness sake. In our culture the men and boys were always special, but I had also always seen the women of the family as very strong, combining power of prayer and expertise in the kitchen and at homemaking in a balance with their beauty. Makeup and manicures, hair setting and eyebrow tweezing were all part of being a woman in our culture. I loved it all and saw no contradiction.

None of this prepared me to connect comfortably with the wave of the women's liberation movement of the early '70s. It took me years to discover why the stories from my Italian ancestry and my life experience in my Italian American household made me a feminine misfit in my own generation.

One afternoon in 1990, after a three-day conference in Washington, D.C., a set of my male and female colleagues and I were decanting in a hotel suite. Conversation turned to weight, nutrition, cooking, and family traditions around food. I began to explain to my colleagues that in my family women cooked so well that food became "the at home sacraments," that we were adored by our husbands and children for our culinary achievements, and that all girls learned the art. Our cooking combined excellent taste and good nutrition. The evening meal each night was a major event no one missed. The table had a cloth, the places were set, and each course was a treat. As I spoke about my family and food, my normal defenses relaxed, and I went on to explain that in my culture not only was cooking an art but ironing was also done to perfection and taught. Initially the housekeepers but eventually my practical grandmother and her five daughters all learned to use the Ironrite mangle, high-tech ironing machines at which the ironer would sit and control the rolling padded cylinder's contact with the hot curved metal platform it fit into by moving levers with quick motions of the right or left knee: right to make contact and to roll or stop rolling, left to hold the contact in place for an extra second or two of pressing on the item placed between the pad and the platen.

In our home, my mother taught me how to use the Ironrite deftly as an early adolescent, and by full puberty I could iron a man's shirt, light starch. I felt proud and competent, I explained, to be developing skill with the Ironrite as I did in the kitchen. I told my colleagues that the Ironrite also created a quiet setting for important mother-daughter talks and that I even remembered coming home from college vacations and discussing Saint Augustine, Saint Thomas, and more contemporary boys as my mother rolled most everything the family wore through the Ironrite. Even my father's boxers were pressed in thirds twice and turned into tiny packages for the second drawer of his dresser. Careful ironing and talking together was as natural as careful cooking and talking together, and both seemed like normal activities I would always do.

When I married, I explained, my husband and I were both graduate students in the same Ph.D. program and were living in a tiny basement apartment. In the first month after we moved in, I put an ad in the local paper and found a used Ironrite in mint condition for only \$25! My enthusiastic

recall of my achievement must have sounded increasingly alarming to my professional colleagues—all of us then in our mid-forties with several advanced degrees. Stories of my mother and grandmother and the Ironrite were quaint and funny, “but not you, Claire,” their eyes seemed to say. They were looking at me like people who had just discovered that the stockbroker they had trusted for years wore a hair shirt and self-flagellated twice a day. Suddenly aware of their eyes, I felt forced to invert my perfectly earnest story about how I intended to carry on the traditions of an Italian American housewife into a self-deprecating joke. As I snapped to my senses, realizing the alarm my story was causing my colleagues, I said, “I was just a bride. I guess I was afraid a marriage could not be officially consummated in a home without an Ironrite.” Great laughter. “Whew, she was only kidding,” they seemed to say with their eyes and laughter. She actually was not completely kidding of course.

At least I did not tell them that for years of our marriage I used to set a little alarm clock and wake at 4:00 A.M. to freshen my hair, apply light mascara and blusher, and then go back to bed so that when my husband woke up he would find me looking closer to what I wanted him to see rather than to what the night would have left behind. Lack of self-confidence and vanity? Of course. But it always actually felt like not taking David for granted, like keeping the gift of romantic love alive, just as my grandmother and mother had done.

I was much too embarrassed to explain to my colleagues that my grandmother had always told me to take precious care of my husband, to try to please him in what she mysteriously called “personal ways,” and never to do or say anything to break his heart. If I had told them that, I would have had to explain the rest of the story—the story of how a woman must be careful and sure that she has met the right man to marry and shower with gifts like these. My mother recounted it to me. When Nonna Rosa was of age to marry, her parents permitted appropriate young men to call at the house, for tea first, and if they seemed interesting, then for dinner. At dinner all the courses were made by the cook, but my grandmother made the dessert herself. When the complicated pastry was served, her own mother announced to the suitor that Rosa had prepared the dessert personally to please her guest. Little did the young man know that his next few words would seal his fate. Only the effusively responsive were permitted to call again, regardless of their education, wealth, or physical appeal. My great-grandmother explained that Italian women bring extraordinary gifts to their husbands throughout a lifetime. Appreciation, really outright enthusiastic gratitude from husbands makes

the gifts a continuing source of pride and joy for giver and receiver. Needless to say, any suitor who could not produce more than a “non ch’è male” for a gift a woman offered during courtship would not be worth further consideration. What a lesson about a woman’s self-worth and the value of her love and attention! A lesson as well about the importance of a woman’s wise discernment and the power she wields in her home.

Yes, my background made me a bit of a misfit in consciousness-raising meetings in graduate school in ’71 and after professional meetings in the ’90s. The women in my family had not seemed oppressed and did not seem alienated from their fathers or husbands. My own marriage and family life reflected my cultural traditions more than my contemporaries’ experiences. I was naive about the problems for which the solutions discussed in those meetings seemed like only a loss: imagine emancipation from service to family!

I was always driven to achieve and knew I would have a profession, but it never occurred to me that I would not also cook, bake, iron, and sew. I remember feeling just as driven academically as I was to continue traditions, to keep a well-managed home, and, maybe in those early transition years, to iron table linens and, for a few years at least, my husband’s boxer shorts. In my immense naïveté, I did not know what so many women had struggled with at home, at work, and in getting work. Nor did I have the least idea how many expectations for home life were going to work with my professional life. All that, my husband and I made up as we went along year after year inventing a stable dual-career marriage.

Through the most precarious decades of social change, my own marriage has been the gift of a lifetime, in no small measure because of my husband’s generosity and wisdom but also because the stories of my family had as powerful an influence on me as those of my sisters in the movement. With the latter, I shared a drive to knock down barriers to women’s achievement and ensure that the women of my daughter’s generation would be able to bring their personal gifts and interests to society and not experience discrimination because of their gender. With the former, I shared a continuing commitment to our faith and parish work, to making full dinners each night and baking bread and homemade pizzas. With my husband, the couple we became has been struggling to make sense of both directions. We have helped each other succeed at work, and each of us has moved twice to follow the other to better positions. We shared making school lunches, and David learned to be a great cook. I learned to tile bathrooms and make screened-in porches.

As a part of the women’s movement, I was the first woman with a

husband and a tiny new baby to complete a Ph.D. in the French and Italian department at Indiana University, the first one for whom the department had to meet and to vote and give special permission to nurse during lunchtime of Ph.D. exam days. The women's movement was part of public life and the expectations for achievement. Changes in American society and my father's expectations made me ready to struggle with high expectations for achievement in public life, but my family stories shaped the structure of my private life, my home life. The generosity of my husband helped us both to create a balance between our public and private lives. To this day our lives begin each morning, like my grandparents', with espresso in bed together, although I have not yet succeeded in inducing David to say an Our Father, never mind an entire Rosary with me. As in the marriages that shaped my own, David and I are soul mates. When we moved our careers for each other, we were both putting the family and each other (and pleasing each other in "personal ways") first. We advise each other on professional challenges and share equally in the great adventure of raising our two children, attempting to offer them the stories, our own and our ancestors', that will be witnesses for them in the complicated world they will engage as they leave our home.

Years later I realize that my own drives in life are to increase social justice and tolerance, to strive for highest achievement myself, and to celebrate life. I get to do that as a mother, wife, and daughter and as a professor, college president, writer, corporate director, community volunteer, and Eucharistic minister. Those early experiences of trying to satisfy personal drives—say for spoonfuls of Parmesan cheese—with responsibility for the well-being of others probably helped me sort through the conflicts between wanting a career and concern for my family life. I still feel power in prayer and find help from my heavenly coaches. I still pray for specific personal virtues and work for justice in civil society. I see that power comes from striving and expertise built through competition and cooperation, that it comes from achievements at home and at the office, from serving others and from leading them, from prayer and from work and from having access to friends in high places—worldly and spiritual. I see that I had a whole set of role models. Our role models do not need to have the same profession or education we aspire to. They need to have the same human impact as we seek to have. My family and patron saints were powerful role models for me, though none of the women ever finished college or received a salary.

Now, more than a hundred years after Augusto Rossano arrived in the United States, more than eighty years after his marriage to Rosa Cosenza,

and more than fifty years after their daughter Vera married Augusto's best friend, Dr. Gaudiani's only son, Vincent, our children speak Italian, cook, and pray and celebrate in their Italian culture. All the while they achieve at the highest levels by American standards in some of this country's most prestigious schools, Andover and Princeton. They study art and science. One does architecture; the other, history of science. They are committed to the needy and to excellence, passionate about family, food, children, and their work. The synergy between our Italian family values and our American civic values continues. Their great-grandparents would be proud, I think. My husband and I are grateful.