

# IMMIGRATION BEHAVIOR: TOWARD A SOCIAL-PSYCHOLOGICAL MODEL FOR RESEARCH

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The unintended consequences of the blind pursuit of globalization of the 1980s and the quest for unbridled democratization with their attendant political upheavals of the 2000s have sparked a keen interest and a burning fever in people around the world to seek safer and greener pastures. People are on the move. The world now is in the midst of the largest wave of immigration in history. In every corner of the globe, Africa, the Americas, Asia, Europe, and Oceania, people are either contemplating immigration or are actually going through it. For example, over ninety percent of those who are contemplating to immigrate wish to come to the USA. Despite the criticality of immigration, especially in the area of brain drain for developing nations, little has been done in theory building to facilitate the scientific study of this crucial issue happening in humankind's daily life. While there is a great deal of academic and policy work on the study of immigration, there is a dearth of studies devoted to theories of immigration to guide research in a systematic way in order to build a body of scientific knowledge. In this study, a theoretical model of immigration behavior from a social-psychological perspective is presented. An attempt is made to endeavor to enhance the scholarly explanation, understanding, and prediction of immigration behavior as one of the most pervasive and complex issues confronting the world community of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Migration and immigration activities have been germane to both human and animal kingdoms. While migration is now largely undertaken by animals in a grander and more patterned approach, immigration activities have been specifically in the domain of Homo sapiens.

As a rule, animal migration represents a collective travel with long destinations. The act suggests premeditation and unwavering willfulness known to humans as inherited instincts. On the other hand, immigration has been a complex process beyond simple explanations. Contrary to animal migration, human immigration has been disorganized, sporadic, and downright enigmatic.

Recently, biologists have identified five major characteristics that apply in varying degrees and combinations to all migrations (Quammen 2010). They involve prolonged travel that carries animals outside their familiar habitats. Their movements are rather linear (not zigzagging). They entail certain behaviors of preparation such as overeating for the long and arduous trek. They demand special allocation of energy. Finally, the migrating animals maintain a strong commitment to the greater mission, which keeps them undisturbed from side temptations and undeterred by challenges (e.g., storms) that would turn other animals aside when in non-migrating mode. The long and perilous journey must be continued at all costs.

An example of the animal commitment for a course of action is the wildebeests' yearly migration. Once the herd decides to migrate, none of the rivers such as the Massai River in Kenya, albeit deeply infested by ferocious crocodiles, would deter them from crossing the dangerous, murky waters hiding death and destruction. One by one, they all plunge, as though suicidal, into the river toward greener pastures without any attempt to retreat to their old habitats. Thus, the exodus cannot be reversed regardless of any real or potential deadly hindrance or hurdles.

Animals seem to migrate for two major reasons: one reason is for moving into a more favorable environment such as birds escaping harsh winters to warm locations; the second reason is to find abundance of good food for survival and propagation of their species (Teague 2010).

To a lesser degree, humans such as the Laps of Norway and the Mongols in Asia till today also migrate for the same two reasons as cited above: better climate and better food supply for their domestic animals.

When it comes to humans as to why they immigrate, economists and other social-scientists provide us with a myriad of isolated reasons (Fortuny and Jargowsky 2010). An extensive review of the literature and a meta-analysis of studies on immigration, lead one to conclude that the main purpose of immigration can be subsumed under two major categories of incentives: material and non-material (Fuligni, A. J. 2001).

Material incentives are mainly economic benefits (e.g., better standard of living), while non-material incentives would consist of social-psychological reasons such as seeking a safe haven or as for a chance for self-actualization.

In this article, after a brief introduction to migration and immigration contrasts, the dire need is discussed for a theory, a map for the study of how an individual makes a decision to either immigrate or not to immigrate when the opportunity to move and live in another country presents itself. Secondly, a theoretical model of immigration behavior based on a social-psychological perspective is presented. Thirdly, a verbal statement of the model is briefly discussed. Finally, a walkthrough example is given to show how the decision process takes place within the context of the proposed model, followed by a conclusion.

### **THE NEED FOR A THEORY OF IMMIGRATION TO GUIDE RESEARCH**

Studies on immigration, whether scientific or anecdotal, have isolated mainly material factors such as better opportunities, availability of jobs, better standard of living to cite a few (Scott 1998; Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco 1995).

Other researchers have proposed some non-material factors for immigration such as political strife at home, corruption of the government, no hope for self-actualization and so on (Hoerder et al. 2006).

Unfortunately, most of the explanations behind immigration have been limited to a very few factors. Meta analysis of these studies indicated that collectively there are many more factors contributing to an individual's or family's decision to immigrate into another country. These factors, as they are later discussed under "Social-Psychological Factors" and "Individual Factors"), must be considered as well in determining as to why individuals immigrate or decide not to immigrate in the face of adversity or in the presence of opportunities.

The unintended consequences of the pursuit of globalization of the 1980s and the quest for democratization of the 2000s through purging tenacious dictators, which usually involve bloody

strive, have sparked a keen interest and a burning fever in people around the world to be on the move for security and safety reasons. The world now is in the midst of the largest wave of immigration in history. In every corner of the globe, Africa, the Americas, Asia, Europe, and Oceania, people are either contemplating immigration or actually applying to relocate in another country. The West has become the Utopia.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union (1989-1991), the flood gates were opened to immigration. Of the former 15 Soviet republics, Armenia and Moldavia are the two republics experiencing the most escalating population loss to immigration to the West. Armenia alone has lost over 1.1 million persons since its independence in 1991. From a rather small population of 3.5 million in the Soviet era, Armenia now has dwindled to 2.5 million persons (Demirdjian 2011).

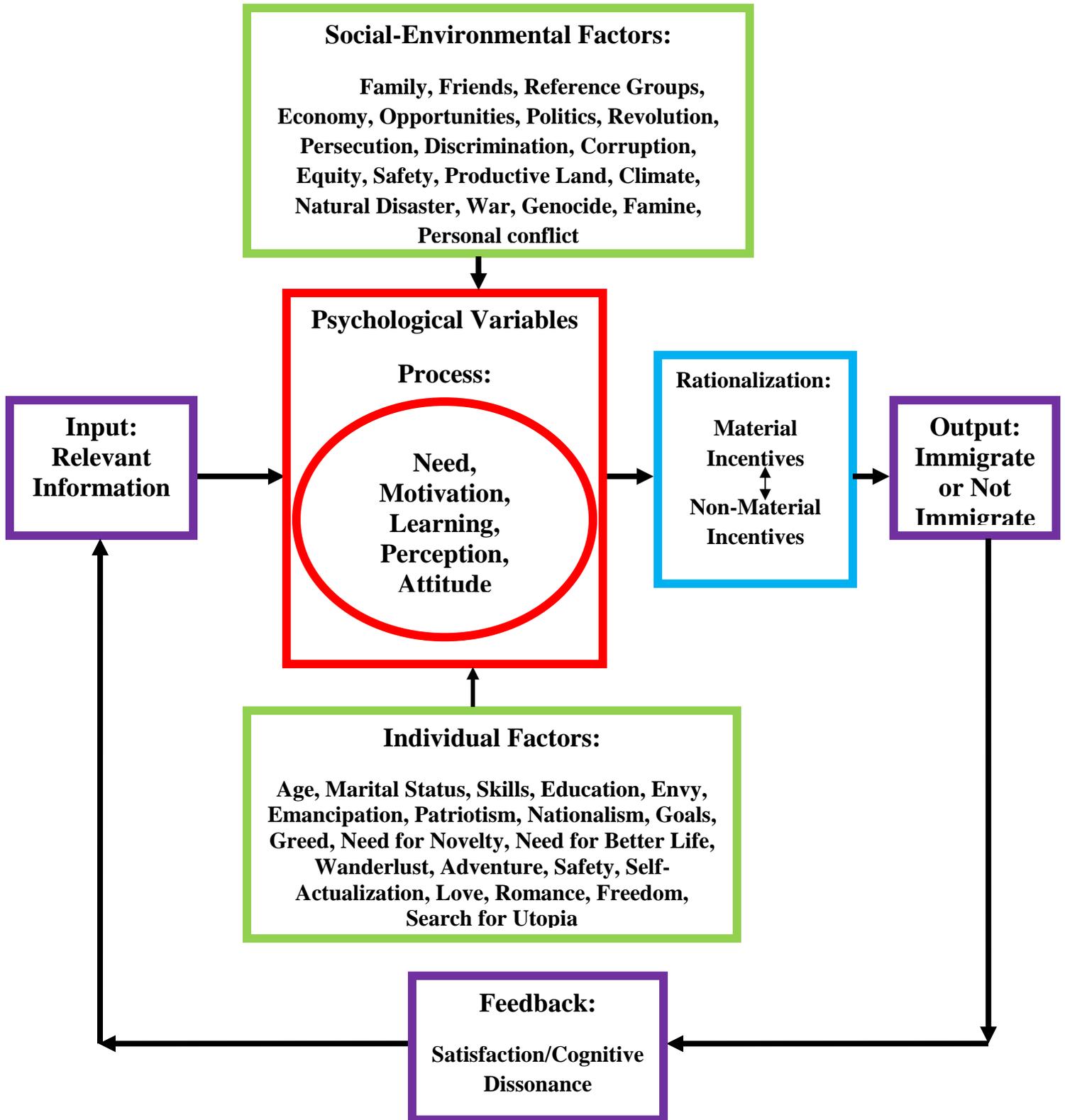
While there is a great deal of academic and policy work on the study of immigration, there is a dearth of studies devoted to a comprehensive theory of immigration to guide research in a systematic way in order to build progressively a body of scientific knowledge. The theoretical model presented below endeavors to enhance the scholarly explanation, understanding and prediction of one of the most pervasive and complex human issues of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as the century of the amalgamation of world cultures.

### **A SOCIAL-PSYCHOLOGICAL MODEL OF IMMIGRATION BEHAVIOR**

For the sake of brevity, here is a multi-dimensional model of immigration behavior from a social-psychological perspective. It should be noted that the model is based on system's concepts of "input, process, and out" (Bertalanffy 1969; Meadows 2008). Here are the major components of the Social-Psychological Model of Immigration Behavior as shown in Figure 1:

- I. Input: Relevant Information reaching the individual as stimulus to process the incoming information about the individual's well-being within another country (e.g., News that Russia is offering monetary incentives for Armenian farmers to immigrate to Russia). This input information launches the individual's decision process. The unit of analysis in the following proposed model is the Individual who is confronted with the challenge of deciding whether to immigrate into another country or to stay put in his or her country.
- II. Process: The individual's Psychological Variables such as Need, Motivation, Learning, Perception, and Attitude are activated to process the individual's incoming information about incentives to be either accrued or not realized from immigrating.
- III. Rationalization: The individual's choice of Material or Non- Material incentives or a combination thereof as the individual's primary reasons for considering for or against immigration.
- IV. Social-Environmental Factors: These factors influence the individual's decision process for or against immigration; they consist of political situation, escape from oppressive government, physical environment (e.g., climate at home country), economic conditions (e.g., lack of job opportunities), etc.
- V. Individual Factors: These factors also influence the individual's decision process for or against immigration. Some examples are age, marital status, personal goals, hope for better life, religious freedom, adventure, sense of patriotism to stay, etc.

Figure 1  
The Social-Psychological Model of Immigration Behavior



- VI. Output: The individual's outcome of the decision process to either immigrate to a perceived "utopia" or not to immigrate and stay in his or her homeland.
- VII. Feedback: Consists of the individual's level of satisfaction and/or cognitive dissonance (i.e., guilt feelings when one decides a course of action over another competing option) after a decision is made or after the decision has been implemented.

For the sake of seeing the gallery of items arranged categorically as Social-Environmental Factors and as the Individual Factors, no attempt was made to run a statistical cluster analysis to group the similar items together under a single blanket word in each area. The law of parsimony was violated here in order to enhance the self-explanatory power of the model.

### **THE VERBAL FORMULA STATEMENT OF THE MODEL**

The proposed multi-dimensional Social-Psychological Model of Immigration Behavior (to immigrate or not to immigrate) can be stated as:

$IB = f( RI + P \text{ variables} + S-E \text{ factors} + \text{Individual factors})$

Where,

IB= Immigration Behavior (to leave or not to leave one's own country?)

f= is a function of (the result of certain variables and factors)

RI = Relevant Information (serves as stimulus to initiate the decision process)

P = Psychological Variables (necessary for decision-making process)

S-E= Social-Environmental Factors (which influence the decision process)

I= Individual Factors (which also influence the decision process)

The Individual's Decision Process to immigrate or not to immigrate is, therefore, a function of some or most of the above-mentioned variables and factors which are also stated in Figure 1.

To many young generations, the West has been a "Paradise." For instance, most students who come to the USA to study state the expressed intention to return to their country upon graduation. After having enjoyed the opulence, the freedom, the availability of opportunities for advancement, they usually marry a local girl or a boy and stay. Then after a few years, they uproot their parents to come and live with them. Because of family ties, the parents often decide to immigrate into a country not because of economic gains but because of their relatives (i.e., sons' and daughters' influence) who had decided to remain in the host country. Around the world, the United States has always been perceived as "The Land of Opportunities."

The factors behind migration are easy to explain while immigration is complicated. The behavior of immigration is obvious to detect, it is objective, but as to why the individual immigrates is mixed with reality, fantasy, and wishful thinking. Even those who immigrate or plan to immigrate are unable to pin point the correct reasons.

Consistent with human nature, the individual who has planned or who has already immigrated has to justify his or her act by putting the blame on their bad government or the monopoly of the oligarchs, or the attraction of opportunities on the other side of the fence, etc. Some people have the tendency to invoke God, fate, or manifest destiny to rationalize their behavior. Most people

do things in the name of God, Allah, Moses, etc. to ease their conscience in carrying out their inner desires for abandoning their motherland.

### **A WALKTHROUGH EXAMPLE OF IMMIGRATION BEHAVIOR**

Let us take “Discrimination” from “Social-Psychological Factors” to see how it would influence the individual’s immigration decision process. The Russian Jewish immigration to Israel began en masse in the 1990s as the liberal government of Mikhail Gorbachev opened the borders of the USSR and permitted Jews to leave the country mainly to live in Israel. Overall, about one million Jews immigrated to Israel during this period.

Thus, the Soviet Jews, for a hypothetical example, began to immigrate to Israel in the 1990s mainly because to avoid discrimination (a major influence in their “Social-Psychological Factors”). Hypothetically speaking, these Jews felt that they were deprived of opportunities for advancement commensurate to their potential. Hence, they considered themselves persecuted because of their religion or ethnicity

Let us walk through the Immigration Behavior Model by taking a simple example. When the Soviet Union lifted the ban on immigration, this “Relevant Information” reached David Rabinowitch (a fictions name) as “Stimulus”. Because of being Jewish, as a student he was only admitted to a second tier university for his medical degree regardless of his high academic qualifications. Upon graduation, he was only allowed to practice medicine in certain socially and economically less desirable areas.

In David Rabinowitch’s “Psychological Variables” for decision process, he had a “Need” for level playing field; thus, he was highly “Motivated” to seek an environment with less discrimination. Since his high school years, he had “Learned” that the Jews had a free and sovereign homeland in Palestine. He “Perceived” Israel to be an ideal place to be for someone who had his background. Moreover, he had held a very positive “Attitude” toward living among his kind of ethnic or Judaic people in Israel.

As for David Rabinowitch’s “Individual Factors” which also exert influence on his decision process, let us look at some of his personal features such as his “Age,” “Marital Status,” need for “Self-Actualization,” etc. He was in his late thirties and single; therefore, it was easier to make a move for immigration. He had always felt a strong need for achievement, therefore the opportunity for “Self-Actualization” was brighter in Israel than in his birthplace Russia.

Lack of equity through discriminatory practices made David Rabinowitch decide to leave Russia. So, his decision to immigrate was rather based on “Non-Material” incentives or reasons (e.g., better life without discrimination, opportunities for self-actualization, etc.).

Now let us look at the Feedback. Once in Israel, though, David Rabinowitch, this idealistic Soviet immigrant, experienced very low “Satisfaction” from the move and even he had “Cognitive Dissonance” (of questioning whether he had made the right decision to leave the Soviet Union). The low “Satisfaction” and the incidence of “Cognitive Dissonance” may have stemmed from the constant conflict with the Palestinian demands for their share of the homeland and their suicide bombers. In this way, the “Feedback” completes the decision process of the individual who had either decided to immigrate or not to immigrate. In our above example, he had already planned and implemented his decision to immigrate by moving to Israel.

The “Feedback” enriched his “Learning” (i.e., knowledge and experience), that Israel is a beautiful country but that it is an unsafe place for him to live, not knowing when and where he

would be blown up by the reckless and surreptitious activities of suicide bombers. One day, after his immigration to Israel, he receives a letter from one of his cousins residing in Canada.

Rabinowitch's cousin describes Vancouver as a great place to live and work. This letter now serves as a new "Input", a "Relevant Information" (a stimulus) for "Decision Process" to either immigrate to Canada or to stay in Israel regardless of the daily fear of being blown up. At this state of affairs, "Safety" as a "Social-Psychological Factor" exerts a great deal of influence on David Rabinowitch's decision to immigrate to Canada by ruefully leaving behind Israel, the Promised Land, where he once dreamt to live. Thus, the move to Vancouver completes his second immigration behavior.

## CONCLUSION

That we need a model, a multi-dimensional theory to guide research is unequivocal. Europe, for example, has been concerned with the influx of immigrants especially from the Muslim countries (Kent 2008; UNHCR 2012; Pan 2005). According to the German Central Institute of Islam Archive, the total number of Muslims in Europe in 2007 was over 53 million (7.2%) –excluding Turkey (Zentralinstitut Islam-Archiv 2007). The total number of Muslims in the European Union alone in 2007 was about 16 million (3.2%). Approximately over 9 million Turks are living in Europe now, (excluding the Turkish population of Turkey), which makes up the largest Muslim immigrant community in Europe of over 80 million (Cole 2011; Kerbaj 2009).

The allure of Western Europe has been dubbed as "Eurobia" since it has become irresistible to Muslims living outside the continent of Europe (Saunders 2008). According to some historians, for centuries the Muslims wanted to convert Europe into Islam and in due time they may very well succeed because of their high birth rate (Ghodsee 2009). Pakistan, for example, has one of the highest birthrate in the world and a large number of them live in the UK.

Likewise, the Christians of the Middle East are immigrating to the West in droves, mainly due to the internal political unrest. the Christian population nowadays are leaving the Middle East not to seek greener economic pastures, but rather for safety from the dangers of revolutionary strife in the countries they happen to live. Syrian Christians of Armenian or Assyrian origin is a case in point.

While immigration during war time or during economic downturns is easy to explain (i.e. to seek save haven to escape danger to one's life or to find better economic opportunities), it becomes very complex when it happens during peace time (e.g. is it for lack of jobs, is it for corruption, is it for adventure, is it for the pull of friends and relatives living abroad?). In other words, the reasons to immigrate during war time are comparatively easier to identify than the reasons for leaving the country during peace time.

Hopefully, the proposed model will put the beast of immigration on the table for scientific dissection involving analysis, explanation and prediction. Namely, this model would serve as a source, a unified theory to generate hypotheses to be empirically tested and validated and the results to be categorized according to the major components of the model for building a body of scientific knowledge.

Policy decision makers with elasticity of mind should use the model in determining what percentage of the population is likely to immigrate and for what main reasons in order to devise strategies to countervail these tendencies with the hope of retaining some of their population members at home.

Therefore, this model is directed to my colleagues who have a lively interest to pursue the study of immigration from a systems approach, in an organized and scientific way. Their mission is to advance our knowledge of immigration behavior which is becoming a vital topic for developing nations such as the former Soviet republics, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh to cite a few. Economically strapped nations, especially those which have small populations, tend to suffer the most from the loss of the most precious asset of the country, namely the human resources, through the brain drain phenomenon.

Some of the most pressing problems facing the leaders of developing nations are hunger, poverty, and environmental degradation. These problems of immigration, which serve as the chief catalyst for brain drain, is often relegated by the government out of political reasons. All of these problems are system failures. They cannot be solved by fixing one piece in isolation from the others because even seemingly minor details about immigration, the loss of precious human resources, have enormous power to undermine the best efforts of too-narrow thinking.

Many scientists obtain government grants and are fascinated to study the epic migrations of animals requiring amazing endurance and boundless energy, yet many governments give lip service when it comes to the explanation as to why their people are leaving their ancestral lands to only settle in a foreign country. Putting one's head in the sand for political expediency would be akin to letting a wounded man bleed to death without a Good Samaritan intervention.

History has lessons to teach our new generations of policy decision makers --who cannot hide behind the tree any more: whenever a nation constantly loses its population to immigration to other countries, that nation is eventually doomed to oblivion. More bluntly stated, a nation without a vision and population will perish.

Note: The original conceptualization of "The Social-Psychological Model of Immigration Behavior" is dedicated to my co-author and editor, Zara Mokatsian, without her encouragement my creative thinking – no matter how humble -- would have dried up.

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