

THE ROAD TO REINVENTION

BY ROBERT COLLISON

Starting over is tempting but often terrifying. Here, three examples light the way



TYLER ANDERSON / NATIONAL POST

Alan Gratias: Bureaucrat to games-maker.

mer course at Laval University when Mary, an ex-house model for Dior, was in her mid-20s and her husband was a decade older, the couple had been inseparable. So his untimely death was, in a word, deeply wrenching. "For the first few months, I sometimes literally froze when I woke up in the morning," she recalls. But then she made a conscious decision to re-engage with her life and was helped in this effort by supportive friends and by taking, like Ms. Gilbert, a symbolic journey and making some dramatic moves.

Ms. Symons' existential voyage took her to Buenos Aires, a city which neither she nor her husband had ever visited. "I wasn't running away; I was going to a place we had al-

ways wanted to go together." But it was still *terra incognita*, a place where she could begin the task of recreating A Life. "It was empowering to know that not only could I go alone, but that I loved going alone."

When she first returned to Toronto, she decided to resume her career as a publicist and force of nature, in the Canadian fashion industry. But when and how to re-launch became pressing issues. "Over lunch, I recall telling an old family friend, Sonja Bata, that I was going to take my time going back to work." Mrs. Bata advised the contrary. "She told me to get back to my career and my life as soon as possible." And she even offered Ms. Symons a contract at her shoe museum

BACKYARD BLISS: ALAN GRATIAS

Another member in good standing of the Elizabeth Gilbert tribe, although he has likely never heard of her, is a one-time Ottawa mandarin named Alan Gratias who has dramatically recast his life at a time when many of his grey-haired compadres are heading to the golf links to kill time in their sunset or retirement years. "Let me paraphrase Herman Goring," says Mr. Gratias, "When I hear the word golf, I reach for my pistol."

Mr. Gratias' new life is not the consequence of a deep trauma in his personal life or because of an urge to serve humankind. So, what motivates the still-hunky, strapping ex-bureaucrat to build a first-class little vineyard in Ontario's Prince Edward County and develop a new game (it's a Trivial Pursuit for adults called Gravitas)?

The answer can be found at the top of psychologist Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs: the need to self-actualize, to fulfill one's potential.

"Unlike my years in Ottawa, I can do whatever pleases me now and I am having more fun than I've ever had," says Mr. Gratias. And he's quick to point out: "I didn't achieve my present karmic state by travelling the world looking for a guru or jaw-boning with a shrink for years.

"I discovered my bliss literally in my own backyard, to wit, my Crumbling Homes vineyard, and translating the mind-games fun me and my friends played over years at dinner parties into a game which, it seems, other people are grooving on. I am a great believer that anyone's personal salvation is staring him or her right in the face. You just have to be alert enough to recognize it."

Could Elizabeth Gilbert have said it any better? Maybe not.

Bottom line: your reinvented life is so close you could trip over it if you're not careful.

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