



MY FIVE MONTHS TEACHING WOMEN IN AFGHANISTAN

Gillian Gilman Culff

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Hawaii & Kabul

It is 7 pm at my home in Hawaii. I am dialling in on Skype. A teacher at the American University of Afghanistan in Kabul answers on the other end and welcomes me to her classroom, where it is 9 am. About 30 young women sit patiently on several rows of folding chairs in a modern-looking classroom. The teacher tells me some of them showed up an hour early, excited to meet the English teacher from the United States.

As the teacher addresses her students in Dari Persian, the language common to most Afghans, I take in my students. The first thing I notice is the brightly coloured hijab, or head scarves, worn by all of the women. They come in all fabrics and patterns - stripes, prints, solids, even leopard print. I don't know these women, but their fashion choices have already shown me a glimpse of the personality of each wearer. Already my impressions of them are individual, rather than collective. I see them now as stylish and attentive to their appearance, rather than dour and uniform as I had been raised to imagine observant women in the Arabic world looked. I'm relieved

none of them wears a burkha; I am happy to be able to see each of their faces.

I open the class by introducing myself and telling them how inspired I am by their commitment. I ask them to take a moment to read the poem in English that their teacher has handed out: 'Coffee Cups' by Susan Baugh. In the poem, the poet remembers drinking coffee with her grandmother when she was a child. Through subtle details, she gradually reveals to the reader that her grandmother was blind. When the women have finished reading the poem, I read it aloud to them and then launch into a short discussion. I am interested to see at what point in the poem they were given enough clues to understand that the grandmother was blind. They are eager to participate and raise their hands to offer responses to my questions. Quickly, I realise, the poem is too subtle for their level of English. All or most of them missed the clues entirely. As I explain, they begin to understand.

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I wrap up the discussion and jump ahead to the writing assignment. I describe how the poet uses a physical object as a vehicle for revealing things about her grandmother, and I ask them to write for 15 minutes about an object they associate with a person, using the object to reveal details about the person. I instruct them to keep their pens moving without staring into space thinking. Nevertheless, many of them stare into space thinking. I'm used to this. When I taught creative writing to high school students in the

US, they did the same thing. It's hard for people to give themselves permission to write whatever comes. The internal pressure to write something good on the first try can be intense.

When the writing period is up, I ask for volunteers to share what they wrote. It's a big class, so not all will get to read. I'm impressed by their eagerness. Several of the young women come up to the computer. It's wonderful to see them up close, to look them in the eye, knowing they live far across the world in a country and culture I can't really imagine - or that I think I can imagine, but that I know I'm probably mostly wrong about.

From December 2015 to May 2016, I taught English writing as a volunteer with the nonprofit Afghan Women's Writing Project, or AWWP. The classroom teaching programme - which sadly ended in 2016 - brought American teachers of English into classrooms all over

Afghanistan. The AWWP also sponsored an online blog featuring the writing of Afghan women, often under first names only, to protect them from retribution by local authorities or, in some cases, men in their own families. Though the AWWP is no longer posting new content, the website is still available.

My foray into international teaching felt important for the potential to assist women who have few opportunities to expand their possibilities educationally and professionally. It expanded my horizons as well, allowing me a

glimpse into a society I would likely never have the chance to visit and know up close. Though those glimpses were fleeting, I share them here in the hopes of offering a sense of connection to a corner of the world where people - especially women - are facing a rollback of all of the opportunities and freedoms that were painstakingly built over two decades of relative peace, stability and advancement.

Freshta. I am reminded of the soft drink from my childhood, Fresca, which was light, bubbly and lemon-lime flavoured. Freshta is light, bubbly and refreshing like her name, and she endears herself to me immediately. But her story is neither light nor bubbly. She tells me that for her object she chose a banana and I'm intrigued. She goes on to say that she associates the banana with a little girl, a stranger, she saw in the marketplace. As she reads the story to me, I'm impressed by the fluency of her English.

One day, she narrates, she was walking in the open market with her sister, when ahead

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In most of the stories I hear, the chosen objects are predictable: a piece of clothing, a mug, or other household items that remind the writer of her beloved mother, father, sister, aunt. I'm not sure whether their level of English has forced them to keep it simple, or whether they believe that I expect them to mimic my example rather than take off in a new direction. Perhaps their educational system - like the American educational system I was raised in - has roped them into mimicry, squelching their imaginations and discouraging originality. Or perhaps domestic life and family are forefront in their culture and, thus, their minds.

In the midst of all of the mothers and aunts and teacups and vases, one story stands out as unique. A young woman approaches the computer and introduces herself. Her name is

of them she spotted a little girl and her father. As they passed a fruit stall, the little girl said she was hungry and asked her father for a banana. Her father scolded her harshly, saying they had no money for such luxuries. Freshta turned to her sister. 'I'm going to buy a banana for that little girl.'

A look of fear came over her sister's face. 'Don't get involved,' she urged. 'That father has a temper. You don't know what he will do.'

Freshta remained undeterred. She couldn't bear the look of disappointment on the girl's face or the knowledge of how it felt to have a hungry belly. She bought the banana from the stall, cautiously caught up to the little girl and waited for her opportunity. When the father looked away, she offered the banana to the little girl, whose smile as she accepted the gift brightened Freshta's day.

Freshta puts down her paper and looks at me, eager for my reaction. I tell her I am moved by her compassion and courage in

helping the little girl, despite the risk of the father's temper. I say that the world needs more people like her, who lead from the heart.

Freshta comes to life and elaborates on her story; her spoken English is better, even, than her writing. This young woman is a bright light, and in her compassion and courage I imagine she will not be content to simply find a path that serves just her. It's clear she needs to make a difference, to ease the suffering of others. It feels like a privilege to have offered her the inspiration to share this story and to have held the space for us all to have heard it and been moved by it.

As I 'travelled' by computer over the next five months from one region to another - Herat, Mazar-e-Sharif, Bamiyan, Kandahar; names previously known to me only from news reports about bombings and other war-related incidents - the classrooms varied widely in appearance, group size and personality.

The women in my classes - especially the ones in the outer provinces - often came in

their English and be witnessed as they shared their stories aloud.

In Kabul, participants were all university students in their twenties. In the provinces, the ages were more mixed, with older and younger women, sometimes in equal number. In Mazar-e-Sharif - which locals call Mazar - about 15 students occupied one side of a long U-shaped table, the walls behind them made of stone. It was raining there, and kept losing our Skype connection. They were unable to reconnect when they had finished writing, so they read to their teacher who later forwarded me their writing via email.

The small group in Bamiyan was exceptionally friendly and chatty. They wanted to spend all their time talking with me, rather than writing. At the end of the class, they asked if I would return. I had only been scheduled for repeat visits to Kabul and Kandahar, but in my next call with the programme administrator I asked to add return visits to the provinces as well. The women in Bamiyan even invited me to visit them in person. The teacher explained that it wasn't possible, and they seemed not to

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secret. I was instructed not to take any screenshots of the participants, for fear of jeopardising their safety.

To each group I gave the same open-ended prompts, with a collective writing time of 15 minutes, after which the women came up to the computer one by one to read like they did in that first class in Kabul. I listened and offered each student a piece of encouraging feedback, remarking on something that had stood out to me in what they'd written. The point was not to teach them to improve specific skills, but rather to hold a space for them to practise

understand. Perhaps the safety threats they endured on a daily basis were so routine it didn't occur to them that this wasn't how others also lived.

To my current disappointment and dismay, I didn't keep any samples of their writing. In my files, I have some notes from the Bamiyan group that serve as a reminder. I began with a prompt about gratitude. Since so few of us in the Western world have any understanding of life in Afghanistan, I thought I'd recount some of the gratitudes the women in Bamiyan shared that day.

Sharifa wrote about times spent gathered with her family, everyone laughing, smiling and gossiping while her nephews ate chocolate. She said her family encouraged her to write; she felt certain she was the luckiest person in the world.

Surael, who wore a bright pink scarf that day, expressed gratitude for Allah and for her parents. She too described herself as a lucky person, blessed with good health, a friend to share her happiness and sadness with, and the confidence that she would find a good job and a good husband.

Zahro wrote a poem about the sound of the river, her neighbours and her family.

Nadya, a mother of two, wrote that she awoke every morning to sunshine, greeted by the smiling faces of her children.

Fariba, a woman with East Asian features, who wore a green scarf, had been to India on an exchange programme and was grateful for cultural sharing. She looked forward to the future, when she would study for her master's degree in America.

Arazu was grateful for her husband and her children, for song, and for the historical buddhas of her city. I now wonder why I didn't ask her to speak more about the buddhas, given that the Taliban's destruction of them had made the news across the world, where activists tried to save them. Arazu was also grateful for moments in time: reading a magazine near the heater with a cup of warm tea, making a snowball in winter.

I was moved by the optimism of these women. They had been raised in a war-torn country with limited opportunities for women and an uncertain future, yet each of them positively spilled over with gratitude for all that they had, expressing how fortunate they were.

How often had I complained about small inconveniences or felt impatient because aspects of my own life hadn't fallen into place? I had lived over 40 years with a sense of safety none of these women had been gifted, and yet, they had no trouble accessing a sense of bounty and joy in living.

When I first came on board at AWWP I was required to sign a mentorship agreement that outlined the organisation's policy regarding requests I might receive from students for letters supporting applications for asylum and visas. Though the last 20 years in Afghanistan were years of progress and unprecedented opportunity for women, the country was still a place people felt the need to leave in order to seek opportunities for advancement. Still, though my students often had to pursue their education under the veil of secrecy, the opportunity for an education existed, and I met many young women who were taking advantage of it.

One of my Afghan students has remained in touch with me through the years, asking for my continued writing support as she applied for foreign study programmes, business competitions and scholarships. Through hard work and determination, at only 27 years of age, Sveto Ishaq has already accomplished far more than the average Afghan woman.

Shortly after the AWWP programme ended, there was a bombing at the American University of Afghanistan in Kabul, where Sveto was a student. She wrote to me about her experience. When the bombing occurred, some students and faculty were able to flee off campus, but many were trapped hunkered down in classrooms, in silence, not knowing whether more violence would follow the initial blast. For hours, Sveto didn't know if her classmates, friends and teachers were alive or dead. The university shut down for weeks before re-opening virtually so that students could finish the year. Through this adversity, Sveto expressed frustration that her studies had been delayed. She had goals was determined to meet them.

Despite the personal trauma of having lost fellow students and professors in the attack, Sveto made it through to graduation. Soon after, she was the only Afghan national selected as a prestigious Schwarzman Scholar to study in China.

She founded a modest-clothing company to offer affordable fashion and employment for Afghan Muslim women, as well as the nonprofit Chadari Project which picks up where the AWWP left off, publishing Afghan women's stories. Now, she is enrolled in a masters programme at the London School of Economics, where she received a full scholarship. Her family, who left Afghanistan over a year ago, are settled safely in a neighbouring country.

Recently on her Instagram, Sveto shared how her first days at LSE have been overshadowed by grief and despair for her country and the feeling that the dream of a better life for Afghan women that had fuelled her pursuit of higher education was now so far out of reach that her pursuit no longer had meaning or purpose. Yet, having grown up in the midst of struggle and war, she had learned that optimism was the only way forward. She gave herself a pep talk and committed to the studies in front of her. I never cease to be inspired by this young woman's example.

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A few weeks ago, I saw photos in the news of Afghan's filling and clinging to American military planes, desperate to escape, and like Sveto, I can't help but wonder what will happen to the brave young women I taught, to their families and teachers. As their volunteer English teacher I felt I was making a contribution to the possibility of a better future for these young women and their families. What will become of their dreams now? I wonder how many of them and their families made it out of Afghanistan, and I fear that most are among the millions left behind.