



“You have one-minute remaining:” What my parents have taught me about distance, loss, and uncertainty

By Azeta Hatef

In the early spring as concern over the novel coronavirus increased throughout the U.S., Americans began stocking up. Walking through the bare aisles of a Trader Joe’s in the Boston area—where I live—a sense of unease set in. I called my family in California and urged them to purchase the necessary essentials to last them a week or two. My concerns were met by a calmness from my father that left me frustrated. I wondered how he could be so unworried.

In my family, the coronavirus has resurfaced conversations around trauma, disaster, and uncertainty. As a child of refugees, I have witnessed the strategies to cope with calamity throughout my life. The hoarding my parents adopted was a response to once being forced to leave everything behind and fears of unpreparedness. And, so a part of me understands the impulse to stock up on toilet paper and hand sanitizer. I have seen the sense of temporary comfort and perceived control that comes from the possession of objects, as insignificant as they may be. I have also witnessed how the trauma of displacement continues to shape my parents’ daily experiences. What I once interpreted as a lack of planning, I now realize is a response to the collapse of certainty.

The plans my parents had for their lives fell apart suddenly, so rather than plan long-term, they prepare.

My family came to the U.S. in the mid-1980s as Afghanistan was in the midst of war. As the case for many Afghans displaced around the world, leaving their homeland was traumatic, the effects of which are felt throughout generations. As the anthropologist, Dawn Chatty writes, “forced migration is generally big, sudden, violent, dangerous, painful, and compelling” (2010, p. 8). For many, leaving one’s home means abandoning all you have, your possessions, your job, your loved ones—leaving an indelible mark on their lives.

The longing for home and for families in distant areas is one that many displaced groups are familiar with; feeling the pain of social distancing intimately. My parents celebrated weddings and grieved the loss of loved ones over the phone. I remember scratching the back of calling cards to reveal those valuable digits—a portal to another world, one that was always interrupted by the operator’s voice announcing, “you have one-minute remaining.” I remember my parents wrapping up their goodbyes as quickly as possible and I remember the sadness they felt of being back in their physical world, so far away from their families. Recent stories of people losing loved ones to the coronavirus, unable to comfort them in their final moments and unable to say goodbye has reminded me of my mother grieving the loss of her mother from 7,000 miles away

and the heartache in knowing she cannot comfort her sister who grows more fragile in her old age.

And, while there are parallels between this type of grief and distance, I am not conflating experiences of displacement with lockdown orders. Rather, this moment has brought to the forefront, once again, the trauma of displacement for my family, leading me to wonder how one recovers and perhaps grows from extraordinary pain. Is that possible?

How do you plan when it is difficult to think beyond the day ahead? How do you love and care for one another when you cannot express that in person? How do you process such profound loneliness?

The immediate tears that rolled down my mother's face when I asked about the loneliness she felt in leaving Afghanistan is a reminder that this is a loss she continues to carry with her every day. Unaware of whether they would return to their homes and to their families, my parents lost the things that once felt so familiar and permanent. I think about this often now, as the world of three months ago is hardly recognizable.

To ease the pain of loss, my parents created community in unfamiliar places during unfamiliar times. Exchanging stories of war and home with strangers who became

family, this community celebrated the little joys of life together and held one another when their worlds collapsed.

The weeks ahead promise further destruction, especially for the most vulnerable. As we find ourselves in a moment of heightened uncertainty—unaware of how exactly children are affected by the virus, if students will return to college campuses in the fall, if rent will be paid next month or if the virus will take a loved one from us—I think back to what my mother said to me about always experiencing the world as we are in this moment, “zindagi mah da corona ter shouda,” a reminder that uncertainty is certain. While my typical plans of visiting my family in California over the summer have fallen apart and I am unsure of when I will see them again, I take comfort in the ease with which we are able to connect with one another. Celebrating birthdays over Zoom, as my parents once did over the phone, I now understand the emptiness they felt when the phone call ends, even without the operator’s voice interrupting the call. I am reminded that both joy and sadness can exist alongside one another, as they have for my parents all these years.

My father shared a saying with me recently, “gurg ke baran-a deedah,” meaning that once the wolf has seen the rain, it is no longer afraid of it. Even when my parents didn’t mean to, they taught me that uncertainty is a constant, that there are some losses so heavy that we continue to carry them with us, and that we feel the pain of distance in nuanced ways. Most importantly, I have learned it is the communities we cultivate that

help us get through the rain.



Work Cited

Chatty, D. (2010). *Displacement and dispossession in the modern Middle East* (Vol. 5).
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