

EVERYTHING CHANGED IN EGYPT



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"Why do you do this? Why? Why?" The young man, my student of English literature at the University of Alexandria, had fallen into my arms as if he were losing consciousness. We had met, several minutes after class, in the door outside our classroom. He was faint with strong emotion, pale and trembling. The time was early Autumn 1982, a year after the assassination of Sadat, time of a new atmosphere of belligerence, a feeling that Jimmy Carter's peace-making was all for naught. No one else was in sight along the dusty corridors, but I did not have sufficient time or gumption to worry that someone would see me embracing a student.

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The massacres by Christian militia at Shabra and Shatila were on his mind and tearing at his heart. He was Palestinian. Perhaps he had just received news of relatives or childhood friends who had been killed. He supplied no details. His questions were, to my relief, in the present tense. He was not implicating me in the actual massacre although he had ascribed to me a more collective and diffuse accountability. I knew he liked me, and I had been delighted to see in him an awakening of mature critical thinking. But, at that moment, as he switched to Arabic between sobs, he seemed sympathetic. He seemed to feel sorry for me.

We had been studying the writing of Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson had provoked some deep response in him. I did not know how to react or what to do for him. I still do not know what I should have done or said. My empathy was operating full on in 1982. Despite all cognitive resistance, I accepted the guilt; but Egypt was teaching me much about preserving equilibrium.

By fits and starts, but certainly by 1984, my emotions had become tempered by a sort of fatalism. Perhaps I had absorbed *'In shā'a llāh* and learned to seize joy where Allah conceded I should find it. Now, thirty-six years later, joy proceeds from my hope and love for grandchildren, whose parents also absorbed a propensity to sustain a sort of willed calm in the midst of the unfamiliar, which always seems at first to be chaotic.

I do not know the subsequent history of that young man. He may have become a teacher, a pharmacist, a cleric, a policeman. Jefferson's prediction in a letter to his friend William Smith lingers. "The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants." In retrospect, I think my student knew that much.

My eldest daughter, Amanda, has observed, "We mark our family history as before and after Egypt." Indeed, my family has constructed much of its narrative on that year in Egypt, and the tipping point was not duck-walking into the burial chamber of Khufu's pyramid. It was immersion in a rich, complex, and challenging culture. Much changed. A list of specifics is almost meaningless (as was the list of abstract admonitions and exhortations by the Fulbright Commission), but I name some revelations now despite their abstraction: experiencing day-to-day living as a minority, being poor, experiencing a prevalence of death, being moderately conversant but illiterate, encountering ubiquitous fatalism, learning to tolerate constant noise (those



damned car horns), living without previously assumed infrastructural advantages like heat and water, reluctantly accommodating the arrogance of white compatriots, perceiving the deficiencies of education in Mississippi as opposed to the virtues of Schutz International School, accepting casual corruption with a grin (the baksheesh system), recognizing the power of authority in determining modes of thought, valuing tolerance, accepting unconditional generosity, admiring perseverance, and at least partially mastering flexibility.

In this essay, I cannot address all of these changes. Indeed, some exceed my limited capacity to describe. I shall, therefore, just try to get on with the narrative. Marlow, the fictional narrator in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, remarked, "Oh these months! Well, never mind. Various things happened." Indeed, for me and my family, they did.

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I taught four year-long courses, Second-Year Drama (Marlowe, Shakespeare, etc.), Third-Year Drama (Shakespeare, Goldsmith, etc.) Third-Year American Literature, sometimes called "Criticism" (Hawthorne, Poe, etc.), and Fourth-Year Shakespeare. I was never informed or consulted about the assignment of courses, nor was I particularly qualified to teach drama as opposed to poetry, fiction, or nonfiction; but the assignment suited me. There was plenty of Shakespeare for me to enjoy.

Texts were not available for some of the obligatory readings, but we made do with photocopies, courtesy of the American Culture Center; my own books; used and donated books shipped to me via the US Agency for International Development; judicious substitutions; and my own semi-dramatic oral presentations.

The students' ability in English was variable. Some few, mainly the outnumbered young men, seemed not to understand much. Most students spoke and comprehended easily. Many also spoke French, arguably the high-culture language of Alexandria. (As one entered the lobby of the symphony hall, one might anticipate switching from Arabic or English to French.) But our issues of communication were not linguistic. They were cultural and resulted from my own ignorance of Egyptian (and in fact of my own) unacknowledged assumptions about truth and the function of language in conveying truth and -- well, I suppose-- about knowledge itself.



One of my early concerns was how the courses I was teaching related to the department's general *curriculum*, or what the *curriculum* was. I realized later how unimportant were the relationships I was seeking. Texts seemed to be taught in an unusual degree of isolation. Colleagues explained this practice, but I simply did not understand what I was hearing. They said too much history, criticism, or theory would leave the students with crib-book information and insufficient exposure to the written lines before them. An expressed goal was to avoid "spoon feeding." Coupled with this admonition from colleagues, however, was advice from my insightful chairperson to stick to my "American way of thinking." Why else would an American be there?

My preprofessional introduction to literature was called "comparative." I had formulated my prejudices from the sometimes-contradictory stances of Rene Wellek, Erick Auerbach, Wayne Booth, William Empson, Robert Penn Warren, and the school of New Criticism. I doted on what we called back then "close reading", which would reveal the literary work as a self-contained esthetic phenomenon, but one occurring in a linguistic and historical context on which it depended for meaning but not necessarily for beauty. "Stick to the text" were welcome words of advice.

I set about teaching my courses with what I thought were detailed references to the texts but with some talk of genre and careful (I sincerely believed) employment of concepts like dialog, chorus, allegory, soliloquy, pun, joke, complication, and salvation, sin, honor, revenge. After about a month I was getting questions from students about what on earth I expected them to know. I thought I was through with *Everyman*, *She Stoops to Conquer*, and *Hamlet*; they thought I had not yet begun.

A courageous student remarked that she would appreciate my "sticking to the text" more closely. Joyfully, my New-Criticism synapses fired away. I ignited my first pure lecture, a one-and-a-half-hour explication of one dramatic scene—imagery, poetic effects and tropes, dramatic and verbal contexts, possibilities for staging, loaded vocabulary, ambiguities, mimesis and the fantastical, internal structure—the whole agrarian catastrophe. I had a wonderful time. My students filled a month's worth of copybook. Exhausted and triumphant, I asked if there were questions. There was one: "When are you going to tell us about the text?"

James Joyce never portrayed an epiphany more striking than mine. Understandably, mine took about a week to jell. I realized what they and my colleagues



meant by "sticking to the text." It was moving from the front to the back of, say, a scene (eventually through the entire play), selecting what they called "key lines" (since they could not learn *all* the lines) and telling what the lines meant as unambiguously as possible. The lines had to be referred to by page number and, if possible, by line number. Sticking to the text would not be recognized if one said, for example, "When the ghost appears the second time . . .".

Fortunately, my wonderful chairperson saw the whole picture. She laughed. My job as a Fulbrighter, she said, was to bring a different perspective. I was to model critical thinking. I tried. I declined to be the authority with correct answers; and, by the onset of dreary January, my students were beginning to comprehend my expectation -- often to their horror. At least some were delivering critical and creative reactions to literature. Some were thinking, not looking to me to think for them. I should note here that a sizable proportion of my students were among the most brilliant I encountered in a long career, before or after the sojourn in Egypt.

Having been warned by former Fulbrighters, I was studiously nonpolitical; but in retrospect, I can see that my "American" way of teaching might have seemed dangerous in a society drifting toward radical fundamentalism. Indeed, my sole encounter with a University authority (presumably a political appointee) provoked this memorable question directed to my guide for the day: "What is this American Johnson which you have brought to me?" He was not happy I was there. I was radical, Western, liberal, dangerous as Socrates although not immediately subject to hemlock. I followed judicious advice not to enter the building from a door that would cause me to pass by his office. Apparently, he was not aware that I stayed on the job for an entire year. I learned the trivial monetary contribution from the university to the bi-lateral Fulbright Commission never appeared. Since, at some level, I was not there, nothing was owed. For that administrator, the American Johnson had been properly eliminated from his political concerns. Ignorance was bliss -- or something more important for him than mere bliss.

There were other challenges to teaching, but nothing as basic as the matter of authoritarian *versus* individually constructed truth. I mastered most of the smaller challenges: finding chalk and the men's toilet; figuring out the holidays; preparing students for their one high-stakes examination at the end of the year; convincing our



departmental *factotum* that I really, really preferred my coffee *seda* rather than with sugar, *mazbut*. There was satisfaction in so doing, but the joy of teaching those young people was, at that point in my professional life, unmatched.

Over the course of a year, we engaged each other intellectually. They learned a bit. I learned more. We staged and presented excerpts from Ionesco's *La Cantatrice Chauve*, my directorial debut with candles as footlights, the electric current having failed once again. We embarked on an extra-curricular project of writing short poems, mostly *haikus*. Some extraordinary students wanted history of English, and I helped as best I could with sorry knowledge, but certainly better than theirs and more than my talented colleagues were willing to offer. A few were interested in ancient Egypt, and I knew enough history and language to direct their curiosity. We practiced copying hieroglyphic inscriptions on the unwashed, milky chalkboards. They transcribed with what I could recall of the International Phonetic Alphabet but, much easier for them, with Arabic. I could approximate the supposed sounds, and they had the literacy to record them. We translated together. That activity took place after normal hours at the University and was, of course, not authorized by the Department of Egyptology.

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Doing what I reckoned was a passable professional job in unfamiliar circumstances was a wondrous feature of that year in Alexandria, but by far the most intense effect was on the ethos, attitude, politics, and future of my family. For example, my late wife wrote her doctoral dissertation on the relationship of visual memory and reading achievement, comparing Egyptian, Italian, and American children during their early years of schooling. She did the hard part of her research in Alexandria. Within the circle of her Egyptian friends, she also became an advocate for government-sponsored birth control but never achieved an effective platform for the cause. That story would need another essay.

Our flat on the fifth floor of 6 Rue El Nahda in the district of Roushdy, was hilarious in its garishness, which exceeded any baroque extravagance our children had giggled at in Europe. It was situated a block south of the main tram line running east and west, about a mile and a half west of Schutz American School (where all three children attended) and three miles east of the University. The tram cost two to four piasters a ride, the best deal in town.



Our arrival at the flat in August included an introduction to an extraordinarily large rat in a kitchen cabinet. It was the size of an opossum. As a Mississippian, I knew about opossums, less about rats. Our facilitator, Amal, never quite recovered and fled with much information unimparted. Egyptian armed guards at the nearby Israeli Consulate participated gleefully in the capture and execution of what we had labeled Brer Rat. A cage appeared. Peanut butter and tomatoes were advised as bait. BR stood no chance. Greed or hunger led to a prolonged death by rocks from neighborhood children and judicious crushing with the butts of AK-47s.

The flat had three tiny bedrooms, one shared by Amanda (15) and Meredith (6), one for Marlowe (13), and one for the conjugal pair (never mind). The tiny dining alcove sported a gigantic chandelier suspended, as we learned, solely by its electrical wires. It eventually fell into the dining table with no attendant injuries. The kitchen was serviceable, powered, as were all heating necessities, by a tank of butane, called butagaz.

There were issues with utilities. The longest we had to be without water at one time was two days. When pressure was insufficient to bring water to the top floor, where we lived, we could usually go downstairs to neighbors. They always helped. Electrical failure was frequent. Violent fluctuations of current and a hot-wired fuse box caused a small fire. By far the most time-consuming problem was securing butagaz. There were general shortages during the cold months. We could see crowds of servants and doormen waiting for delivery trucks at our neighborhood butagaz station. One could spend hours in this activity, and I did. I remember wondering if I was spending more time on butagaz than on Shakespeare, so I checked one week. I was.

We had a cleaning lady named Samara. As she communicated via a neighbor helping with translation, she "came with" the apartment. Of course she did not, but we loved her. Her meager wages included permission to shower in our bathroom twice a week. She knew how to disinfect cauliflower with a bleach solution, how to turn a dingy shirt blindingly white with lemon juice and sunlight, and (unfortunately) how to lord it over our neighbor as she shook our dusty, sandy rugs over the balcony into the widower's kitchen one floor down. We made a show of chastising her, but the show lacked credibility. Maybe the man should have just shut the windows. We never delivered that message. Regarding Samara, much was not in our control, and that was



also a lesson. We comforted ourselves with Epictetus: Of things, some are in our control and some are not.

Overlooking the rear of our flat was a small hospital. We could see the patients and their families gathered on the terraces, often preparing meals. We decided to make a call. After all, what if one of our ambitiously athletic children broke a collar bone? The owner and chief physician (credibly credentialed in London) showed us around. He asked if we had a car. We said we did not. He had two. One of them, he said, would be a gift to us as long as we stayed. I declined the gift, saying that I lacked an Egyptian driver's license. He laughed and said, "*Mabrouk*." It is a kind of blessing and a statement of congratulations, but extends its meaning to something like "That's okay." Much later in the year, we gained use of a Chevrolet clunker from the American Culture Center. It was awaiting shipment back to the U.S. or some other sort of disposal. I enthusiastically joined the beeping swarms; mastered the one-inch rule, which determined right-of-way; and learned some of the graceful left-hand signals by which drivers communicated with each other.

The children's school was superb. We knew that public (and, worse, private segregated) schools in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, were not direct channels to Stanford or to any sort of creative intellection or humanistic compassion; but back in that southern state my wife and I were at a loss for alternatives within the scope of our experience or imagination. Schutz American School was far beyond what we could have imagined. The teachers were not sullied by fatuous educational theory. They did not fret over bulletin boards or assessment. They were adventurous, creative, engaged, and wonderfully understanding of the needs and aspirations of their young charges. The school administration encouraged their unique talents, gave them leeway to experiment, and insisted that they put the children's welfare uppermost in their professional and even their personal lives. The experience was crazy good.

In Alexandria, we learned to our sorrow about a casual attitude toward being alive and about ubiquitous death. In a vain effort to unclog our soil pipe, a workman draped a frayed rope ladder over an unsecure peg and flung himself off the side of our building, five stories high. I saw the strands spinning out and grabbed the rope below the point where I thought it might break, I yelled to the workman to ascend. He did. He did not fall, but once back on the flat roof, he said, "If God wills." What was that



about? An electrician, repairing our burned-out fuse box, tested the 220-volt system by turning his head to the side, grimacing, and sticking his fingers into the two points of contact. "No," I shouted. The current jolted his body, but he seemed to recover as I steadied his legs on the short ladder. "'*In shā'a llāh*"; "If God wills," I shall die or live.

There was a funeral every other week in Rue El Nahda. Beautiful floral arrangements arched above the dusty street. They were set there by daredevils on three-story ladders used as stilts. I saw no one fall. An expatriate remarked that he had learned not to make many Egyptian friends because they kept dying. One of my students died. A plumber could not keep a hard-achieved appointment. He was dead.

But the worst was Rasha. She was the two-year-old daughter of a couple who had become friends—as dear as a cross-cultural, cross-status friendship can be over the short haul. My wife had embraced her literally and figuratively. Teddy bears and games had been given. Earlier in the week when she died, I had held her on my knees and sung the German ditty, "Hoppe, hoppe, Reiter." At the end of the song, the rider goes "Plumpf." As my knees parted and she fell to my ankles, Rasha had let out a squeal of shock and delight. We laughed and hugged. Her eyes were as big as dates. She was the most beautiful child I had ever seen. She fell to her death from a high window. Her fall sealed a part of my heart in Alexandria. I have never truly accepted her death. Remarkably, her parents coped in a way I have yet to understand. They grieved; but for them, the world still made sense. We talked. My Arabic was just good enough. For me, a world in which Rasha could fall from a high open window to her death did not make sense. It still does not. God's will?

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So what does or did the Fulbright experience mean? There are small answers. Some fleeting mastery of Arabic. Some friendships now expired. Some triumphs and sorrows now tempered by time. Some cherished knowledge of the stops on the tram line to Roushdy. Some unanticipated appreciation of plays and poems I would have never otherwise opened. Strong in my memory, however, is the young Palestinian who trusted me enough in his sorrow and rage to fall into my arms and ask me to make sense of his sorrowful world. Strong is the pride in sticking to an "American" version of critical thinking. Strong also is the sadness of Rasha's death and my observation of the will of



her parents to retain faith in the plan of Allah and thus to retain their own sanity and sense of an ordered world.

But telling the effects is like grabbing a handful of ocean wave. There were experiences and epiphanies, now memories, that escape capture. Perhaps they have morphed into trickles of what I want them to be, but perhaps what I want them to be is an effect in itself. Yes, we mark our family history—and I mark the less-than-remarkable narrative of my intellectual and emotional development—from a Fulbright experience that took a younger man from Mississippi to the heart of a culture that would, for him and his family, change everything.

ABSTRACT

A year's Fulbright appointment at the University in Alexandria, Egypt, brought me, a relatively unknown scholar, and my family into a situation of great joy and gain, tempered with sorrow. It was the most profound experience of my professional career to date in 1982/83, the year after the murder of Sadat and the year of massacres in Sabra and Shatila. Teaching was, at first, difficult. The unacknowledged assumptions of Egyptian students and my own unacknowledged assumptions about truth and knowledge erected barriers to understanding; but each side learned from the other, a gratifying result. For my family, the year in Alexandria was life changing. We learned to cope with the absence of amenities we had taken for granted, and we learned that there was a world different from ours but one that deserved respect and accommodation. We learned to face daily life with more humor and flexibility, admiring a level of generosity we had never before experienced. We also learned about mental equilibrium, a recognition that some acceptance of fate seems healthy. We learned to value and cultivate calm in the midst of chaos.

RESUMO

Uma nomeação de um ano como Fulbright, na Universidade de Alexandria, no Egito proporcionou a mim, um estudioso relativamente desconhecido, e a minha



família, uma situação de grande alegria e aprendizagem, misturada com tristeza. Até hoje, esta foi a experiência mais profunda da minha carreira profissional, entre 1982 a 1983, o ano após o assassinato de Sadat e dos massacres em Sabra e Shatila. Lecionar, a princípio, foi difícil. As presunções não reconhecidas dos estudantes egípcios, e minhas próprias presunções sobre a verdade e o conhecimento, ergueram barreiras para a compreensão mútua; porém cada lado aprendeu com o outro, proporcionando um resultado gratificante. O ano em Alexandria foi uma mudança de vida para mim e minha família; aprendemos a lidar com a ausência do conforto que tínhamos e descobrimos que havia um mundo diferente do nosso, mas que merecia respeito e adaptação. Aprendemos a encarar a vida quotidiana com mais humor e flexibilidade, admirando um nível de generosidade que jamais havíamos desfrutado anteriormente. Além disso, aprendemos sobre o equilíbrio mental, um reconhecimento de que aceitar o imprevisível pode ser saudável. Aprendemos a valorizar e manter a calma no meio do caos.

KEY WORDS: Fulbright, Alexandria, University, Johnson