

Ayman Mohamed

In The Eyes of Others

'How we see others and how others see us' was a phrase that bothered me all the time while packing for my dream journey to the US. Actually we did know nothing about American people except from the movies, but it is always the case that people's attitudes and conceptions are drastically skewed by the media which should be a true mirror. I thought I must discover this on my own. Although overwhelmed by excitement, I could not help myself being shaken as I stepped upon the new land carrying conceptions and expectations, and holding fears and apprehensions. Moving from the East of the globe to its West felt indescribable to me at that time.

Everything was happening quickly; numbers, files and documents overwhelmed me. I myself was a number. Everything was new and totally different but I was keeping calm and my strategy was to keep learning without anxiety and confusion. I felt rootless and I needed to retrieve the scent of the place where I belonged. What intensified my rootlessness is that I arrived at a time I was supposed to be fasting during the day while everybody around was eating and drinking. Tired and exhausted in the heat of summer, I went out to settle documents and I walked long miles. The campus was so huge, and I did not know that I should use a map even for the bus. It was a very terrible experience to get lost and I felt as a child. Eventually I got a laptop and made my first contact with Egypt, and was just like having a cold sweet punch in the midst of summer. From that point, I began to recollect and link past to present, and from there I thought my mission had begun.

My first amazement with the system was mixed with anxiety as I started talking with American people. I was keeping track of their reactions to my appearance and my accent. I had a strong feeling that my middle-eastern features would trigger suspicion and uneasiness on the eyes of others. But this did not happen. Instead there were smiles and greetings everywhere. However, I do not know why I stuttered as I spoke although I am proficient in English; whenever someone at the shop said 'Hi. How are you doing?' I did not know how to respond or how to look and sound nice; and I did not understand either why anyone would greet me without knowing me. It is not common in our country to greet strangers.

I had a mission in my mind that I must act as an ambassador and a good representative to my people who happened to belong to that part of the world which recently fell under the accusations of terrorism and backwardness. This was not a struggle between identity and acculturation but a kind of awareness of the self and an obligation to convey my message and correct any misconceptions about us. At the same time, I had that excitement about the American way of life just like everyone coming from the East. However, I rejected the attitude of some persons who tried hard to suppress their own cultures and values in the sense that they wanted to please Americans and match well together. But this is totally misleading because I do think that Americans would love to hear about others and learn about other cultures, and they would find such a person unusual if he or she was just imitating.

Suddenly, a 5 AM phone call disturbed my sleep as well as my emotions. My father was speaking; he was very nervous; he was speaking so quickly and loudly that, in the midst of my sleep, I could not catch except the final three words 'Get Back Home!' 'What?' I said to

myself, 'Am I dreaming?' But it was real, and my father was actually begging me to come back. I thought he just missed me but it seemed to be serious. He told me that recent news came around that some person in the US was intending to burn our holy book in public. 'So what Dad?' I said 'It is just a person, it is not the whole US' My father was still nervous and said 'No, No. They hate us. They will harm you my son!; please come back'. At this point I was starting to wake up, and I said 'No father, this should not be true'. I was unable to communicate with my father anymore so I ended the call gently and tried to go back to sleep, but I failed.

Actually American people are not like that; they may have had a distorted view at one point due to recent events but I think they do not generalize; and anyway it is our fault that we do not reach out and express our reality. They had every right at that time to feel angry, and we are obliged to clear the image. It is a part of my responsibility here to convey this message. A sense of fear began to rise in my mind: could my father be right? Do my American classmates feel uncomfortable with me? But they were nice with me so far and seemed interested in my culture as well. I fell in this dilemma and I could not bring my mind at ease.

Two days later, I was shocked by a Facebook post that there was an individual act of a drunken person who tore down pages of Quran in front of Lansing Islamic Center. I could not believe it; I called my Egyptian neighbor who said it was a trivial incident that happened two days ago and there was nothing to worry about. I hurried to the mosque as I lived across the street from it. I wanted to understand what happened, and there came the relief for all my worries. I could not believe my eyes as I saw a number of American people standing in the reception placing flowers and writing words of support. I could not find any words to communicate at this time, but my eyes responded with tears. I wanted to hug everybody and

cry hard but I was too shy to do that. This was a moment of noblest human sensations when all cultural barriers dropped and human language dominated. The American people wanted to show in their special way that they respected other nations, cultures and beliefs, and that all people are equal in humanity. Freedom of belief and expression was and will always be the foundation of this great nation. If an individual who happened to attach himself to a certain belief committed a mischief, this does not smear the whole group or hold them accountable for it.

That night I sat back blaming myself and I felt how silly I was to be driven by immature preconceptions. The essence of international education lies in the interaction among cultures and the consideration of others. If we as young men around the world managed to build networks of mutual understanding, the future of whole world would change. Otherwise, there is no use of suffering the hardships and challenges of studying abroad.

By the weekend, my academic advisor invited the entire department to a Potluck dinner. I did not know what Potluck meant but, being a linguist, I checked it and understood that every person would be expected to bring some food to share. I decided I should be considerate and live the experience. I helped my wife preparing the most famous Egyptian dish. A German classmate drove us there. We found it hard at first to mingle in the American way but they were encouraging us. They liked our dish and I spent most of the night talking about Egypt and different aspects of comparison. I felt great about that, and I even felt I loved my country more than I ever did. Maybe the sense of belonging is intensified by separation. However, I did not feel homesick at that night because I felt at home. The place combined people from America, Germany, Turkey, Russia, Japan, China, Korea and others. I have never been in such an

international crowd, and I was learning that it is not that embarrassing to walk by and say 'hi' then start a casual conversation. I learnt that I should not be so shy or silent because Americans could perceive this as a need for privacy and just respect that, but if one became open, asked questions and engaged more, he would find a good amount of interaction and enjoy hanging out with friends. It was a really wonderful night, and it warmed my heart. I returned home, opened my e-mail and sent a short message to my brother to have it delivered to my kind-hearted father: 'Don't worry Dad! I am with my big family here'.