

From Where I Stand

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The critic in me would say that my journey to Morocco started with a disappointment, but that would be unfair to the wonderful people in my life, so let's just call it a long and winding road.

I was born in New York City and grew up in the Bronx. At fifteen I moved to Georgia, finished high school and returned to New York. After working for a year in Manhattan to make enough money to go to college, I went upstate to Binghamton University. With just three classes needed for graduation, I left Binghamton and moved back to Georgia with the wonderful man who would eventually become my husband. In 1993, we started our lives together, but I knew I had some unfinished business. Kennesaw State University was the perfect solution for me. It was not too big, it was not too expensive, and I lived right across the street. Unfortunately, there were obstacles that hindered me, so I put this on a shelf and promised to return.

Fast forward fifteen years. I have married, had two wonderful daughters, attended Culinary School and worked as a Pastry Chef. I was proud of many of my accomplishments, but still the disappointment of not finishing my educa-

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tion hung over me. As my daughters grew older I saw their futures unfolding and I knew that I had to set an example for them. At first I was embarrassed to tell some of my family and friends what I was doing, but I received nothing but encouragement and support. Walking around campus with all the other students energized me and gave me the determination to succeed. Little did I know just how much I would gain from my experience at KSU.

When Dr. Catherine Lewis first mentioned the MCCA project, I was very interested in the concept. The possibility of a free trip to Morocco was an easy sell, but there seemed to be so much more. With its difficult racial and cultural history, I couldn't think of a more complex place for Muslim-Americans to live than the American South. Religion is ingrained in the fabric of Southern culture, but it's a controversial subject. Some Americans feel that as a nation with Christian values, the United States is no place for "those people." There is no doubt that the South has come a long way, but there is still progress to be made.

Since September 11, 2001, Muslims, Islam and terrorism have been so inextricably linked in some minds that even Muslims born here are not above suspicion. Their food, dress, language, and physical features mark them as unassimilated and make them targets of disdain. 9/11 didn't change my perceptions of Islam that much because I had little knowledge beyond what passed vaguely through the periphery of my life. I did become more conscious of Islam and Muslim people in a way I had not been before. I wish I could say that I sought out their input or feelings on this episode, but I didn't. I didn't feel much different after 9/11 in terms of my own safety or patriotism, but it brought Islam under a glaring spotlight that was rarely flattering. Words like jihad were thrown around along with images of a people who presumably reveled in our destruction, but all we could do is ask why. In their minds some Americans created a justification narrative that explained why we should be afraid. Perhaps they threaten our way of life, beliefs, or the foundation of our culture. Whatever it is, it is that fear that drives much of the panic and anger directed towards Muslims in our country and towards us in their own. One of the initial project components reflected this hostility. It was a survey on people's knowledge and perceptions about Islam. Project participants asked people all over the community to fill them out. The responses were not surprising, but nonetheless disappointing and disturbing. It was not so much the lack of knowledge that bothered me so much as the closed minds. I was not exactly sure what I could do or how I could change this perception, but I felt compelled to try.

One of our first assignments as project participants was an essay on our thoughts of Islam. In a strange twist of fate the essays had been due on September 10th, which really made me examine my perceptions. For me, being a New Yorker came with a slight air of superiority when it came to exposure and tolerance of different cultures and personal expression. My native city is home to the United Nations, both literally and figuratively, and for that reason I thought myself quite the global citizen. Though my travels had been somewhat limited by my wallet, growing up in the quintessential American melting pot made me a woman of the world by virtue of wandering the streets as a child. That being said, I began to reflect on what I have taken for granted for so long. How much did I really know or understand?

It is hard to say what I knew about Islam because I was not sure that what I knew was real or true. I knew what I thought I knew, but some of that was a result of collective American construct and the rest was filling in the blanks. Then there was the issue of religion versus culture, which are so intertwined that separation is nearly impossible. I knew the five tenets of Islam but only on an academic level. And, try as I might, it was difficult to ignore the question of women and their place in Islamic society. I knew I was not supposed to impose my cultural and spiritual biases on others, but it is hard. I needed to know more, and here was my chance.

The other opportunity before us that was equally important was to show who we were. I was not naïve about the perception of Americans in other parts of the world, particularly in Islamic countries. For me the goal was to go beyond the caricatures and stereotypes and just see the real people and let them see the real me. Going to Morocco was going to be the real test of opening my mind and letting even the smallest preconceived notions fall away. It was obvious that we were sent to be ambassadors of a sort. Though we would be seen as representatives of our country and our school, we also symbolized a bridge of cultures and ideas.

Our journey to Morocco went beyond my most far reaching expectations. While traveling there had never occurred to me before this opportunity, I can't imagine my life now without this experience. The trip itself was many things: exhilarating, exhausting, and emotional, and those are just the "e" words. My memories from the trip are all about the people and how they made this experience so special.

On our first full day in Casablanca, Dr. Bird, Meagan, Emily, Jay and I went to Ben M'Sik for the opening of their Creating Community Museum. I was nervous, excited and a little tired from the trip. As I walked around looking at the exhibits, Hakima, one of the Ben M'Sik students, came up, took my hand and showed me all the work they had done. There was a sense of pride in the room about their accomplishments and I was happy to be part of the experience. Later that day, we visited Hassan II Mosque, which was somewhat overwhelming in its scale and beauty. As we drove up, the sight of children playing soccer on the grounds made it clear that this structure belonged to the people. The intricacy of the architecture and how it sat on the water gave it a regal feeling. Walking around the city later that night with Youssef C. and Mohammad, I felt a sense of belonging. I was a city girl and the energy of Casablanca filled me with excitement and awareness.

The next day was Rabat, a beautiful city and home to our wonderful host, Professor Samir El Azhar. The combination of architectures, the beauty of the waterside, and history of the ruins were yet another facet of the wonder of Morocco. From Rabat we went south to Marrakech. From our hotel balconies we could see the Atlas Mountains in the distance. Here we toured the gardens, mosques, and palaces, but the best was the market. Filled with colors, sounds, and quite a few animals, the market ended up being the most fun. During this trip we really got to know the Youssefs, but one of my fondest memories was on the ride back to Casablanca. On the ride down, the excitement and exhaustion of the first day caught up with us and we slept the whole way, but the ride back was a different story. Our shuttle driver, impromptu tour guide, and man of all seasons, Hamid, had amassed an eclectic selection of CDs. Among these was a collection of old American country hits. At one point we were all singing "The Gambler" by Kenny Rogers as the Moroccan countryside rolled by outside our windows. Later, I sat in the back with Youssef F. and he told me how he teaches students English by having them sing songs. One of his favorites was "Another Day in Paradise" by Phil Collins. He asked me about the song and what it meant and we talked about it for awhile. He handed out copies of the lyrics, and despite my lack of ability, we sang together. I still have the copy of those lyrics and I think about the trip back to Casablanca whenever I hear the song.

One of our responsibilities as delegation members was to give a guest lecture to the Ben M'Sik students on an aspect of American culture. Each member of the team submitted a number of possible topics and one was chosen by the

Moroccan students and faculty. The topics were diverse and interesting and I learned something from each one. The Ben M'Sik students were very attentive and respectful, even when they didn't agree with our commentary. Though I am not a shy person by any means, I was nervous about my lecture. The subject, Historically Black Colleges and Universities, was one I hoped the students would enjoy. I know that the racial issues behind the establishment of these schools are a dark and painful part of American history but I wanted to present it in a way that was open and honest.

Unfortunately, before I knew it, there it was, our last day in Casablanca. After Megan, Emily and I got beautiful henna tattoos put on our hands, we went down to the beach and walked along the boardwalk. Soon we stopped for tea and I started talking to Ilham. She had been very quiet most of the trip, so I was happy to have an opportunity to talk to her. She told me about her family: her mother, father, sisters, and brothers and their life in Ben M'Sik. She talked about the hijab and what it meant to her. She told me that it was not an imposition to wear, but protection and part of her culture. She spoke of modesty and how it makes her feel to know that the man she will marry will be the only one to see her full beauty. This was the answer. It was the answer to the question that so many had asked me when I said I was visiting a Muslim country and the question I had asked myself so many times. As we talked more, Ilham told me that her mother worries about her and might be concerned with her being out late. I said I understood because my mother still worries about me. "She does?" she asked. "Of course" I replied "that's what mothers do."

As the young men and women of Ben M'Sik began to leave, I found myself becoming very emotional. They presented us with gifts, which made me cry. From Wafaa I received a set of tea glasses to go with my teapot, the only gift I bought for myself. Tea was such an important part of their culture and our trip that I wanted something special to symbolize this memory. From the guys we received tea and mustard, which may seem strange, but only if you've never had Moroccan mustard. They had already been so generous with their time and hospitality and I felt unworthy of anything more. But I knew this experience couldn't last forever and I had to return home to my family. We were leaving the next morning and yet it felt like we had only just arrived.

I was able to do a great deal of thinking the next day. Since I was flying to New York and not Atlanta, I would be going without the rest of the KSU delegation. As I sat in the hotel lobby waiting for my ride to the airport, I opened my

computer to check my e-mail. There, sitting in my inbox was an e-mail from Youssef F. In it he expressed how hard it was to say goodbye to us and called me Sister. While I am sure this is a common term among Moroccan people, it meant a lot to me. I don't know what I had done to deserve all of this, but I was determined not to waste it. As I sat on the plane, I looked out the window and reflected on the week before. Tears came to my eyes as we left the ground because I didn't know if I would ever be back, but I knew I was better having been there.

I came home and the world felt smaller, not more crowded, but closer together. I was already anxious for the Moroccans to visit but waiting until April seemed like an eternity. In the mean time, there was a great deal of work to get done and it was time to start our part here at home. One of the main responsibilities of the project was the interviews. We needed to interview Muslims from all over the community and find out about their experiences. Over the next three months, the project team interviewed around thirty people. At first I was nervous about doing the interviews. I wasn't sure what people would say or if they would even be willing to talk to us. As the interviews went on, I was amazed how open and enthusiastic the interviewees were to share their stories.

There were some common themes in the interviews and the most prevalent was peace. I don't think there was one session that I was part of that didn't emphasize the idea of peace in Islam. While some people didn't specifically address "acts of terror" or aggression, they did make it clear that these types of activities were neither sanctioned nor condoned by their faith. Terrorism is a very touchy subject and Muslims here know what Islam looks like on American television. One thing that I did not hear, even from those who clearly had a right to it, was anger. While doing our marathon stint of interviews at the Istanbul Center in Norcross, Emily and I had the pleasure of interviewing a very pleasant and funny young man named Suleyman . During his interview he told us about a road trip he had taken with some friends to Florida. During the trip he and his friends stopped at Subway for lunch, then went behind the store to pray. While praying, they were spotted by some people who then called the police. When the police came they told them they couldn't pray there. He was hurt and angry but he jokingly told us that the moral of the story was "If you're ever in Florida, don't pray behind Subway." Ultimately, what I heard was that this type of story was the exception and not the rule and it gave me more faith in the tolerance of all people. I had not given the South enough credit, but I was happy to stand corrected.

Another memorable story involved a KSU student from Turkey who told us about how she started wearing the hijab. While still living in Istanbul, she had become friends with another girl. Due to Turkish law, the girl had been forced to remove her headscarf at school and they were both very upset. In solidarity with her friend, the KSU student started wearing a headscarf and now saw it as an important symbol of her dedication to her faith and her friend. At this point she started to cry and since I can't let anyone cry by himself, I cried too.

Most of the interviews involved two or more members of the MCCA project team, but on one particular night we had a number of people to interview and a limited number of team members. That night I had the pleasure of interviewing Rumeysa Goker. Even though we had only met that night, our interview felt like an easy conversation between old friends. We spoke as women and I felt a bond between us. Later, Emily and I interviewed a man who didn't like talking about his religion. Although this was one of the shorter interviews we did, I respected his right to keep his faith a private matter.

My last interview was with the family of a very dear friend. Afsar was from Iran and we had met in a culinary school. Her husband, son, sister, brother-in-law, nephew and mother were all in attendance, making it quite the family affair. I had even brought my youngest daughter with me because she loves Afsar and her family and they love her. Emily had agreed to help me and after the interview we were invited to their mosque for what would best be described as a Muslim wake. A member of their congregation's father had died and the other members gathered to pray, talk, and eat. Throughout this process I had yet to go anywhere or meet anyone who did not make me feel welcome. But now it was our turn and I could hardly wait.

In her hummingbird-like way, Dr. Lewis got us all ready for the Moroccan delegation's visit. Itineraries were checked and rechecked with nothing left to chance. Despite just adopting her lovely baby girl, Emma, she made sure she was always on top of what was happening. The day finally arrived and from there it was a blur. With a schedule that seemed determined to squeeze in every possible opportunity, the delegation was shuttled from one side of town to the other, without a second to spare. Soon, it was time for the Coffee & Conversation event, the culmination of everything that the program had tried to accomplish. I was honored to be asked to be on the panel and despite my anxiety of public speaking, I was determined to express what this experience meant to me. Many of the people we interviewed were in attendance and I was happy to see

them again. I was last on the panel to speak and when my turn came, Dr. Anne Richards quietly told me I had one minute to wrap it up. As I looked out into the audience into the face of my friends and family I knew sixty seconds would not be enough time to say what was in my heart. I jumped off the stage and spoke about what a true honor and privilege it had been to be part of this journey and that I hoped one day to deserve all that I had gained.

As I think back to the beginning of this process, I reflect on its lessons. From a conversation I had with Wafaa and Hakima, I think about how the idea of freedom, something Americans assume is a birthright, is different to different people. I came to see that this whole process was ultimately about the connections we made, even among our own team. I had made friends with new people and became better friends with others. I came to know some of the faculty and staff at KSU in a way that students rarely do. I will forever be grateful for every person I met, every friend I made or friendship I deepened, every opportunity I had to stand and be counted among those who believe that we are all so much more alike than we are different. I was given a great gift, not just of the trip itself, but of the entire journey. I am mostly the same person I was before, but richer for all the experiences I had along the way.

The term “global citizen” is not a bad word. You do not lose yourself by becoming part of the world beyond your national borders; you get the chance to change “us” and “them” into “we”. From where you stand is from where you see, but if you go and stand somewhere else, you see more. This trip, this project, this experience allowed me to stand somewhere else and see more than I ever imagined. Our lives unfold in a way that we can never predict because we plan and the universe laughs. Had my life gone as I had planned, I would have missed this, and I would not have missed it for the world. My advice: Travel. Grab your passport, your car keys or just your shoes and go find someone who doesn’t look like you or think like you and talk to them. What do you have to lose?