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Living in Afghanistan on the Eve of the Russian Invasion

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Living in Afghanistan on the Eve of the Russian Invasion

A senior project submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of California
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Bachelor of Arts and
Cultural Studies

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“Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime.”

— Mark Twain, *The Innocents Abroad/Roughing It*

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Abstract

In my Senior Project I intend to illustrate the differences between cultures juxtaposed with the similarity of humans from those cultures. Also, this paper will demonstrate how experience of and contact with other cultures can broaden and change one's perspective and engender compassion and understanding.

By recounting stories of my time and travels in Afghanistan in the late 1970s and my experience of the people, set against the historical backdrop of political upheaval accompanying the impending Russian invasion, I will demonstrate the beauty and wonder of a fascinating country and her people that have, sadly, been ravaged by invasion and war.

This paper will, of course, be supported by thorough historical research and stories derived from direct experience, as well as those of family and friends who were also there. I also intend to interview people I know who are very knowledgeable on the subject.

Introduction

Afghanistan is a fascinating country with a complex history. Until September 11, 2001, many people knew nothing at all about this landlocked high desert country in the Middle East. After 2001, it earned a place in infamy, thanks to its perceived role in the tragic events on that fateful day in September. I lived in Afghanistan in 1977, '78 and part of '79, during the time of the Saur Revolution and the subsequent Russian Invasion.

I have studied the history of that particular time period in that area of the world rather extensively and have interviewed people who have far greater knowledge, having studied this subject for decades. It is a fascinating area of study, complete with intertwined political and religious complexities, intrigue, coups d'etat, betrayal, torture, and murder. One of the most interesting things I found in my research, was the way in which one event or decision often affected another and then that one another, causing a whole chain of events, a domino effect, if you will. It shows how interrelated events and things are, and how they have a causal effect on history. Afghanistan is a very patriarchal, warrior culture. However, I still witnessed great authenticity, kindness, affection, and hospitality in the people. While there were vast differences in our beliefs, ideas, habits, and cultures, I found many more human commonalities between us. Travel broadened my perception of the world and its peoples and opened my eyes, mind and heart to the validity of different ways of living day-to-day life. It also gave me a more realistic perspective. For instance, when feeling sorry for myself, in any situation, I remember some of the things I've seen, such as starving children living on the streets of India, and realize how very fortunate I have actually been in each and every moment of my life, no matter how

difficult it may seem at the time. This has left me with an overwhelming sense of gratitude that wraps around my days. I deeply enjoy this state of gratitude, which I feel was birthed by my travels and grew with time, age, consideration and experience. This is something of a state of grace, as I see it, and I am, once again, grateful.

I would first like to give a brief, condensed history of Afghanistan in the late 1970s, when I was there, and relate some of the stories of my adventures, experiences, observations, as well as some stories about the people I knew there.

Afghanistan, as I have mentioned, is a landlocked, high desert country. What this means, first of all, is that it is terribly, deeply, almost unfathomably dry. The people there tend to age very quickly from the dryness, the weather extremes, and the hardships of every-day life. It is a country of high mountains with treacherous passes and extreme temperatures, very hot in summer, well over 100 degrees, and very cold in winter, with deep snow falling on the mountains. It is a rugged and harsh terrain, which often necessitates a rugged and harsh life for its inhabitants.

It took about 6 months and some traveling around for me to begin to appreciate the beauty of this country. It is so dry, harsh, extreme, but it has its own character and sometimes subtle but awesome beauty that grows on one over time and then inserts itself firmly into the heart.

It is definitely a patriarchal culture. It is a harsh land that has bred a tough warrior race. It also has a wildness, and a strange hospitality, bred of Islamic law that is very appealing. To quote Lowell Thomas from *Before Taliban*, “adventure beckoned just over the border to the West in forbidden Afghanistan. Remote, rugged, if there is a wilder country anywhere on earth today than Afghanistan, I know not of it, and inhabited by

tribesmen reputed to be as ferocious as any on earth.” I have no quarrel with this quote. I found all of this to be absolutely true. I came to have great affection and respect for the people. Despite their position on women, which is less than enlightened, to say the least. In point of fact, I rarely came into contact with women there, despite having many close male Afghan friends. I saw a few here and there on the street, some in modest Western wear, skirts and blouses, but most in full charderie, the garment particular to Afghanistan, which is a pleated affair that hangs over the head and goes all the way down to the toes. It has a woven mesh area through which one can see out. In the heat of summer, especially on the buses, which are hot and overcrowded, they can be seen vomiting under these garments from the extreme heat of being so completely covered, in such hot weather. It is a pitiable thing to see. Mostly, however, they hide in their homes or in walled compounds around their homes. The culture seems almost devoid of any femininity until one gets closer to the men, and then I was treated to displays of great passion, emotion, affection, camaraderie, hospitality, and joy that were so innately, beautifully human. The men also love to dance, cook, play music and generally enjoy life whenever the occasion presents itself. Since it is a harsh life in many ways, they seem to enjoy opportunities for escape, as many people everywhere do.

Following is a brief history of political, religious and cultural events of the time I was in Afghanistan.

In 1978, on the eve of the Saur Revolution, 85 per cent of the population were peasants or nomads, and agriculture accounted for 60 per cent of production. The peasants paid virtually no taxes, and the government relied instead on revenue from

foreign aid, sales of natural gas, and taxes on a few export commodities. The literacy rate was 10% (Rubin 19).

Mohammed Daoud Khan overthrew King Zahir Shah in 1973 to become the first President of Afghanistan. This was the end of the monarchy in Afghanistan, where King Shah had ruled for four decades. The Arg Palace in Kabul became the Presidential residence. This was common knowledge in Afghanistan and during the early period of my residence there, there were pictures of President Daoud everywhere, even woven into prayer rugs.

In 1978, Mir Akbar Khyber, a leading communist activist and a prominent member of the Parcham, a faction of the Communist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan, the PDPA, was assassinated. Although the government denied any responsibility for the assassination, it was widely assumed that Daoud's secret police were behind it. This belief was shared by much of the Kabul Intelligentsia. Daoud was alarmed when the funeral procession turned into a 15,000 strong demonstration. Daoud reacted by having many Marxist leaders arrested. However, Hafizullah Amin, a high ranking official in Daoud's government, was only placed under house arrest. This allowed him to order an uprising, which had already been coalescing for two years. Amin, despite having no authority to do so, instructed army officers to overthrow the government. (Tanner 230)

Thus, Daoud's presidency came to a sudden and violent end on the morning of April 28, 1978. Military units marched down the main streets of Kabul, with tanks in tow, bombing buildings along the way. Planes flew overhead, strafing as they passed. Upon arrival at the palace, they surrounded it and killed most members of Daoud's family, including men, women and children. The troops then demanded that Daoud and his

brother Naim surrender. As one familiar with Afghans would expect, Daoud and Naim instead chose to charge out of the palace toward the soldiers, pistols in hand, firing. The obvious and predictable outcome was, of course, that they were both shot and killed. Six fighter planes, a few tanks and several hundred soldiers had overthrown the government of Afghanistan. Daoud loyalists had been too confused and disorganized to mount a defense. This came to be known as the Saur Revolution, as Saur is the word for April in the Afghan calendar. This is a quote from *Before Taliban* concerning the great importance of this one-day revolution;

While it failed in its ostensible goal of creating a Marxist state in Afghanistan, the Saur Revolution is nevertheless the single most important event in recent Afghan history. Some of the effects of the revolution are obvious, for it laid the groundwork for the popular rebellion that swept over the country in 1978-1979, the subsequent rise to power of the Islamic resistance organizations, and later the development of the Taliban movement. (Edwards 53)

The PDPA then took over the government and divided into two factions, the Parcham and the Khalq. Nur Muhammad Taraki was the new leader, or Prime minister. Khalqi Karmal, who was Parcham, was deputy Prime Minister and Amin was foreign minister and also a Khalqi. In July, Taraki and Amin relieved most of the Parcham from governmental positions. Karmal was sent abroad as Ambassador to Czechoslovakia. In August of 1978, Taraki and Amin became suspicious of a plot against them, and began to imprison and execute some of the cabinet members, including the military leader of the Saur Revolution, General Abdul Qadir Dagarwal. In September of 1979 Amin turned on his former comrade Taraki, and had him arrested and executed. (Rubin 82)

Once in power, the PDPA implemented a socialist agenda. The PDPA advocated women's rights, for instance. This, along with several other doctrines that were perceived as anti-religious, angered the conservatives who saw it as a threat to their Islamic way of life. Another thing that angered a large segment of the population was the changes the new government made in the national flag. The traditional flag was green with the crescent moon and star of Islam. The new flag was stripped of all Muslim symbolism and was Soviet red. This was a provocative affront to the people of this conservative and deeply religious Islamic country. (Tanner 231)

The PDPA government dependence on and adherence to the Soviet Union became apparent. This greatly worried U.S. strategists, who were paying close attention to all the political upheaval. The U.S. of course, did not want to let the Soviet Union get too strong a hold on Afghanistan.

All of this chaos and the resulting general paranoia came to a head when U.S. Ambassador Adolph Dubs was kidnapped and murdered in the Kabul Hotel on February 14, 1979. "This event set in motion a series of coups, counter coups, diplomatic intrigue, and Cold War posturing that ultimately would push this strategic Central Asian nation firmly into Soviet hands and pave the way for the Soviet Invasion less than a year later, and help spark a continuing civil war that has left more than a million dead" (Finneman).

These events, seen from the typical Afghan's point of view, are very different. In the early-to-mid 1970s, as previously in history, most of the population was uneducated, living in rural villages, working the land. Unless it directly affected them, they had little knowledge or concern for politics. They were more concerned about family life and day-to-day survival. Many Afghans have large families and are responsible for the survival of

their family members. I once visited a family with two men, 8 women, and 33 children. The two men would have been responsible for the survival of all these people. Of course the women and children help with the work, but survival is the ultimate responsibility of the men.

As education became more popular and accessible, more and more youth began to leave home to be educated in the universities. Far away from home and traditional family life, it often happened that there was a kind of split within their character, a moral confusion, a division of self. It estranged fathers from sons. Philosopher and poet Sayd Bahauden Majrooh expressed it nicely when he said, “Neither a complete Westerner nor a genuine Easterner, he became a stranger to his own society and even worse, a stranger to himself.” This left these young men questioning and vulnerable, perhaps needing something to replace the family traditions and tribal culture they had known. “This appears to have hatched a variety of radical ideologies and organizations, which provided collective identities and social contacts. Kabul University, where 1200 students lived without family, became a center of insurgency.” (Rubin 78)

“An imprisoned radical in Egypt, named Sayd Qutb, wrote from his jail cell a manifesto titled Signposts, which argued for a new Leninist approach to Islamic revolution. Qutb justified violence against unbelievers and urged radical action to seize political power.... Qutb was executed in 1966, but his manifesto gradually emerged as a blueprint for Islamic radicals from Morocco to Indonesia”(Coll 112). His work was taught in Universities in Jeddah and Cairo, and thus traveled to Kabul University and was spread by some of the most well known Islamic radicals of the time.

To make matters worse, there was a lack of private employment for university graduates. The promise of a better life through education was not being fulfilled. “In the early 1970s, unemployment among university graduates was becoming visible” (Fragmentation of Afghanistan). This economic downturn affected the more traditional population, as well. “Just as the introduction of British mill cloth led to the disappearance of Indian weavers, the introduction of cheap, manufactured imports led to a loss of livelihood for many traditional Afghan artisans” (Rubin 78).

This began to change a way of life that was centuries old for many Afghans. “A man who earns a salary in a government office doesn’t need his wife and children to help with his work, nor does he need tribal or kinship alliances cemented through marriages to guard his land, assure his water supply or fight his rivals” (Rubin 79). Henning Sawitzki, who studied academic elites in Kabul, wrote, “Everything indicates that conflicts will be inevitable and that Afghanistan will not be spared sudden and violent change” (quoted by Rubin 80). This was a dire prediction that sadly, proved true.

As illustrated, there were many changes taking place on many levels in the country. Modernization was causing a kind of cultural schizophrenia, one that had political, social, economic, educational and last but not least, religious implications. The culture was moving away from being a tribal, familial, rural, agrarian culture, largely ruled by respect for the religious laws of Islam, to a more modern, independent, educated way of life, one much less dependent on family and religion. This may sound like a good thing, but it created many divisions, personally, culturally, economically, and in the area of religion, one of utmost importance to most Afghans. This I discerned from my research.

These are some of the factors that contributed to the upheaval and chaos that were happening in the 1970s and '80s in this part of the world. The political situation led to dependence on the Soviet Union for economic aid and military guidance. However, when it was discovered that the Afghans were altogether unruly, untrustworthy and uncontrollable, the Soviets felt pressured to invade, though they were not really ready to do so. Some of this pressure came covertly from the U.S., who hoped that Afghanistan would ultimately be Russia's Viet Nam. The U.S., fearing loss of all control in the area, began to support the Mujahideen, who fought against the Soviets, by sending them money and weapons, and providing military training. The Mujahideen fought to keep their traditional, tribal, religious way of life. They felt the new trends would destroy the religious base for daily life in Afghanistan, and being what they considered to be devout Muslims, they could not allow that to happen. As the government became more and more Soviet backed and controlled, the way of life did begin to change considerably in many ways, many ideas were forced on the people and many changes were made without their consideration or consent. It is no wonder that many, many of the Russian trained soldiers in the Afghan army began to defect to the side of the Mujahideen. They were fighting for the way of life they had known for generations as opposed to one which was being thrust upon them, unwilling.

The Soviet presence was felt very strongly in 1978 and 79, when I was living there. I was acutely aware of it, and it was not even my culture, or way of life, that was being forcibly threatened or altered. I felt great compassion for the Afghans, having witnessed some occurrences at the time. There were forced curfews, men posted around the city with machine guns, tanks in the streets, and parked outside the city. We often heard

screams and gunfire in the night. I will relate more of this in my stories, but it was a harsh situation that forced many Afghans to choose a side, where they would once have been complacent. This is the political situation that I found myself living in during the time I spent in this fascinating country.

Religion

The religion that is by far and large predominant in Afghanistan is Islam. Islam has a book for guidance that is very much like the *Bible* for the Christians. It is called the *Qur'an*. I have been studying an English translation of the *Qur'an* and *A concise introduction to Islam*. These books have proven to be a wealth of invaluable information. The *Qur'an* is interesting in that it lays down many, many laws of everyday life--how to treat one another, how to marry, how many women to marry, how to treat them, how to distribute wealth, and many other such pragmatic guidelines. It's more than a book, as it incorporates religion into every aspect of daily life. "Islam joins faith to politics, religion to society, inseparably" (Smith 59).

"The *Qur'an* is the sacred scripture of Islam. It consists of 114 surahs, or chapters, which are divided into ayat or verses. Most of the surahs were revealed to Muhammad during the two periods of his Call: the Meccan period (610-622A.D.) and the Medinan period (622-632A.D.)"(Fakhry 1). This quote is taken from the introduction to the translation of the *Qur'an* that I studied. Further, Huston Smith states in *Islam, a concise introduction*, "The proper name of this religion is Islam. Derived from the root s-l-m, which means primarily 'peace' but in a secondary sense 'surrender', its full connotation is 'the peace that comes when one's life is surrendered to God'"()

In studying the *Qur'an* and the ideas of Islam, I was astonished at the many similarities to the *Bible*.

As people of the Book, Jews and Christians are accorded a special and privileged status in the *Qur'an*, because "they believe in God and the Last Day" (Surah 2/62)...the *Qur'an* abounds in references to the Old Testament figures,

including Abraham, Isaac, Moses, Jacob, Job, and Lot, as well as New Testament figures, including Mary, John (the Baptist), Jesus, son of Mary, and many others. The miracles of Christ are given in full, and, in fact, the *Qur'an* attributes to Christ a number of other miracles, which are not in the canonical Gospels, but are referred to in the Apocrypha. In addition, a large number of biblical narratives are given in the *Qur'an*, not for their historical interest but rather for their spiritual or moral interest: they are often intended to illustrate the justice of God's ways and His sovereignty in the world, and to underscore the trials and tribulations to which His prophets or messengers have been subjected throughout history (Fakhry 3).

It is of note, that Islam has a Golden Rule, and Ten Commandments handed down by none other than Moses. "First, God revealed the truth of monotheism, God's oneness, through Abraham. Second, God revealed the Ten Commandments through Moses. Third, God revealed the Golden Rule-that we are to do unto others, as we would have them do unto us-through Jesus" (quoted by Smith 48).

Islam, it would seem, is terribly misunderstood and distorted by the West, which is strange, given the striking similarities when one actually studies the *Qur'an* and Islamic literature and culture. "No part of the world," an American columnist has written, "is more hopelessly and systematically and stubbornly misunderstood by us than that complex of religion, culture and geography known as Islam." (quoted by Smith 1)

I recently was treated to a picture of a dollar bill on Facebook, sent to me by a relative in Florida, with the words "there is no God but Allah" written on it. The caption underneath read, "Don't accept these bills." I was very tempted to contact her and explain that in fact, the literal translation and meaning of this phrase is "There is no god but

God.” This explanation is directly from the *Qur'an*. This is a fine example of the misunderstandings that abound in the West.

Kabul

In the summer of my 25th year, I went to Asia with my boyfriend, Peter, a young Australian man who had already traveled extensively. He spoke several languages, among them Farsi and Pashtun, which earned him great respect among the Afghans, as this was most unusual. At first, we went alone together and stayed in a hotel mainly populated with hippie drifters. Later, we would go again, but this time with my two sons in tow. Peter had many friends in Kabul, both Western and Afghan, having been there several times before and spent quite some time there. It was very exotic. Kabul was like nothing I had previously known. In many ways, it was as though we had been transported back in time 1000 years. Then a car would pass or we'd hear a boombox, and be brought back to present time, where the old world mixed with the new in some strange and interesting ways.

There were donkeys in the streets, often being used to transport rural farmers' goods to the bazaar for sale. We visited a camel market on the outskirts of town.

It was a period of time when many, many young people set out to see and experience the world. Many were disillusioned with their own country or way of life and in search of something different, perhaps something better suited to their needs and personalities. I was one of these people. Originally, I followed Peter to faraway places, partly because it sounded romantic and partly because I wanted to be with him, wherever he went. Later, I realized that I was much happier traveling and there were places much better suited to my personality, and the lifestyle I preferred, than my own homeland. I felt I quickly began to thrive on a personal level while traveling and exploring other places and cultures. This didn't, however, sadly, prevent me from eventually becoming deathly ill and being forced

to flee back to the U.S. for emergency medical care. That is, however, another story for another time.

The first time we visited Afghanistan was brief. The second time, we came back with my sons, Troy and Charlie, as I said. We rented a huge two-story house, with a high wall around it in the Shahr-e-Nau Park district of Kabul. The house had running water, but in order to get hot water, we had to build a fire in a woodstove in the bathroom, which was upstairs. We did our laundry by sloshing laundry, cold water and soap around in a bucket with our feet, nearly freezing our toes as the weather grew colder in autumn. There was a tutor procured to home school the boys, a young American man who worked in the Peace Corps and rode a big, white horse to the house to work with the children. As time wore on and the political situation got worse and worse, we would have to look around to see if anyone was watching when we entered our house, as Westerners were no longer allowed to be living there or renting houses. Eventually, the Peace Corps (and all American companies) were expelled, and we lost our tutor and friend. Soon after we fled, realizing that the situation was becoming more and more dangerous, not to mention unpleasant.

Before we left, we moved to a hotel some Afghan friends of ours owned, which was near our old house. This was actually a good experience for many reasons, not the least of which is that the young boys who worked there, called bachas, befriended my sons and taught them to speak quite a bit of Farsi, taught them the money system, and how to count the money, and generally how to get around in the streets, shop in the bazaars, things that would be helpful to them in day-to-day life. My sons are long ago grown, but still remember these boys who took the time and had the patience to teach and help them, with great fondness. Sadly, as the revolution and invasion became more unavoidable and

insidious, these boys all eventually disappeared. We never knew if they had been captured, imprisoned, killed or just ran away to join the rebels. It was difficult for us not to know their fate. We had all become very fond of them.

In the hotel were a group of friends of ours from the U.S.. I am friends with many of these people to this day. We were all living there, temporarily, at least, and had an affection for the country and the people. It is probably common knowledge that one of the big attractions in Afghanistan for the hippie drifter crowd was the very high quality and readily available hashish. I must admit that we were no different in this respect. A large portion of many of our days were spent smoking hash and socializing while stoned, enjoying the whole culture around the procurement, preparation and enjoyment of the lovely substance. Many of us had children, too, which people probably find appalling now. I am fond of quoting Keith Richards when this subject is broached. He once said in an interview, when asked if he regretted his drug use in the presence of his children, "It was a different time," and so it was.

We had many Afghan friends, admittedly born largely out of business associations, involving the procurement of the hash. They were wonderful friendships, though, proving a loyalty that seemed to go far beyond business. We had big parties with live music, huge feasts, lots of hash, of course, dancing, and general cavorting, that would sometimes last all night long. Then came the curfews, men standing outside of certain buildings around town with machine guns in hand, the threat of being shot if we weren't locked safely in our homes before eleven o'clock. Once, we stayed too long at a party, and I remember running through the streets at about 11:30 p.m., hiding in doorways and shadows, terrified we might actually be shot. Fortunately, we made it safely home. I remember

hearing machine gun fire in the night and people screaming. During this period, many people were disappearing. This is about the time the bachas from the hotel disappeared. There were sometimes tanks in the streets, and soldiers would speak Russian over loudspeakers. It was very obvious the Soviets were behind everything. The guns we saw were Russian, as well. At one point, we were told to stay away from Chicken Street, the tourist shopping area near our house, because Russians were being stabbed and killed in protest against the obvious saturation of the Soviets into the government. It isn't that easy to distinguish an American from a Russian. All this was before the actual invasion.

One day, on April 28, 1978, to be exact, my dear friend Susie, who was 6 months pregnant, was going into downtown Kabul to get her visa renewed or something. As she walked hand in hand with her six-year old son, Shambo, they heard a rumbling, looked around to see where it was coming from, to see many soldiers marching up the street followed by tanks. Then the tanks started to bomb the surrounding buildings and planes began to fly overhead. Susie, of course, became alarmed and began to run, urging Shambo to go faster. They were running from doorway to doorway, hiding behind anything that would give them shelter or hide them from view. They ran all the way across Kabul to the hotel and relative safety and the comfort of friends. When I asked Susie years later, if Shambo was scared, she replied, "No. Are you kidding? He was living every little boy's fantasy, running away from tanks, guns, soldiers, planes, and bombs. He was so excited. He thought it was huge fun." I guess it's all in your perspective.

Bamyan

The Soviet Union built the Salang Tunnel through the Hindu Kush mountains of Afghanistan in 1964. Up until that time, there had been, for centuries, a road that ran from Kabul to the north that cut through the Bamyan Valley. This was a major transit point on the famed Silk Road for trade between Central Asia and India.

The new main road now enters Bamyan Province from the east over the Shibar Pass. Bamyan is a high altitude plateau bordered on the southeast by the Koh-e-baba mountain range. It has a mountainous continental climate with very warm summers and cold winters with temperatures reaching below zero. Rain is rare here. With its dry climate and narrow, intensely farmed valleys, Bamyan has little in the way of woodland. Snowmelt is the main source of water and crop irrigation (Unesco).

Bamyan means “the place of shining light.” In the early centuries of the first millennium A.D., Bamyan was part of the Buddhist Kushan empire, which united large parts of India and Central Asia. The earliest references to Bamyan occur in the 4th century, and recent research has shown that some of the Buddhist frescoes found in Bamyan can be dated back to the early 5th century. Around this time, Bamyan was a Buddhist center with many temples and sites of worship, among them the famed Giant Buddha statues that were, sadly, destroyed by the Taliban in 2001, after watching over the Bamyan Valley for over 1500 years. At that time, there were thousands of Buddhist monks living in the valley. (Centlivres)

The Arab invasions and subsequent Muslim rulers gradually converted Afghanistan to Islam. Bamyan became a prosperous Muslim city. However, its prosperity was abruptly ended by the invasion of Genghis Khan in 1221 A.D. The city’s citadel then occupied the

prominent hill known today as Shar-e-Gholghola. The Mongols ransacked the fortress and massacred the population, giving the hill its name, which means the “City of Screams” (www.silkroadbamiyan)

For many years Afghanistan remained closed to most travelers and then, in the 1970s there came a new kind of traveler, the youth of Europe and America who found the hippy trail from Istanbul to Kathmandu. Bamiyan, with its historical Buddhas and the beautiful lakes of Band-e-Amir became a favorite stopover.

In 2003, the archeological remains and cultural landscape of Bamiyan were declared to be UNESCO world heritage sites. The Bamiyan valley bears witness to a period of Buddhist history and a cultural tradition, which has vanished from Central Asia.

I was fortunate enough to spend some time in Bamiyan Province during my time in Afghanistan. While there, I visited the Giant Buddhas and the lakes of Band-e-amir, Shar-e-Gholghola, and Dragon Valley, and I witnessed buzkashi games. Most of these adventures were also undertaken on horseback. This, as far as I am concerned, was the best part of my travels, far from the political strife and chaos occurring in Kabul, in the presence of such awesome antiquity, the sites of ancient legend. It was the most awe-inspiring thing I ever encountered on my travels and, very possibly, in my life.

We traveled by taxi, driven by a friend’s brother, through the snowy mountains of the Hindu Kush. In the town of Bamiyan itself, we stayed in a yurt, composed of mud and straw. I do not remember being uncomfortable. In this little yurt compound in which we stayed, we met a family of four. They were from South Africa, very lovely and interesting people. I had two lively young boys, as did they, and the kids played around the campfire while we adults spoke of world events, the political situation in Kabul, our

different travels and experiences, and we spoke quite a bit about the dwindling animal populations in Africa. This subject caused this family, particularly the father, much distress. He was especially disturbed by the decimation of the elephants. I believe poaching may have been a big problem, though this was very long ago and my memory hazy. I do, however, remember clearly how deeply upset he was by the disappearance of the great beasts. The most fascinating thing to me, about this story, is the fact that it was revealed in the course of conversation that he was a professional mercenary. He was quite open about it. I asked him many questions about which side he fought for and how he chose his work. It basically came down to finances, if I recall correctly. There is, of course, an entire argument about ethics that I could interject here, but that is not related to the subject at hand. Suffice it to say that I was taken aback a bit by what I considered to be an immoral stance and most surprising of all for me, from a man I quickly grew to respect and like very much.

However, this is just one small instance of the education in humanities and human nature that one can stumble upon when one explores the world at large. Here was a man who fought and killed purely for money, and to support his family, while being torn apart by the harm done to animals in his home country, and being a loving father and family man, not to mention highly intelligent and likable. It was an encounter that has stayed with me for a long time. Often, when taken as a whole, most people or situations have some merit, no matter how much we may think otherwise.

One morning, we set out on horseback through the desert with our little Afghan guide, a young boy of maybe 12 or 13. We moved rather slowly, as my youngest son, Troy, seemed afraid of the horse and would not go very fast--annoying little fellow.

Occasionally, we would canter ahead, leaving Troy with the guide. It was a wonderful experience. It was the only time I have ever gotten to ride a horse out in the open, going at whatever speed I wished, going anywhere I wished, as opposed to some track or designated area, as in the U.S. It was a great feeling of wildness and freedom, of times long gone. Riding through the desert with its arid openness has such a unique feel to it, an expansiveness that is difficult to describe, especially in a place where there are no roads, no buildings, no electric wires, no other people. As far as the eye can see there is only nature, an unusually expansive, extreme, harsh, yet heartrendingly beautiful nature.

Our first stop on this day was at Dragon Valley, about five km outside of the town of Bamyān. This valley has a spectacular geological formation associated with the legend of Hazrat Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Mohammed. He is said to have slain a dragon that was terrorizing the area, in order to save a young girl who was being offered to appease the beast. There is a gigantic stone ridge, which is split in the middle. This is reputed to be the remains of the dragon, where Hazrat Ali cleaved it in two with his sword, Zulfiqar. There is an effervescent spring here that is called Dragon's Tears. It is said that Hazrat Ali's horse's hooves struck that spot when he slew the dragon, and the water springing from the rock is said to be the tears shed by the dying dragon. I bent down and inhaled just over the water as I was instructed, and the effervescence in the water seemed to suck the breath out of my lungs. It was a very weird feeling. This is the only effervescent spring I have ever encountered.

Next, we rode on to the Giant Buddha statues. The Buddhas were to be the pinnacle of my travel experience. It is difficult to imagine a more breathtaking, awe-inspiring sight. These things are almost inconceivably huge. There is a network of caves that meander

around behind them that lead to the top of their heads, with steps carved from the very rock in the mountain. Buddhist monks lived in these caves many centuries ago and painted frescoes on the walls and ceilings. The entire thing, statues, steps, and caves, are all carved right into the stone of the mountainside. We actually went into the caves, climbed up the steps, and onto the top of the Buddha's heads. Sitting up there, at that lofty height, the view was so amazing and so breathtakingly beautiful that I will never forget it. When one looked up, directly above our heads, the ceiling was painted with beautiful Buddhist paintings, much like a Tibetan Tanka. I feel there is no way to convey in words, this experience and the profundity of it. Fortunately, it was not lost on me, despite my youthful oblivion. It was truly a place that inspired worship. These Buddhas measure respectively, 55 and 37 meters high. They are the largest examples of standing Buddha carvings in the world, and as mentioned previously, are over 1500 years old. Sadly, it is said the Taliban saw them as idolatrous and envied the money being spent to preserve them, as a World Heritage site, so they attempted to destroy them with tanks. When that failed, they employed explosive devices. In March of 2001, after a month of explosive barrages, the ancient Buddha statues were finally destroyed. I am not ashamed to admit that when I was informed of the destruction of the Great Buddhas, I wept. It was a very sad moment for me. I considered these one of the great treasures and great wonders of the world. It is truly an enormous loss.

Our next stop on our desert horseback tour of ancient landmarks was Shar-e-Gholghola, which translates into the "City of Screams." Another awesome experience, this is the site of the old town of Bamyan, where the Mongol hordes massacred an entire city and piled their skulls into columns many feet high. The version I was told, though I

have found no documentation to back this up, was that they isolated the city and starved and thirsted the population to death. Regardless, when I was there, one could still see the columns that supposedly were once skulls. They were no longer discernable as skulls, as the wind, sun and harsh weather had worn them down almost smooth. They appeared as tall, skinny, stony pillars. Somehow, the antiquity of the place and the story impressed me greatly, as did my own imaginings of the aggression and suffering that took place there so long ago. This reportedly took place in 1221 A.D., when Genghis Khan invaded the area, as mentioned before. We set out for the ride home, having had an eventful and exhausting, albeit unforgettable, day.

Our next planned adventure, to be embarked upon the next day, was to ride by bus to Band-e-Amir, 75 km northwest of Bamyan, where lies a group of large, clear, beautiful lakes. There, we planned once again to set out on horseback to explore the lakes. Being that there was a shortage of usable roads then, especially to many of the sites I speak of, horseback was a popular mode of travel. Of course, there is also the charm and thrill of doing it the way it had been done for many centuries. I must say, under those circumstances, at that time, I think it was the best possible choice and I would have highly recommended it to anyone considering it. It would have been that much more thrilling if it hadn't been for my son's fear of horses slowing us down. However, we made the best of it and have remarkable memories for a lifetime, nonetheless.

Band-e Amir is a series of six deep blue lakes, separated by dams made of travertine, a mineral deposit. Located in the Hindu Kush Mountains of Afghanistan, at approximately 3000 meters elevation, they were created by carbon dioxide rich water oozing out of faults and fractures, depositing calcium carbonate precipitate in the form travertine walls

that form the walls of these lakes. It is one of the few rare natural lakes in the world created this way. This gives it a very unique visual appearance, The walls of the lakes look white, which deepens the already intense blue of the water. It is a very rare and beautiful sight. Band-e Amir has been described as Afghanistan's Grand Canyon. It later became Afghanistan's first National Park and has also been designated a World Heritage site. The terrain here is stark and harsh. High desert plateau offers a bleak, nearly colorless backdrop, emphasizing, once again, the deep, rich blue of the lakes. The land is not without beauty, but it is a stark beauty.

It is advisable to avoid this area at anytime of the year other than summer, as it reaches temperatures of 20 degrees Celsius. My memory of the people is that they were friendly and hospitable. I remember waking on a chilly morning to the relative warmth of a woodstove fire built using hardened, formed dung patties. One of the things that amazed me in my travels, were the many and varied uses different cultures seem to find for dung. I once lived in a house in India that had floors made of hardened dung. My memories of the lakes are not as vivid as memories of the Buddhas. I think I may have been getting sick, if I remember correctly. I was very sick for a long time while I was there, and it made me weak and hazy. I just remember the intense beauty and color of the lakes and the unique quality of the landscape juxtaposed with the water. It was a very beautiful sight and a wonderful place to ride horseback for a day.

I don't actually remember where it fell chronologically on our trip, but at some point on this little side journey, we were invited to attend a buzkashi game. Buzkashi is what one could probably call the Afghan national sport. It is brutal and chaotic and a great source of national pride and personal pride for riders, their villages, friends and families.

Being a buzkashi rider is akin to being a famous sports hero in the U.S. It doesn't pay as well, to be sure, but it carries enormous respect and prestige.

Buzkashi has been around for centuries. It is played on horseback, using the carcass of a goat as the "ball". When played in the Northern countryside it is played with few rules and no physical boundaries, a fact that was later to become shockingly apparent to us as uninformed spectators. Afghan boys often dream of becoming great buzkashi riders the same way young boys in America dream of becoming a football hero, for instance. It is a very high aspiration in their culture.

We rode in the back of a rickety little pick up truck with some other townspeople out to the playing field, which was simply an open space way out in the middle of nowhere. On the way, my oldest son happened to look under his seat and saw the goat carcass that was to be used as the "ball." He yelled out excitedly, "Hey, mom, there's a dead goat under my seat." It was pretty funny, he seemed to take it in stride. Once there, we all piled out of the truck and found a place on the side of a hill to squat in the sand and get a good view of the playing field. It takes a long time to really get started. All the men have to mount their horses and get situated. Then an announcer rides around and narrates the important points in Farsi, which wasn't much help to me as I spoke very little of it. At first, there is only a little movement, as they are in a tight bunch, and then they start jostling each other more and more until someone gets the "ball" and runs with it. Then all hell breaks loose, and there is screaming, fighting, chasing, yelling and whips and gashes as riders tear back and forth across the terrain at full gallop. Apparently, there are goals, but I can't remember if I could even tell where they were. When they are in a tight clench, one can't really see what is happening with any clarity, so I spaced off and was

looking away, probably more than a bit stoned at the time, and suddenly I heard people yelling, and as I began to come back to the present time and place, realized that everyone was getting up and running, and my boyfriend was nearly dragging me away by this time. I looked up to see the entire buzkashi team galloping straight toward us at full speed, now mere yards away. I fortunately managed to jump to my feet and run out of the way in the nick of time. My family survived our first buzkashi game, barely, and lived to tell about it. A very strange, exotic, unique and somewhat frightening experience it was, not to mention memorable. We later saw an official buzkashi game in Kabul Stadium, complete with walls, boundaries and rules. It wasn't nearly as much fun, as exciting, or as memorable as the "real" buzkashi game we had the privilege to witness (and run from) in the north.

When traveling, I find the closer one can get to the main population, the closer one can come to their way of life, the more one learns and the more enriching the experience. I have always found it difficult to understand why people travel to foreign countries only to stay in five-star hotels where everything is exactly the same as it is at home. One learns little or nothing about the people or the culture in this way. The closer one comes to sharing the lifestyle of the people, the closer one is to understanding something about them and their way of life.

Riding with the Kuchis

Gypsies and nomads have always fascinated me: the lifestyle of moving around constantly, having only your tribe, family and friends as a constant in your life. The Afghan nomads are called Kuchis. They seemed very exotic to me. The only possessions for the Kuchis are what they can carry on camel or horseback. They travel around the deserts and mountains of Afghanistan and pitch tents for shelter. They carry around beautiful handmade carpets and throw them on the ground as a floor and seating in these tents. They have a particular way of dressing and are easily recognizable by their look, jewelry, hairstyles, and clothing. I still own a Kuchi dress I bought in Afghanistan so many years ago. It is long, heavy and extremely warm, being made of very heavy velvet with embroidered borders.

The Kuchis were once celebrated in the west as handsome, romantic nomads adorned with silver and lapis jewelry. Traditionally, they have lived by selling or bartering animals, wool, meat, and dairy products for foodstuffs and other items with villagers. As they move from pasture to pasture, the Kuchis are able to escape the limits on the size of local herds, a restriction villagers are subjected to. (Embassy of Afghanistan-Tokyo, The Kuchis)

The Kuchis are not liked by other Afghan people; they are ostracized, looked down upon, often yelled at, called names, or have things thrown at them. People are highly suspicious of them, believing them to be thieves and criminals. It is true that they sometimes steal to survive. This is common knowledge. However, this lack of ownership, of ties to any one place or job, has always fascinated me. One day, while riding on

horseback through the desert, we came upon a caravan of Kuchis. They typically travel in a long caravan of horses and pack camels, and sometimes donkeys, sheep and goats. As we came alongside them, they were very friendly, greeting us and inviting us to ride with them. This was exciting for me, getting to ride with, meet, talk to, laugh with and befriend real Afghan gypsies. We rode with them for a while, talking and laughing and they invited us to stop and eat lunch with them. They seemed like a happy people to me. They were very friendly and hospitable, which altered my perspective, sadly influenced by the townspeople. It was relaxing, comfortable and enjoyable riding with these warm, lively people. I enjoyed this encounter very much. I suppose I was imagining myself as some sort of gypsy, living free in the desert, traveling around on horseback with my tribe. I think it was the idea of total personal freedom that appealed to me in my younger years (not to mention possibly a lack of responsibility). Now, I think I feel like I am too old to even manage it, needing the same warm bed and home to retreat to each night. How things change. It was a wonderful and, once again, enlightening experience that shows how great people can be when you give them a chance to show you the best of themselves and set aside predetermined and uninformed judgments.

Summary

In summary, while there are many stark differences between the culture of Afghanistan, the people, the lifestyle, dress, politics and even the terrain, and the culture in America, I found many commonalities in the humanity of the people. I enjoyed getting to know them and found them charming, despite the differences in our beliefs and attitudes. They proved to be good friends and wonderful hosts, hospitality actually being one of the tenets set forth in the *Qur'an*. Speaking of the *Qur'an*, there are also many glaring similarities between this holy book of Islam and our Christian *Bible*, a fact that I personally find amusing and ironic since the worst perpetrators of hatred toward these people are often the Christians, and they base it on religious differences that are largely imagined through ignorance and the unfortunate tendency many have not to bother to research a subject before they form strong negative opinions about them.

I found the Afghans to be mostly honorable, religious, friendly, kind, passionate, lovers of life and freedom. Naturally, I disagree with some of their beliefs, but I am not Afghan, so that is not my decision to make.

One of the problems I had initially, upon arrival in Afghanistan, as most modern Western women probably would, is the attitude toward women. However, I was once treated to a stay at a compound in the wilderness where I was introduced to all the women and children, and I have to say I have never seen such big smiles, such faces full of happiness. These women literally shone when they smiled. It led me to think at length about what would be so joyful about their lives. I came up with some answers of my own conjuring, such as, the joy of each other's companionship on a constant basis, the joy of

spending all their time with their children when they are young, being protected by their men, not having to go out in the world and struggle and compete. Mind you, all of these “joys” are forced upon them, but they certainly, as far as I could tell, seemed to be in agreement with the lot they were dealt. I saw similar smiles of great joy on very poor women in India. The conclusion this led me to is that we cannot decide what another’s happiness may depend upon. No one culture or power or religion should be deciding what is best for everyone. I believe it truly differs from place to place and culture to culture. This is one of the conclusions I drew while traveling.

Another conclusion I came to, and I think I have mentioned it before, was that people everywhere are essentially the same in their humanity. They laugh, they cry, they love, and do the best they can within whatever the parameters are that have been set for them by their circumstances. Of course, in any country, city, or culture, there will be a few who are misled in their beliefs or ideas, and sometimes they somehow end up gaining more power than is their due, but that does not mean that an entire culture is evil, cruel, fanatical, destructive, or whatever the belief about them is. It is usually a minority who somehow gain control of the masses. This has been the case in Afghanistan, though to be fair, gaining any kind of control over Afghanistan is a feat of great proportions, given their warrior tendencies and their independence. In these traits, I have to admit that I admire them.

During my travels in Afghanistan, I experienced some wondrous things, some extremely dangerous, some awesome in their scope and antiquity, some just plain human and fun. I think one of the things I loved about the country was simply the fact that it was so alien to me, so completely foreign to anything I had previously known or experienced.

Although things could have turned out much worse, and for many I knew, they did, I have no regrets. I have some amazing memories of things few have experienced. Some of them seem to have come from a time before I was born, as they were invested with a wildness and a feeling of freedom that is seldom experienced today. I feel very fortunate to have had the privilege of seeing and experiencing this culture and country before wars decimated and largely destroyed it, a fact which deeply saddens me. I am grateful for the opportunities I had to enjoy these unique and wonderful people while their culture was still largely intact. I wouldn't change any of it for the world. In fact, though I know the world is a very different place now than it was then, I still dream of traveling again, and experiencing some of the joy, wildness and freedom that so enthralled me in my youth. It is a hope I have for the future.

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