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Mansour, Khaled and Mohammed

Mansour, Khaled, Mohammed: my three Kuwaitis. When I first met them in 1987, I knew only that Kuwait was a country somewhere in the Middle East. When I first met them, they knew so little English that we could not carry on even the most elementary conversation. My assignment was to teach them enough English that they could enter VCU as undergraduates and progress as quickly as possible through pre-dentistry to the School of Dentistry, a tough four years for them, even if their English was in good shape.

The government of Kuwait wanted to have native Kuwaitis available as dentists, since Egyptians and other Arabs were the only dentists in Kuwait. The Kuwaiti government chose VCU because of its well-known School of Dentistry. The young men (women were not considered for this assignment) would be financed handsomely by the government for however long their complete dental education took. They would have yearly journeys back to Kuwait, and if any of them should get married, their monthly stipend would be raised to cover family expenses, too.

We began with three hours every morning, Monday through Friday. Three hours of intensive English instruction can be very tiring for students and instructor. I supplemented basic texts with popular magazines, newspapers, and casual conversations comparing their culture with mine. They were, indeed are, very proud of their country and its government. They talked fondly of "the family"; that is the only way they ever referred to the reigning Sheik and his extensive family who constitute the core of the government. I could see why they should be fond of such a benevolent dictatorship.



After their English progressed sufficiently for us to be preparing for the English as a Foreign Language test all foreign students have to take in order to enter a university, I had a considerable learning experience of my own. They had never taken a standardized test, and neither had I. When I helped them with the first sample test, I realized that the

strategies of taking of a timed test were as important as the knowledge the test quantified. I took the several sample tests until I developed my own strategies of handling the contest against time. Then, I tested the three of them repeatedly, explaining how to devote just the right amount of time to each question without wasting valuable time. Finally, when they took the real test, they did remarkably well. Incidentally, I never did make a perfect score on the test, a fact that they found hilarious. Actually, I disagreed with the answers of two or three of the questions. The official answers were simply wrong!

Mohammed told me about their eating customs – seated comfortably on the floor around the serving dishes from which each man ate, using his right hand and scooping the food with fingers supplemented by bread. (The left hand was never used for food, because it is unclean. I did not encourage them to tell me why.) The women of the household served the food and ate later after the men had finished. When I reacted negatively to such a custom, they assured me that, if I were to go to Kuwait, I would be welcomed and would be invited to dine with the men. How did I rate such treatment? I got the idea that my age plus my status as their teacher was enough to remove me from the general rank of women. I can't help wondering about that!



I did discover the next year that my white hair had given me some credibility that they found lacking in the occasional young woman they had for a teacher when they were admitted full time to the University. But we got along famously, and by the end of the following summer, I was rewarded with a truly American, affectionate hug from Mansour. He had come a long way in becoming Americanized.

They were intelligent men and learned so quickly that, just before Christmas, I felt they had enough English to join two of my other classes. One was a regular freshman composition class; the other was a mixed ESL class consisting of men and women from Switzerland, Poland, China, Korea, France, Italy, Russia, and Vietnam. I was wrong. The Kuwaitis could not yet handle the work of the composition class, but they were able to converse some with the American students. Several of the Americans were dismayed to discover that Muslims do not celebrate Christmas! I, in turn, was dismayed that these

Americans knew so little about another culture. Fortunately, the Kuwaitis fitted in very well with the ESL class. They enjoyed talking to people from other countries, many of which they knew from their travels.

Kuwait is a very small country, but these three, who had not known each other until they were selected for the dental program here, had widely divergent backgrounds.

Mohammed Mohammed was a Shiite, an Islamic sect I had only heard associated with the extremes in political behavior in Iran. He was never able to explain to me how his denomination differed from the other, but, then, most Christians find it impossible to explain how their own beliefs differ from other Christians'. Mohammed was very handsome, even when he decided to shave his head during the Christmas break. He denied that the act had any religious significance. He practiced his faith devoutly as did the others, praying to Mecca five times a day and carefully observing all the dietary restrictions. He frequently went to Washington to buy meat that had been ritually killed and prepared according to Muslim rules. He learned to seek out Kosher food supplies in Richmond even though as an Arab he initially found the idea unacceptable. He found a nearby farmer who sold him a lamb which he slaughtered and shared with the other two. He was very athletic, enjoyed pickup games of soccer and worked out regularly in the street-shoe gym on the campus. When Mohammed was married later, his wife returned to Kuwait just in time to be caught in the turmoil of the Iraqi invasion. For quite some time, he did not know her fate. She did return safely to him after the war.

Khaled Hashem was the shy one with whom I was the least well acquainted. I originally judged him to be the most intelligent of the three, but he seemed to have the most trouble with his academic courses. His name, Khaled, contains an Arab sound /kh/ that we do not have in English. With his coaching I could sometimes get the sound almost right. Most people didn't try. So, he became Kaled, a name he smilingly accepted. He was a Sunni Muslim, a member of the most populous sect in Kuwait. He never volunteered any information about himself. In fact, he didn't respond well to questions about himself, either. But he, like Mansour and Mohammed, suffered during their first Ramadan. Ramadan is a month of the Islamic lunar calendar, consequently it, like our Easter, falls at a different time each year. During Ramadan, Muslims fast during daylight hours, eating only after dark. At the end of Ramadan, the feasting and celebrating resembles the Christian Mardi Gras in this country. It coincided with the end of the semester and their first final exams. The required fasting and praying was especially difficult during their first experience with college exams.

Mansour Al-Ajmi was shy, too, but responded well to personal attention and became the one I knew best. He, too, was Sunni, but he also belonged to a Bedouin tribe, setting him apart from Sunni Khaled as well as from Shiite Mohammed. He had great pride in his family, the Al-Ajmis, who had large family reunions even in this country. He was by far the most determined student and perhaps the most intelligent as well. Despite his distrust of his freshman English teacher, a very attractive young woman, he made an A in the class, a fantastic accomplishment for a new speaker. He brought me some of his compositions as he worked on them. They showed excellent organization and amazing

control of the English language. He did well in all his classes, consistently making the Dean's list until Iraq invaded Kuwait. He was so distraught by the invasion and the possible fate of his relatives in Kuwait that he barely succeeded in attending classes. The Deans of Humanities and Sciences and of Dentistry intervened on behalf of all three men in order to keep their scholastic records intact. He has kept me up-to-date on his activities as well as those of the others. All three now have their dental degrees.

The Kuwait/Dentistry program has thrived along with improved and expanded ESL instruction. Now there are several ESL instructors to introduce the Kuwaitis to English, and some twenty-five or so new Kuwaitis enter the program every year.

Mohammed married and has a child, a baby girl. Khaled is as shy as ever. Mansour's brother finally allowed him to get married. The last time I talked to him, he was happy and said he would bring his wife to meet me, but the isolation of married women in the culture is probably too great for him to overcome easily. The ordeal would also be considerable for her. Yet, it was Mansour who became Americanized enough that, after he returned from a summer in Kuwait several years ago, he rushed down a corridor at school to greet me and actually gave me that big hug I mentioned earlier. He assured me that the only reason he hadn't told me goodbye when he went back to Kuwait was that it was Ramadan, a month when Muslim men are denied any contact with women. I hope that I will hear from one or more of them when they become settled in their dentistry offices in Kuwait.

The opportunity I had to know these three young men is certainly among the highlights of a happy teaching career. They gave me many insights into a completely foreign culture, not to mention getting to know three fine men. I am sure there are many aspects of Islam I didn't get to know, but what I know of Mansour, Khaled, and Mohammed is worth cherishing.