

**9/26/04: An evening with a young Afghan immigrant girl; And a lesson in internalization of memories.**

We had a time with a young Afghan woman that illustrated how we as human beings get in touch with ourselves. It happens always through physical means – the sounds of speech, images on a page, emblems, places, even old neighborhoods – these are the means by which ideas, memories are “known”. Human dependence on language, symbolic systems, is a kind of miracle, always enabled through forms, things. In this case it was places that awakened memory in the young woman we spent the evening with.

She had come to St Louis to see old friends, having been away for 3 years. She missed everyone, had resented having to go to California. She was eager to come, but when we saw her the night before she left she confessed that in fact she had not had a good time. She was hemmed in with a couple of families only, in L’s house, and H’s house, loving friends who took pride in having her with them. In both places she was trapped.

Everyone wanted to feed her and treat her as an honored guest in the Afghan fashion, smothering her with attention, whereas she was now very much an American girl who wanted to get around and see old friends and old places. But there was no transportation. So she languished. She had decided to go back to California early, even to pay an extra \$80 just to get out of here.

We didn’t know where to take her for supper but Rita suggested we go down to south Grand which Mariam was familiar with and try to find a restaurant there. Mariam wanted us to park near the Salon she used to work at as an apprentice. It was closed of course but next door was the Vietnamese restaurant where she had often eaten lunch when she was working at the Salon. As we were eating she said, almost spontaneously, out of the blue, “I love this place.” It seemed to bring back memories of time now passed. The waiter and she discovered they knew each other. He told her about what had happened to some of the people she had known there and in the Salon next door.

As we left Rita had the brilliant idea of suggesting we go by Mariam’s old neighborhoods – her family had lived in two apartments. As we drove down Grand she recalled that she and her mother had carried groceries along Grand from Schnucks to their apartment, a distance of half a mile or more. There was no car and no cart to bear the burden; they carried it themselves.

For a 14 or 15 year old girl the distance with a load of groceries would have seemed an endless journey. When we paused in front of one of her apartments she remembered the boy across the street that she liked. They had called each other a few times after she left but then lost track of each other. We all remembered that the landlord had been odd. But she was relatively happy there. When she was torn away to go to California she was heartbroken. It would become a blessing.

When we drove down Merrimec street where she had lived earlier she pointed to the treeshaded sidewalk where she and her mother used to walk in the evenings after the younger kids had been put to bed. Those were precious times for Mariam: "My mother is my best friend," she said. "She still is." As we paused in front of their first apartment in St Louis I had many memories, and I feel sure she had similar ones. It had been a comfortable place, relatively safe and spacious enough, but it was sold and the new landlord made their lives miserable. She was an unhappy woman, seemingly driven by rage. She ordered them to move out -- now. There was no time to wait, just leave. Her hostility and menace fell on Mariam, the only one who could speak English. Desperately she and her mother and several others of us tried to find a place for them. Once it was found, even before other help could come Mariam began to carry their effects with her own hands the four blocks to the new apartment. Eventually help came. She cleaned up the old apartment while her mother was at work. When it was all done I tried to remind her mother, in a stammering Farsi, what a precious gift she had been given in Mariam. The confrontations with the old landlord, the negotiations with the quirky new one, the cleanup of the old apartment, the physical effort of moving the whole household -- all of this Mariam had borne essentially alone. A teenage girl forced to be an adult. All this came back to me as we stared at the old apartment in the dark.

Our time together in the old familiar places seemed to stir recollections of times past -- defeats, struggles, heartaches, a young girl trying survive in an inner city school, acquiring the language and ways of a strange people, a foreign world, and when she came home she became an adult, for she was the chief negotiator, spokesperson for a whole household. There must have been a few victories and incremental gains in school.

But in California, despite her heartbreak at leaving St Louis, she had found a new life. She had graduated from High School, had a job, the only job that would provide for her family, not only the food that went on the table but the insurance; she would never quit. But she would begin college in night school

– one course this semester; she can only do one course a semester.

She said at one point, “I found out that I could make it. I could do well in school.” This is a girl who had no formal education during the 6 years their family had been in India. When they arrived in this country she could not read or write in her own language, although she had learned some English – it would prove a vital skill once in America. They had fled Afghanistan when the Taliban took Kabul. Her family had survived the period of Soviet occupation and Afghan communist government, the disappearance of the father, and even the battle for Kabul in which the Mujahedin destroyed most of the city, but when the Taliban arrived the mother took her seven year old daughter Mariam and three tiny children, they all must have been under four years of age, and fled to India. She must have had good connections for they took a plane from Kabul to Delhi, where facilities for Afghan refugees were better than in Pakistan. But the six years in India were, in a sense, lost years. The mother worked while Mariam, as she said, “kept house.” She began her service in the household by managing the younger siblings and keeping house; and somehow she acquired English, but had no other education. It was, as I see it now, a formative experience, for Mariam learned to work hard and to accept responsibility. If she could say that her mother was her best friend her mother could say as much for her. Mariam at an early age -- 8, 9 10, 11, 12, 13 -- held this little family together while her mother worked.

It was no different in St. Louis. Mariam was the anchorage while her mother worked. She was anchorage for her mother as well as the children, for she was the one grown up (or almost grown up) human being who could the mother could communicate with in her own language, the only one who could actually understand her, for she never learned much English.

And now, in California, Mariam had found out she could “make it.” She will make it. I pray that she will.