

Part II: Epilogue...and a New Narrative

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You can't stand long under the shadow of the pyramids or Hagia Sophia without wondering how long we gazed at the heavens before trying to reach them. You can't talk long with an Egyptian youth or taxi driver without wondering what incites a person to risk stability and survival merely to gain a voice. What is it inside us that inherently strives to defy gravity and dictator alike, that pushes to be acknowledged despite the blood and tears and consequences?

The role of any writer—or traveler—is to ask these questions, to weave the disjointed events and experiences of our existence into some kind of palpable narrative. The narrative from my recent trip was threefold: in Istanbul, a city that has experienced and symbolized such furious bloodshed over the millennia, two oft-warring religions beautifully and seamlessly exist under the same dome; in Cairo, the people are filled with an energy, an optimism, a drive for change that spits in the face of historical precedent and political odds; and despite all the places I've been, I still have so much to learn about the world. It's humbling.

When I first started traveling I did so because I wanted to give my future students first-hand knowledge of that world—as my high school English teacher did for us—to impart upon them that behind the pyramids and domes and revolutions lie the narratives, the people that made it all happen. At the same time, I constantly remind them of the lives and resources we've wasted over the millennia because of ignorance, all the times we've pushed each other back as a species because we haven't taken the time to understand our neighbor or a villager halfway across the globe. It's difficult to empathize with someone when you don't appreciate where they're coming from; on the other hand, it's hard to hate a whole people when you've shared a drink with one of them.

I've accepted a two-year teaching position in Spain. In taking this next step I'm giving up a city that has given me the happiest years of my life, but I know I'm ready; I know I've sucked out the marrow*. And as I wrote in my journal a few weeks ago, it's the people I encountered in this city who have given me the confidence to leave it.

In much the same way, it's the connections I make abroad that have kept me traveling year after year. Seven years ago, I returned from my first trip abroad, a trip so demanding I still barely feel hunger anymore. Yet I still look back so fondly on those six weeks because of those faces, those people that have always overshadowed the days without food and nights on park benches. My mind rolls back to all those nuanced memories from my adventures over the years--those I've written about and so many more that hide between the lines--and I can't help but smile. And it makes me less apprehensive—and all the more excited—about the journey that lies ahead.

I wrote most of this travelogue on the plane, and in the months since I've watched the “Arab Spring” stretch out longer than the world of Facebook and Twitter can handle. Egypt, whose

revolution was never assured, seems by so many measures to be teetering toward military dictatorship...and as a student of history, I know full well revolutions aren't supposed to be successful. But "the only recognizable feature of hope is action," as Grace Paley wrote—so clearly, despite the bloodshed, there's hope in the region.

And I also know history well enough to know of those innumerable exceptions to the rule, those moments that challenged greed and precedent and cultural boundaries, that showed what can be accomplished when we stop pushing each other back and instead push each other up to the heavens.

Those are the narratives I'm bringing with me to my students.

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