

## A 32-Mile Journey Half-Way Around the Globe

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My daily journey begins before dawn as I drive from my comfortable home in a suburban, affluent community in northern New England, where education and community are the priorities of the town. I leave my children asleep in their beds knowing they will get to school safely as my daughter can drive them or walk as we live about a quarter-mile from the high school, have a choice for lunch from home or purchased in the cafeteria, have their homework completed, succeed in classes throughout the day, attend practice for whatever sport is in season and some days even attend a game or school event that is well-supported by the student body and community. I start my day with the comfort of knowing that my children will be taken care of while I am working. They will be safe getting to and from school. They will be nurtured and provided for at home, at school and by the community. We are privileged and blessed. Even my children recognize this asking, "Why are we the lucky ones to live where we do?"

I drive through more rural towns and arrive in the former French-dominant, blue-collar mill town. This city has drastically changed since when I was growing up. It is now more diverse racially and culturally than ever with the influx of a significant refugee and immigrant population of Somalis and neighboring countries beginning about 2002. The school system serves a population of low socio-economic students and is one of the most diverse in the state by percentage of students. All students in my ELL classes live at or below the poverty line. I have journeyed half way around the globe in 32 miles.

Entering my classroom I become part of a totally different environment. I am the only white person. I am a female person of power. I am the only English as a first language speaker. In most ELL classes, I am the only non-Muslim. I am the minority.

Before the first day of school I had visited ELL classes and realized that all my students would be black, mostly Muslim and their first language(s) would not be English. I had interned a suburban school district that is the most diverse racially and ethnically, in the state, so I had some exposure to the challenges and differences in teaching ELLs. I was amazed at the lives some of these of children had already lived. I was very excited that I would be a part of their bridge to a new community and nation and hope to assist them through education in creating a new life in the United States.

My first day of teaching was very intimidating. Upon reflection I am certain some of it was just being a brand new teacher, but I think some was being in a "foreign culture." It was difficult to understand some of my students due to their accents, they greeted and spoke with each other differently than I was accustomed

to and everything was done at sloooooow, deliberate pace. Many male students portrayed a gangsta image and they were “baaad” and “going to live in the hood.” They would serenade the class with gangsta rap. I managed to stop the vulgar, violent lyrics but tried to “honor” their culture and let them rap or beat-box as long as it was not offensive.

A particular point of contention was their use of the word nigger as in “W’sup nigger.” At first I responded quite strongly and read them the riot act. A few would use it just to see my reaction. As the year continued I noticed it was as a part of their vernacular. We had several discussions about the history of the word and how language used in different context and by different people can elicit very strong responses. Apparently the word in their young adult black male social circles is acceptable when spoken amongst them. Their reasoning was why should you (white) be telling me (black) not to use a word that does no harm to you. They asked me if I would be upset if my son used the word nigger just as I was with them. I assured them that I would be upset and that the word has a strong, negative history in the US. Over the course of the year I would gently remind them to watch their language and remind them of possible consequences if used in outside their own social circle and they ‘honored” me by apologizing with a “oops, sorry Miss” when I brought it to their attention.

My students are all black Africans or Middle Easterners. I think it must be very hard to now live in a world dominated by whites. At this point there are few staff in the schools or role models in the community who are black like my students. Of course I want to do the best by my students and believe that I will have a positive effect on their future, yet wonder if they would be more motivated if they saw more of themselves reflected in the teachers and community leaders. My students have actually asked why there are no black teachers. A very good question to which I have no answer but a possible reason that so far no one in the community has the education and certification required by law to teach. They feel it is unfair, to which I cannot disagree in some points of the argument. A few offer they would like to teach to which I tell them we (the staff) are willing to help find the avenues to fulfill those dreams, but it will take a lot of effort on their part as well. Maybe one of my students will be the first Somali graduate to come back teach at their alma mater.

The majority of my students speak Somali as their first language. Some may write it or read it, but not all. The rest of my students speak a handful of languages like Arabic, French, Swahili or a local African tribal dialect. Blended in the classroom it can be quite raucous. District policy is only English is used in the classroom. For social conversations outside the classroom, native tongues are acceptable. English is the common language of our classroom. It also the only language I speak fluently. I have tried to learn a few words in Somali and it is very difficult. The little French I remember from high school and college is all I can offer as far as a second language. I celebrate the gift my students have of becoming bilingual. When a new student arrives I often ask a “trusted” student to translate, as I certainly cannot. I have only a few students who are belligerent when I remind them to speak English class. I don’t

like having to ask them to “give up” their identity for class and we have discussions around this point. However, the ones who don’t want to speak English are also the ones who have had issues with saying unkind things that others and I cannot understand. I am torn in these situations. I understand their frustration with having to speak English and they are usually frustrated about school as well, but I cannot tolerate their choice to hurt someone with words.

I don’t want my students to lose their first language. I just want them to acquire English in order to live a better and easier life here in the US. At present most of them live in a small area that is very insular. When asked they reply that they speak only Somali (or other native language) at home. I try to reason with them that the only place they really get to practice their English is when they are in class. Without practicing any skill, how will you improve? My adamant ones just refuse and think they will get by without learning English. Maybe they will. Most of the ELL teachers have noticed that those students who stagnate in school and do not progress in multiple content areas are those who insist on speaking Somali rather than English as much as possible. It makes sense since our schools are required to have a significant degree of English proficiency to succeed.

Several students say it’s not fair that we don’t have a Somali class in the high school since French and Spanish are offered. A good point for a community with a significant refugee population, maybe community members and students could learn the language to enhance community relations, rather than just have the Somalis learn English. I think it will be interesting to see how the second generation of Somalis fare who is just entering Kindergarten.

Race and language are fairly concrete and exterior aspects to identity. An interior characteristic of my female students is blaringly apparent as almost every girl dresses in a hijab and full-length skirt. From the outside it is hard to tell what religion most people follow. It is very obvious my female students are Muslim by their dress. I cannot tell whether the boys are Muslim or not as they dress very “American”. It is so striking to see the gender difference in fitting in with their new culture. The boys can almost blend in while the girls stand out. Personally it is hard for me to see some of the girls from more conservative families dressed from head to toe in dark, somber colors. Those from some of the less conservative families are more willing to assimilate and wear beautiful colors so they look like tropical flowers. Once in a while I catch sight of a pair of skinny jeans and high heels under their skirts. I smile and think to myself, “You go girl!”

Most of my students are Bantu Somali, which I have learned are quite conservative. Which aspects of their culture are attributable to their interpretation of their Muslim religion or their Bantu culture are hard to determine. Females are not respected by many males and expected to perform most of the traditional household chores. I’ve observed boys grabbing pencils, papers or snacks from girls. Some boys will ask the girls to get up and get them papers or sharpen their pencil. It is difficult for me to accept this treatment of the girls. I tell the boys in our classroom

they can get up and get what they need and not expect others to wait upon them. Often the girls will insist upon doing it anyway.

Although I'd heard of arranged marriage, I never had met anyone who had experienced it. Several girls at school are married or been sent to marry someone in a distant state. I am shocked how parents can send their 15 year-old (or younger) daughter away to marry someone, in several cases to a husband 20 years older than them. One of them came back to school for a couple months, then "disappeared" again apparently back with her husband. It's just surreal to me. I will say that not all families are that conservative and I have a senior who just had her first baby. She was married last year but to a boy from the community a few years older than her. She says she is happy being married and was in school until the day before she delivered their baby boy. So far a happy story as she was on target to graduate, was doing great in high school and has continued to keep up her schoolwork while home caring for the baby for the past three weeks. It has been such a joy to know her and see her success given all these extra challenges.

As a teacher one of the hardest aspects of gender discrimination is that many of the conservative parents do not want their daughters to attend college or enter the workforce after high school. As educators we always encourage our students to set lofty goals and education is a key to a better life. It is difficult to speak with a parent and have a daughter say she wants to go on after high school, yet the parent explicitly states the daughter will be a good wife and have babies. How do I help a student set realistic goals or motivate them to work hard and learn in school when their destiny is pre-ordained? How do I even tell them they have a choice in any matter or their life? It is difficult for me to see these young women attend school and realize that there may not be many options for them. How hard it must be for them to see the "American" girls who have so many options. Perhaps as years go by their culture and community will change and my girls will be able to use what education they have attained and even pursue more.

I never had given serious thought of facing a sea of otherness. This otherness I now feel on a daily basis. Growing up in rural northern New England I had little contact with any racial minorities and was well aware of prejudice and discrimination and the effects of these issues in the US and the world in general. I always thought of myself as quite tolerant and believe I was and still am very accepting and value people for their character. On a trip through the back roads of Mississippi we got stuck in a traffic jam in the middle of nowhere. Oblivious to our surroundings we crept along and finally got to the entrance of Alcorn State University where a long line of cars slowly turned into the parking area well decorated with balloons and signs for tailgate parties. As we slowly drove on, my husband and I began to realize that everyone in the cars were black, dressed very well and most of the cars were up-scale BMW's or similar cars sporting Alcorn Alumni stickers with license plates from all the neighboring states. We later discovered that the QB for the team was a top NFL draft pick and drew huge crowds of alumni. I remember thinking at the time that I had never seen so many black

people driving that many expensive cars. I have since thought to myself where did that come from? Did I really think that many black people would not drive fancy cars? No. I guess it was just the numbers of them in the backroads of the south. Maybe I thought most of the “successful” blacks lived in bigger cities like Atlanta or Memphis. It’s something I still think about but I’m not sure why.

I love teaching. I love high schoolers. I love thinking that I am making a difference in my ELLs lives. These children have been discriminated against by their own race in their native lands due to their ethnicity. They have been brought to the US to seek a better life. I wonder how much better it really will be for them here? I was not born in a refugee camp nor ran for my life through the forest until reaching a haven across a border. I have little experience in common with them, other than being human. Sometimes I do think, why do I seek to teach these particular students? I could seek a job in a high school closer to home and teach white kids higher-level math courses. So why don’t I? Perhaps it’s the guilt I feel for continuing to live a life full of blessings. Is this a way to assuage just a tinge of the advantages I’ve received just because of my skin color and being an educated female raised in a culture of relative gender equality?

My 32-mile daily journey home takes me back to the life I’m accustomed to. A life where all my basic needs are met. A life that allows me to share leisure time with my family. A life that is privileged.