

TEA AND WORLD PEACE

Sept 12, 2001

in 1977 I went to Yemen, Osama Bin Laden's country of origin, as a Peace Corps Volunteer. Like most Americans then I had hardly heard of the place and was not at all sure where it was when I said an enthusiastic YES to the recruiter in Washington who called to offer me the assignment. In the months before departure I tried to learn as much as I could about that remote corner of the Arabian peninsula, and a little about Islam and the Arab world, but I arrived there anxious and uncertain.

Within a week my husband and I were off on our own, hiking toward the highest mountain on the Arabian peninsula. Shepherd girls with a crooked staff greeted us as we followed a trail across their fields. At the end of the day we stopped, dehydrated and sunburned by the altitude and were promptly invited in for tea to a home where gradually the whole village seemed to come to stop by to look at us. We slowly realized we'd become impromptu guests of honor and part of the Eid celebrations that take place a month after the end of Ramadan. The next day I was sitting in another small village of solid stone houses set high in the rocky mountains, sipping sweet hot tea from a glass I could hardly hold without burning my fingers, and observing, no, participating in a exuberant double wedding. Men with sprigs of mint and hard-boiled eggs as symbols of fertility in their turbans brandished their rhinoceros-horn daggers as they danced in the streets. Inside a large house the women gathered and stared at me with great curiosity, as some even felt my chest to confirm that I really was a woman—I surely did not look like one to them. We were given places to stay, shared great platters of wonderful food, and escorted from one village to the next. This welcome continued for days and only ended when we broke away from our hosts to finish our hike. The summit of the mountain was cold and barren, a complete disappointment after the warm embrace of the Yemeni people.

So many images from those years are still vivid in my mind. The dark-eyed women and girls who showed me how to henna my hair, and tried to teach me to dance and make bread in a traditional clay oven, the neighbors whose seven children hung around our doorway, the total strangers in villages who invited us in for lunch and meant it, the old men yelling "Shame!" who chased and scolded any naughty kids who called out rudely to us as we walked down the street. The dry and rocky landscape of Yemen is rough and inhospitable, but its people are the opposite, and we learned that Arab hospitality is even warmer than its Southern counterpart. Jimmy Carter met with Anwar Sadat and everyone said that soon the troubles in the Middle East would end.

When people got to know us they had lots of questions about America and we shared postcards of our hometowns, which by then looked unbelievably green even to us. We often talked about religion. It's hard enough for me to explain the difference between a Presbyterian and a Lutheran or a Unitarian in English let alone Arabic, so I never tried and it never seemed to matter. I said that my religion was about the goodness that is present in everyone and a belief in a god or life force in the universe that holds all of us as sacred. They said that Islam was the same, and it seemed to me that we had so much in common in our beliefs that any differences were mere petty semantics.

It still seems that way to me, even now so many years later. This beautiful sunny day with bright sunshine reminds me of that clear mountain air in the highlands of Yemen. I know how easy it is to forget that most of us everywhere on this greenish blue planet just want to live in peace with each other, watch our children grow up, and trust in a world where life is sacred and safe for us all. I remind myself of those people so far away, so different from me, and all I want to do now is sit with them again, sharing another cup of tea and our hopes for world peace. Today, that seems both impossible, and the only thing to do.

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