

Inoculation against terror: Backpacking through Egypt Teaches



The boys playing soccer against the sun bleached walls of Cairo's Sayyidna al-Hussein Mosque were like a magnet for the attentions of my seven year old son Scott. I could feel the tug of anticipation as he gripped my hand and pulled me across the cement Midan Hussein, the open square skirting the mosque's castle-like entrance. Meg, Scott's five year old sister, caught up to us as we stopped, both children sidling close in my shadow. My wife, Cathy, daypack slung casually over her shoulder, came up from behind watching to see what the kids were going to do next.

Neither child knew more than two words in Arabic, but the language of children at play after school seems to be universal. We all stood there watching as a dusty oblong ball was attacked with the intensity of nations at war, plastic school bags thrown recklessly down to form red and green goalposts at the base of the Mosque's imposing facade. Like children at home, the boys' simple grey and navy school uniforms were ignored, as the knees of their pants became scuffed, and white shirts, untucked, fluttered like tiny flags.

We came across these boys while backpacking as a family for seven weeks through the Middle East, just four months before the attacks of September 11 mocked our western insularity. Like a canary in a mine, a radical and disenfranchised fringe of the Moslem world seemed to us to give voice to the aspirations of many of the silenced others we had so recently met.

What we found in Egypt is there for even a young child to discover. There is something very wrong in the way we in the West have understood these children of Mohammed, their parents, and the spirit of the prophet which infuses Mosques like Sayyidna al-Hussein, built as a shrine over the buried head of Al-Hussein, the grandson of the Prophet Mohammed, and Shi'ite martyr.

Canadian Senator Landon Pearson, an outspoken advocate for children's rights, says children need to understand their "connectedness" with others if barriers to peace are to be brought down: "We need to help our children develop their capacity to identify with other children. They need to say to themselves, 'We both like to do this or that', and we need as parents to offer them our own modelling." Having raised five children while travelling the world with her husband, Pearson knows first hand the importance of making children feel connected "beyond borders and beyond language."

In very practical terms, we can do this in our own homes through the reading of books and in our communities by mining the depths of the diversity of those around us. But it is travel that makes us most conscious of our global citizenship. The Egypt we found wasn't that of long dead Pharaohs, boy-kings, and Nile cruises, but a living revolution denied articulation.

Our Children about Global Citizenship

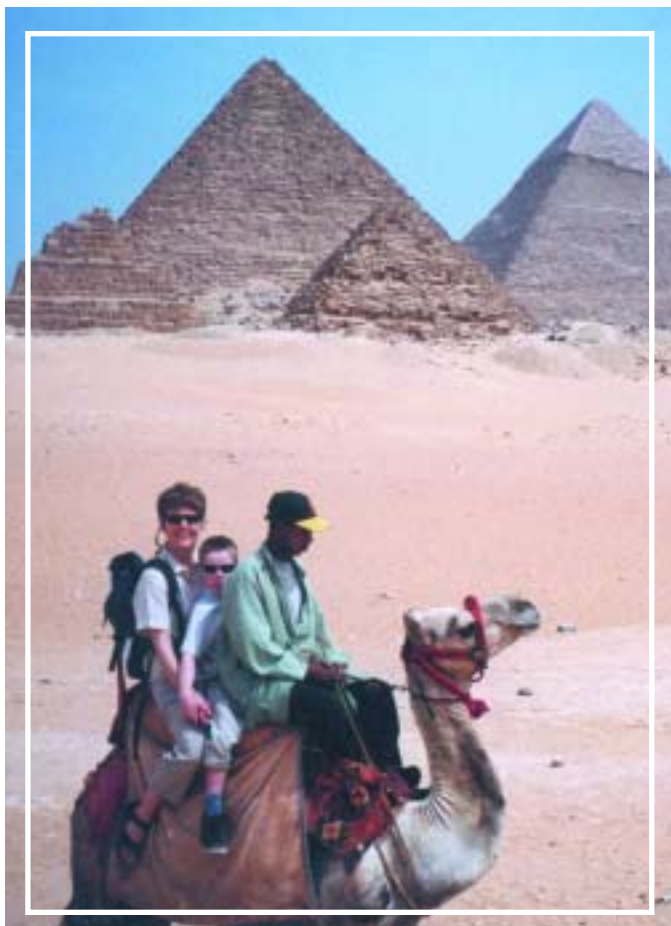
The Mosque sits at the edge of the Khan al-Khalili bazaar in the old Moslem quarter of Cairo. It's a part of the city noted for its fundamentalism, and believed to be home to the Moslem Brotherhood and splinter groups like al-Jihad, the revolutionary movement behind Anwar Sadat's assassination. In these alleyways are also rumoured to be many of those with connections to Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida. From the sprawling streets, reverberating with the caterwauls of Egypt's exploding population, come many of the young men who took up arms as mercenaries in Afghanistan during the Russian occupation. That revolutionary zeal now lies hidden behind the tapestry of religion and commerce in this, Cairo's largest marketplace.

In the bazaar, cultures collide in ways as incongruous as planes and buildings. The streets of the bazaar stretch for twisted miles, adorned with the produce and trinkets of a Middle East in transition. Taiwanese toys and American videos, packaged processed cheese slices, and Arabic fast foods sit next to gold and silver shops that carelessly dangled their merchandise behind glass windows, or leather shops with an

unimaginable assortment of thick belts, three legged stools, and clothing, that flow onto the walkways in front.

Cathy and I had committed ourselves to helping our children know something of the developing world, and the politics of prejudice. Tara Callaghan, a psychologist and Director of the Centre for Research on Culture and Human Development at St. Francis Xavier University, says the formal education system can't be expected to provide answers to such questions without help from parents. Callaghan says we are going to have to assume responsibility as families for this kind of education and expose our children to the world ourselves.

On a public bus from Luxor, the ancient city of Thebes and home to the Valley of the Kings, through the desert to Hurghada on the Red Sea coast, our experience was of east and west colliding. Though we in the West have been told that Egypt and Israel are at peace, the Egyptians we met made us realize how shallow our assumptions of conviviality are. For six hours aboard our "luxury" coach, we are "entertained" with a movie that shows over and over, and over again, the supposed "war



The Egypt we found wasn't that of long dead Pharaohs, boy-kings, and Nile cruises, but a living revolution denied articulation.

crimes" committed by Israelis during the 1967 six-day war. A line of Egyptian soldiers are forced by Israeli forces to dig their own graves and then as the camera pans across their determined faces which stare resolutely back at their captors, machine gun fire flails their bodies. They die during long slow-motion pans in which dust worn soldiers collapse to their knees like big game animals hunted in old American movies. We see this same scene not once, but ten, maybe fifteen times. Our children, despite our efforts to amuse and distract them, stare transfixed. What can we say? They will never read this version of history in any of their school books.

The other passengers watched the film with little comment. But for us it raised larger issues. As Callaghan says, "We need to find out where hatred is coming from, where it is fostered, and get at its roots." It has become increasingly difficult, after having been to Egypt, to offer our children a singular story



about what is occurring in the Middle East. People on that bus did not want Israel to exist at the expense of Palestine, despite the peace accord signed by their government. It was like experiencing first hand John Scieszka's retelling of the tale of the three little pigs from the point of view of the misunderstood wolf.

The well-heeled tourists who are shuttled on real luxury coaches from cruise ship to antiquities, and back again, will never experience this other Egypt. Those tourists we meet are aghast at our lack of itinerary, and patronize us with their wry amusement at our innocence travelling with young children, exposing them to the chaos of the developing world. North Americans, especially, struggle to understand how we could take our children out of school for seven weeks. But it is we who are most baffled by their disregard for the education our children receive while travelling.

When we left North America, we had no idea how much our experience overseas would buffer our children against the jingoistic call to arms and vicarious trauma following September 11. But then, when we left we weren't sure either how our five year old, who cherishes her made in Thailand Barbie brand sandals, would react to roughing it through desert climes. Nor were we sure whether our seven year old who had pleaded unsuccessfully for a Nintendo, was going to react to seeing real guns held by real soldiers at the business of protecting us.

Rush Bernard Grossman, a Buddhist monk, talks about forcing ourselves into the unknown if we are to appreciate the experiences of "others". In his efforts to create a community of peacemakers, he encourages those committed to social justice to plunge themselves into the world of the nameless. As our

transcontinental flight circled the Ghiza pyramids while on its final approach into Cairo, we could see the spiralling towers of the city encroaching upon those ancient homes of god-like Pharaohs. I was thinking of Grossman's words as we landed. We were approaching the "otherness" of a nation with a history so different from our own, a sprawling menace so unlike the solitude of our pastoral homeland. If we were going to help our children to understand the warp and weave of the global tapestry, we would have to immerse ourselves as travellers, rather than sanitize our experience as tourists.

Children, it seems, have no choice but to immerse themselves. They live for touch, sound, taste. Scott and Meg stood with me under that intense white sun in the Midan Hussein watching the boys play. While Meg was content to watch from close up, Scott was desperate to join in the game. The boys noticed us, thankfully, and pointing from my son to the game, and back again, I said, "He's very good", and motioned with my foot as if kicking the ball. I needed do nothing more for the next half hour. With few formalities Scott was led over to the throng of players and positioned as a forward on one of the teams. One boy took him by the shoulders and literally pointed him towards the opponents goal. Then, with nothing more said, mayhem resumed as the boys began to chase the

North Americans, especially, struggle to understand how we could take our children out of school for seven weeks. But it is we who are most baffled by their disregard for the education our children receive while travelling.

ball back and forth like a swarm of excited bees. When my son scored, everyone cheered, including the goalie whose team was down a point.

But soon, as if on cue, the boys evaporated into the alleyways next to the mosque. We could not follow, though I could see Scott aching to find out more about them. We turned instead and went to get a drink, becoming as invisible as the ubiquitous western tourists with whom we sat.

Like us, Alex Neve, Executive Director for Amnesty International in Canada, has struggled to make comprehensible the events of September 11 for his own children. As Neve expresses so poignantly, "Vitality, but almost inconceivably, I want to be sure that they take away from an episode of astonishing brutality, a lesson of justice and a yearning to understand. I want my children to have a hunger to understand the world more that they live in, to be respectful of it, to aspire to make a contribution to it and to make it a better world to live in."

Travelling lightly as backpackers one sinks deep into the well of humanity, unable to avoid its many contradictions. The day-to-day activities of finding food in markets, of moving about by public transit, of the simple amusements found on schoolyards, are all fodder for experience-based learning. Sadly,

Egypt is more often experienced by the westerners we met as little more than a modern day inconvenience standing between them and some of the world's most fascinating antiquities.

The kids came to relish the times when we were away from other tourists. They would find themselves the centre of attention as the curious would poke and cajole with school yard chants of "What's your name? What's your name?" Cathy and I turned time and again to see Meg literally embraced in someone's arms, or sat down alongside an Egyptian woman's own children, a sticky sweet in each hand. Our son was forever slapped on the back, embraced or invited to come and look behind the counters at restaurants and stores.

Hubert Campfens, a consultant with the United Nations Development Program, says global citizenship is about participation and decision-making. Those making decisions, like our children will be one day, need information about others and an ability to critically put in context their own misconceptions. Children, like adults, need to engage in what Campfens calls "participatory learning for empowerment." It is a decidedly engaged learning process and one which we insular westerners have avoided. "Since September 11, Americans are for the first time becoming aware of the widespread hatred against them," says Campfens. Our lack of experience of others has not helped build a safer world, but instead reinforced our accidental fallacies of a singular truth.

Most days we gladly traded comfort for experience, forgoing luxury for an opportunity to sit in a dusty market square waiting for a bus while our kids stared at beggars and asked us where they live. If we are to understand the Moslem world, many more of us Westerners will have to become travellers. Victor Malarek, journalist with the Globe and Mail, foreign correspondent, and an outspoken advocate for children, takes time when he travels to understand children's lives by visiting them at their schools, in refugee camps, and on the street. "I always listen to the instincts of a child", he says, knowing that those instincts are more for peace than war. He insists, "Instead of sending kids to Rome and Paris and museums, I'd send them to a Peruvian village, or to work in a refugee camp, helping



EN BREF

Michael et Cathy Ungar ont voulu aider leurs enfants à comprendre quelque chose des pays en développement et de la politique des préjugés. Quatre mois avant l'attaque du 11 septembre, ils ont fait un voyage de sept semaines au Moyen-Orient. Là, ils ont pu vivre en direct la collision des cultures et la facilité de nouer des liens que partagent naturellement les enfants du monde entier, sans réellement savoir à quel point cette expérience allait protéger leurs enfants des appels aux armes belliqueux et triomphalistes qui ont fusé à la suite de l'effondrement du World Trade Center.

other kids. That's a different kind of experience. When you work with someone like that, you find out who they are."

Robert Rapoport spoke too of the "intentional socialization" we as parents and teachers can use to bring about awareness of the global community. Global citizenship embodies values such as "human rights, diversity, gender equity, a sustainable environment and non-violent conflict resolution." Perhaps Rapoport put it best when he wrote, "Contemporary families recognize that their children will have to function in a world which will differ from that in which they themselves were formed". This may be even more true for the children of the poor we met overseas. For them, a "lofty ideal like global citizenship", to quote Rapoport, is as elusive as peace.

We realized quickly that there are no prizes for the global consciousness Rapoport promotes, neither for us nor for our children. Opening doors to a global citizenship offers both crisis and opportunity. I, like Rapoport, wonder: how do we, when opening those doors, "provide a sense of stability and continuity for children while preparing them to cope with the possibility of instability and change"? After all as Malarek so bluntly put it: "Airplanes aren't supposed to crash into buildings." But they do.

Before crossing to Israel, we spent time in Dahab, an oasis of sorts for travellers with time to spare. The town hugs the Red Sea coast, three hours from the Israeli border and two from Mount Sinai. There we left the Egypt of Egyptians and entered the global village of the backpacker: Rasta music, African art, American movies, internet cafes, middle eastern food, Bedouin camps, tattoo artists, and Irish pubs. But while most of the travellers tuned out, we tuned in on our portable shortwave to the Voice of America to hear about the escalating violence between Israelis and Palestinians just a short bus ride away across the well secured border. Our children become vigilant to the signs of war as well. There were now armed check posts in the desert, frequent soldier patrols, and a slight disquiet in their parents who debated endlessly whether to go to Israel, Jordan, or fly directly to Turkey.

Back at our beachside "camp", the name used for our simple hotel accommodations which cost us just five dollars a night, we sat and watched the sun set each evening. The cool of the Red Sea quelled the heat of the Sinai. Around us, our children

Inoculation against terror ...

Continued on page 47

Inoculation Against Terror

Continued from page 19

amused themselves playing war. Meg and a four-year old Dutch friend dressed up with swimming goggles and armed themselves with snorkels. They launched an attack upon their parents with tennis balls that became bombs. When in retreat, they bunkered down on woven mats behind bamboo furniture. Scott and a 13 year old friend, the son of an employee of the camp, joined in, staging elaborate deaths as the younger children mercilessly inflicted “wounds”. When the older boys began to arm themselves, Meg shouted “base”, and the younger ones scurried back to where they were hiding. The boys breached their security zone and Meg complained to us that it was unfair. We were as helpless as the United Nations to intervene, though we did try to control the boys with threats of banishment to the next compound. They backed off momentarily, but were quickly on the attack again, only this time with more stealth.



We finally decided to go to Israel, bringing our Egyptian experience to an end. When we arrived at the border, there was an overriding tension as our bags were checked and then rechecked, and then checked again. We forced ourselves to stay calm, stay in place, play it safe, get processed expeditiously. Teenaged boys were on patrol with machine guns slung as casually as discmans over their shoulders. Under the cover of these armed sentries, we finally walked out of the border station and to a waiting cab. The border crossing made little impression on our children, just another checkpoint in a long series of them. It was me who stopped to peer back across barbed wire and cement walls at Egypt and wondered, for my children’s sake, what peace really meant. 📍

Michael Ungar is an Associate Professor in the Maritime School of Social Work at Dalhousie University. michael.ungar@dal.ca

Fundraising and Corporate Donations...

Continued from page 43

school district was being run. The effect of this withdrawal will be magnified because in the United States, state and federal funding often depends on the school district’s ability to attract private partners – which they’ve now lost.



As parent associations are pushed to raise more and more money, and school principals spend more and more energy looking for outside funding, our attitude toward public education slowly changes. We come to assume that funding for schools must be augmented by donations or private partnerships. And what has been – up to now – a fundamentally Canadian belief in the importance of a strong and universally accessible public education system, is slowly eroded. 📍

- 1 “To Fundraise or Not to Fundraise”, *Issues Bulletin* (British Columbia Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils, March 28, 2000) <http://www.bccpac.bc.ca/resources/Resources-Main.htm>
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 People for Education, *The Effects of Policy and Funding Changes in Ontario’s Secondary Schools* (The 2002 Secondary School Tracking Report: March 2002)
- 4 People for Education, *Five Years of the Education Funding Formula* (The 2002 Elementary School Tracking Report: May 2002).
- 5 Clara Thomas, *Ryerson of Upper Canada* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1969).
- 6 William Davis, quoted in the *Toronto Star*, March 25, 1999

Annie Kidder is a former theatre director and the mother of two children. She now devotes herself full time to People for Education, which she helped establish in 1996. People for Education is an organization of parents from the Ontario Public and Catholic school systems which has been fighting to preserve fully publicly-funded education since 1996.

www.peopleforeducation.com

pdstore.com

A not-for-profit online bookstore featuring learning resources of all types, hard to find textbooks, teacher resources and more!



www.pdstore.com