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Commentary on Garson's Adventures and Challenges

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Three cheers for brave adventurers!

As the author points out in her last paragraph, don't we have a great profession that enables us to go abroad to teach, research, and learn in other cultures?! Sometimes things don't go quite as planned. Sometimes things are even better than expected, sometimes worse (as is the case here), but we still can have those opportunities if we seek them out. What a deal!

The great thing about the author's story is that she has bounced back and is ready for more. Would that we were all so adventurous.

What's to learn about overseas assignments for the rest of us? I'm reminded of the poster with the kitten suspended from the clothes line, "Hang in there, baby!" But what it should say in this case is, "Don't go there, Miss!" It is hard to imagine a more difficult assignment: Single, Jewish, female teacher goes to a male-dominated Arab culture that reportedly, "... hates Jews." Wow. Into the mouth of the lion. Despite trying to learn about the culture before leaving, the author's advanced "homework" clearly wasn't sufficient. Besides reading poetry and listening to music, did she talk to any previous visitors? Did she write/email/telephone any American faculty already there?

Nor was the host institution's orientation upon arrival adequate. Were there no experienced visitors on the program, to alert the newcomers to what they were going to experience? Or students, to pass on experiences working with previous visitors? But of course by then it might be too late anyway. Course syllabi have been prepared, and major adjusting of one's teaching style probably doesn't happen overnight.

In fact, my guess is the author is too hard on herself, and this particular assignment was doomed from the start. Why? Well, in addition to her own observations above, my experience from living abroad on two different occasions suggests that those who do best either a) have a partner (e.g., spouse) to come home to at the end of a difficult day, as well as other support systems to replenish energy and provide ideas, or b) are single with plenty of opportunities for dating. Singles who date get immersed in the culture much more quickly, and also learn the language faster, even if learning the language isn't required for teaching.

Neither a) nor b) apply to the author, so the chances of success seem pretty slim to me. Further, having visited Egypt with my wife and teenage daughter while living abroad, and suffering through their embarrassment, pain and anger at being pinched by men on those crowded Cairo streets, I wouldn't want them to go back there alone. No way. Adventure has its limits.

Congratulations to the author for being willing to accept such a tough assignment, for knowing when to cut her losses and being willing to learn from them and share her experience with others, and especially for getting up off the ground and trying again. Three cheers!

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