

Shining Back On Me, From My Own Eyes Too

By Rebecca Hassett

The last time I saw Zareen, she lifted up her pant legs to show me her ankles. We were all barefoot because we left our shoes at the door and it was summer time. She said, "I get a new job. I have an interview but I'm still looking, just in case." Her ankles were swollen but her feet were sturdy, "My ankles swell up from that job. I can't work that job anymore." She had told me before, that the job involved walking all day at the hospital and she liked her supervisor. She was, at first, an assistant for patient transportation, but she thought she wanted to become a nurse or a surgeon someday. She pushed the patients inside of the hospital, who came there on the stretchers in the ambulance. One day, a patient arrived in handcuffs from the prison. She thought his handcuffs looked too tight and asked if they could loosen them, but she was told, No.

She arrived almost daily to the hospital, at 4:00 a.m., on time and did all that was asked of her. Her cheerful spirit glowed from her eyes, as she knew it was hard for women to get jobs in the country where she was from, Afghanistan. She had arrived here in Kentucky as a refugee, less than a year ago and was overjoyed when she got her driver's license. She said, "Women don't drive in Afghanistan."

Her supervisor noticed her work ethic and asked if she would like a promotion, transporting bodies at the hospital, but inside of the morgue. Her supervisor wanted to make sure before she promoted her that Zareen could handle the job description, because this time, the bodies would be dead. Zareen responded with a careful look in her eye, "It's okay. My whole country is a morgue."

She easily opened up to me about her life in Afghanistan. I was told by the volunteer coordinator that most refugees from Afghanistan chose not want to share their stories. Zareen must have felt the need to share versus keep it all inside, even if risks were involved. The Taliban went after her in Afghanistan, because she had chosen to work for the U.S. Army. She said cheerfully, "I love to work for the U.S. Army." They warned her with guns and death threats to quit working with the United States, but she confidently explained that she didn't care. She said, "When you're dead, you die in an instant." They tried to take her young son away from his preschool but the teachers wouldn't allow it.

In 2002, when Zareen was just seventeen years old, she was one of the first Afghan women to work for the U.S. Army. She said she wanted to work for the U.S. Army, “Because the U.S. Army travels to help us, so why can’t I help them?” Her family members and neighbors tried to stop her from working for the U.S. Army, but she persisted, performing various jobs, from computer operator to finance manager. She also liked helping them buy things in town. She said, “When they need to buy something, I think it is too dangerous for them, so I go and I bring it to them.”

She reminded me that, “Women are the champions,” as she works, cooks, cleans and takes care of her son. Her supervisor from the U.S. Army, James Robert Smith, was from Covington, Kentucky and he helped her come to Louisville, along with the U.S. Embassy. He and his wife, Melinda, met her family at the airport when they arrived in Louisville from Afghanistan, after over 20 hours on an airplane and have helped them with their transition to living in the United States.

My daughter and I arrived at their apartment, as volunteers for Kentucky Refugee Ministries, to teach English as a Second Language to her son, but Zareen and I always talked too. There was plenty to discuss about navigating the public school system, which I knew something about, as my daughter attends public school too. My daughter and her son both like the schools that they attend which is a blessing! Zareen and her son both knew English rather well but her husband was still learning. My daughter worked with her son on reading and writing, as I learned more about Zareen’s past life in Afghanistan.

Three months later, she informed me that she did get a new job, at the same hospital where she worked but this time, she is a Patient Care Assistant. She told me that her new supervisor had seen her working in her old position and told her, “I see you working hard all of the time. I have an open position. You come work for me.” She takes blood pressure and other tests for patients before surgery. She loves her new job and the people that she is working with. Her health is better now

too. Zareen is now 34 years old. She is successful, a wife, and a mother of her nine year old boy, Hamza and she is a student too.

My Eyes

I am learning to be kinder to myself in the small voices in my head. To clear away the weeds and vines and find myself in the clearing of a field, like an animal on the land without the chatter of human stories. I see myself in the sunshine and know that I exist, like the other animals in the field. None of us needs to blame each other for being in the field.

I am finding peace with myself, my ideas and my disposition. I don't look at celebrities or gorgeous people and wish I could be them. I can only imagine being myself. My only wish is that my circumstances had been different. A loving childhood, with loving parents and loving grandparents and cousins and aunts and uncles. We didn't live near any family. It was just our parents who couldn't stand each other and later divorced and didn't seem to love us too much either. But of course, you find out later, that they did love you, in their own way, in the way that suited them. It wasn't about us, it was about them. Childhood sadness takes so long to go away.

When I met Zareen, I see that she is working daily to change her circumstances. She already has. She still is. As I encourage her, I can't help but encourage myself. For it is only circumstances which have shaped us so greatly, but what I admire more deeply than these circumstances is the deep inner core that shines through a human being's eyes and reveals our souls when we connect simply with another human being honestly. The intimacy of truth in our characters can shine through at any moment, despite our circumstances. It reminds me that: So what, if I wish my circumstances were different, so many people do, so many still do and so many will continue to. All I can do is be encouraging and somehow I feel some of those rays of sunshine, shining back on me, from my own eyes too.