

Letters to the Editor

A Report from Abroad

Kabul, Afghanistan
September 14, 1956

Editor, *Educational Leadership*
Dear Sir:

Life here continues to be full of surprises and as interesting as can be. I wish I felt I were doing more to earn all of the extras which come with being here. However, one of the ways in which one earns his keep is by being patient.

These people live by a very different cadence. In fact our regard for time and our feeling that certain things should be done within certain categories of time have nothing to do with the view of life held by Afghan officials. So we plan and get ready to act—and then we wait. Sometimes the person who must authorize the action gets sick—and all that he is supposed to do just waits. There is no such thing as having a secretary come to the house just to keep work going. If someone is sick everything waits. Sometimes people go on cultural trips and the Afghan people say, "We can't decide until So-and-So returns." We ask, "Will he be gone long?" The answer might be, "Maybe a year." Also there are the holidays. They come and come. The schools are always being closed and many times we don't know until the day before. This is a great change for all of us and we are finding it hard to relax and accept these different ways even when we know that there is nothing we can do to accelerate progress. However, we like our Afghan colleagues very, very much and the days

of both work and play are as pleasant as they can be.

The young man who runs the staff house, Henry Selz, does everything to make us comfortable including conniving with the cook to keep our meals interesting and varied. We even have an ice cream freezer and our cook knows how to make creampuffs. However, he will not cook pork of any kind, including bacon. The Muslims hold the pig to be unclean. However, our bearer (or house manager) is more westernized, so on the cook's day off we always have bacon for breakfast. Last night we had a wonderful party for a family that is leaving. Our cook made pizza pie. It was sans anchovies and sans oregano but it tasted gorgeous anyway. We have the best nuts in the world here: almonds, pistachio and walnuts. We had great dishes of these, some plain, some salted and some sugared and spiced. We also had huge baskets of popcorn. Servants here love a party. Families have had servants quit because they did not entertain enough to suit the servants. They frequently bring in their friends to help and to share in the fun—also to share in the tip.

The mountains are always interesting and always with us. In fact the city of Kabul is split in two or three parts by mountains—mountains that are far higher than most of those seen in America. When I first arrived, I lived in a section of town called Carta Char. Now I live in Sharanow. I can look out and see the big mountain that divides the two sections

of the city. Carta Char can be reached in two ways—by driving into town and back up by the Kabul River, and by driving far into the country and through a back pass.

One night this past week when I was going to Carta Char to dinner, we chose the back route. It was just at sunset and we were enjoying the look of the mountains in the evening glow, when suddenly we came upon a Coochie Camp. (The Coochies are the Nomads and a large and respected segment of the population.) We saw the black tents, the sheep and the camels, then suddenly silhouetted against the skyline of a mountain pass we saw a long, long line of turbaned heads. At first we thought they might be soldiers in formation, but as we drew nearer, the whole line dropped to the ground and we could hear faintly the rhythmic chanting of the Koran. It was all the men of that Nomad tribe at their evening prayer and as always, they were turned toward Mecca. There were no women in sight. Women learn the Koran, but they never pray in groups and they never go to the mosques. However, the Nomad women are not in chadaree and they have much more freedom than most Afghan women. There is no way for me to really communicate how stirring this scene was to us and how beautiful—and in its great difference from anything we have known before, feelings new to us were born, feelings which we hope will help us as we try to help these hospitable and able people to find a place in the modern world without losing that which is good and beautiful in their own ways of living.

The highlight of this past week came as the result of an invitation to lunch from Sofar, the cook in the house where I lived in Carta Char. Sofar seems to us to be about forty, the father of a group

of children of various ages, but sad because of the death of his wife a few years back. Eight days ago Sofar married. It is expensive for a Muslim to marry. The man pays a huge price to the family of the woman and all of the expenses of the wedding except the bride's clothes are borne by the bridegroom. Sofar wanted us to meet his "woman" so he gave a woman's party in our and her honor. It was a gorgeous and generous party and one of the most unusual experiences of my life. In fact, to have been a part of Sofar's party was well worth this trip half way around the world. It was an intimate and joyous family occasion organized in patterns of culture very strange to us and yet, our peculiarities as people of western culture were recognized and provided for in the planning in ways that made us no less a part of the festivities. And all of the people were so glad to have us with them.

Sofar and his family live on the side of a mountain between Sharanow and Carta Char. They live on the Carta Char side. Our driver took us off of the main road and we cut up the mountain side and drove along a mud brick compound wall until we came to a small wooden door. Here we were greeted by Sofar and a group of small boys but not a woman was in sight. Straight ahead, the rocky mountain side slanted up and among the rocks were a number of fireplaces (strictly nature's own) on which the lunch was being prepared. Everything looked very clean and so interesting. All over the place the cooking pots and pilau platters were shining in the sun—and so interesting and so differently shaped from American pots and pans—no Revere ware and pressure cookers—although some of the native pots do have copper bottoms.

We were taken up steep, high mud stairs to the top of the large, long house

which fronted the compound. Here a rooftop room had been prepared to receive us. The walls around the roof were high and made of the usual mud brick. There were two large openings like big picture windows. From these we could look afar across the city of Kabul and we had a magnificent view of the surrounding mountains. A canvas had been stretched overhead to shade us from the sun. The floor was covered with carpets and around all of the walls were the many Afghan cushions and pillows, some cloth covered and some made of oriental rugs. To the far side of the room was a card table set up for us with a white table cloth and dishes borrowed from the house in which I had lived when I first came to Kabul. At the door an older woman, beautifully dressed, greeted us; then Sofar took us across the room to a corner where stood three young women. He pointed to the one in red and said, "This is my woman." We stood spell-bound. She stood before us on a cushion like a small oriental goddess. She was a young girl and very, very beautiful. She wore a bright red brocaded dress. Over her dark hair was a sheer red scarf with gold on it. She never lifted her eyes and she spoke not a word, but she inclined slightly toward us. We could see her very plainly through the veil. Her forehead was painted with a glistening paint. She wore long gold earrings and gold ornaments in her hair. She looked so much like a princess from a fairy tale that I cannot yet believe that she is a part of real life and that soon she will be bearing and caring for the children of Sofar, our cook. Two young girls attended her all of the time, not always the same ones, but she was never left unattended and she never spoke to anyone. Not a person there was her relative. They were all members of her husband's family. After



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we were introduced, the other women came in and sat around the walls on the cushions. They were such a gay and happy lot. Although we spoke very little Farsee and they spoke no English, we managed to communicate and there was a pleasing unity about the whole party. We were accepted and honored guests and we were thrilled beyond expression by this simple, honest acceptance. All of the younger children wandered in and about and everyone loved and cared for them. They accepted us, too. Everyone was so clean and the clothes were all so Afghan. We were the only western touch.

We were seated at the table and boys brought us the receptacles for washing our hands. Then the other women washed their hands, too. But no one seemed to think it important for the children to wash their hands. Next we were served—Afghan food that was out of this world. Before we were served, the

bautcha explained that all of the dishes we were using had been boiled for five minutes. Also, they had boiled and chilled our water. We had chicken, pilau, spiced lamb, hot spinach and non. We also had tea and a great variety of fruit. As soon as we were served, they placed small tablecloths on the floor and placed large platters of pilau on each tablecloth. The women and children gathered around, all eating from the same platters and using only their fingers. Everyone ate with gusto and no one seemed to notice that our eating habits were so different. It didn't matter. Everyone was comfortable in his own fashion. The little bride turned her back to the group and ate from a platter which she shared with two of the young women. When she finished, the women wiped her mouth, adjusted the veil once more and she again assumed the posture of an oriental goddess. I did not see her move again until her slight bow at the time of our departure. When the eating was over, the table and floor were cleared.

Then we had a new excitement. Drums

were brought in, large round ones that looked like oversized tambourines and different groups of women performed the native wedding dances of the Ubeks. (These people were Ubeks from the north country near the Russian border.) It was hard to pull away when our driver came but we had other duties.

Today is Juma and I am staying at home to recover from all of the excitement of yesterday and to get my personal life in order before the demands of next week are upon us.

My very best wishes to all,

RUTH L. SMITH
c/o American Embassy
Kabul, Afghanistan

Editor's Note: RUTH L. SMITH is currently on an assignment working with the Ministry of Education in Kabul, Afghanistan. Dr. Smith is on leave from her position as professor of education, Towson State Teachers College, Towson, Maryland. She is also a member of the ASCD Publications Committee.

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Human Relations

October 12, 1956

Editor, *Educational Leadership*

Dear Sir:

A year has passed since we edited "Integrating Minority Groups into the Public Schools," the November 1955 issue of *Educational Leadership*. Because I believe that people must communicate with each other on this problem, I am venturing some further thoughts.

Just as there is no Solid South on integration—some states have complied; others have stiffened their resistance; areas of "wait and see" are dwindling—there is no "the Southerner." Informed Americans no longer stereotype "the Negro"; they should not stereotype "the Southerner."

Despite the headlines of the fall, we should not lose our perspective. For every boycott in a Sturgis, Kentucky, publicized to the world, there have been 208 school districts which have begun or completed the desegregation process since the fall of 1955. For every Clinton, Tennessee, invaded by rabble-rousers from out of town, there have been 650 school districts where the home folks have been allowed to work it out peacefully in 1955 and 1956.

Yet let us not underestimate the problem. Eight states are still completely segregated on the elementary and high school levels. Still to be envisioned, much less created, by Americans in government, industry, labor, religion, education, and social organization, is a program of the highest statesmanship and coordination to achieve a transition.

Action programs by local citizens dedicated to friendly relations and the maintenance of law and order are needed to support and encourage school boards and local officials in living with the supreme law of the land. The educator who is clear on his values, sure of his facts, and informed as a resource person, often can be a helpful advisor on community action.

Simultaneously, a greatly stepped-up program of human relations education through the schools is needed. The high proportion of young people sucked into recent disturbances is eloquent testimony. Never before has a broad long-range program of intergroup education, nationwide, been so essential to the national welfare.

In our shock at the rioting of mobs and the inciting of violence by their leaders, let us not overlook the role of the gentlemen of terror. The gentlemen of terror are those respectables in politics and community life who help to create the circumstances in which violence breeds. Though never found in the mobs, they pave the way.

Above all, let us communicate with each other and share our experiences and insights. In our ASCD, we have a Commission on International Understanding. We should also have a Commission on Human Relations in American Schools and Communities. Brotherhood begins at home.

WILLIAM VAN TIL

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