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On Learning and Unlearning

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On Learning and Unlearning

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Abstract
I remember passing our lunch lady—the nice one with a big bleach-blond afro. She was perched on an elementary-school-sized desk, eyes fixated to the television. I glanced at the screen on the way into my classroom while my teacher hesitated in the hallway, whispering to the other adults. She reentered the room a few minutes later to explain.

In the following months, my television provided me with one of the most formative, practical and comprehensive educational experiences of my life. First it was vocabulary building, with the words like “hijacker,” and “terrorist.” Then it was physics, learning that inertia is the reason for absolute devastation when your plane crashes into a building. Soon, “Al-Qaeda,” “the Taliban,” and “Osama bin Laden” became part of my reality, as I watched a broadcast of young men in the “Middle East” (I was learning geography too!) burning American flags. [excerpt]

Comments
Surge is a student blog at Gettysburg College where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at surgegettysburg.wordpress.com Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that –isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.
ON LEARNING AND UNLEARNING

September 11, 2013

I remember passing our lunch lady—the nice one with a big bleach-blonde afro. She was perched on an elementary-school-sized desk, eyes fixated to the television. I glanced at the screen on the way into my classroom while my teacher hesitated in the hallway, whispering to the other adults. She reentered the room a few minutes later to explain.

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I learned that our president was George W. Bush and that “Saddam Hussein” was a dictator in “Iraq.” He was possibly even worse than Osama bin Laden because he had “nuclear weapons.” My Dad and I were making pasta when the nightly news announced that United States invaded Iraq. I started keeping track of American deaths. When the tally climbed into the hundreds, I stopped counting. I never thought to keep a count of Iraqi deaths, but no one else was talking about that anyway.

Soon it became clear that the Iraqis weren’t going to welcome U.S. soldiers to free them from the menacing Saddam Hussein and all talk of “them” being “on our side” stopped. People were setting off car bombs and Iraq was swarming with “terrorists” too, just like the rest of the Middle East. I asked my father the same question that millions of others were asking: Why did the people in the Middle East hate us so much if we were trying to help them? He explained that “they” (the car-bombing-Iraqi-people terrorists) were being brainwashed by “them” (the Al-Qaeda-Taliban-Saddam-Hussein-nuke-ya-ler terrorists).

The reporters and the rest of the country started to get bored. Hussein had been caught, tried, and found guilty. My mother, like many Americans, became more dissatisfied with George W. Bush’s spending habits than with men burning U.S. flags on the other side of the world. My new vocabulary lesson was on “government debt” and “exit strategy.”
The war became uninteresting, repetitive, financial; I was too busy dealing with middle school and boys and being a straight A student. The Middle East was “a mess” – that was the term the people around me liked to use. “It’s a mess over there,” they would say – and that was that.

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What I had learned over those years never sat well with me. So I began to pursue opportunities to broaden my knowledge base and quickly realized that a lot of what I had been taught was not exactly correct.

In high school, I visited a mosque. I realized for the first time that not all Muslims lived in the Middle East. I learned that followers of Islam have many different interpretations of the Koran, and that the majority of Muslims don’t consider Islamic fundamentalists to be effective worshipers of God.

I learned that several corporations in the US and Europe maintained control of the oil industry by dominating all aspects of production and bidding countries against one another until the development of OPEC in the ‘60s. The CIA actually overthrew Iran’s first democratically elected leader when he tried to privatise the country’s oil industry. News to me.

During my second year of college I realized that Muslim women do have jobs and opinions, that many of them are empowered by their religion rather than oppressed by it. I learned that family planning services in Iran are possibly more accessible than those in the U.S., and that where Muslim women don’t have rights, they’re actively fighting for them. Just like us.

I read a critical discourse analysis of the post-9/11 media propaganda that I had consumed as a child. I read Bush’s post-9/11 declaration that “Our grief has turned to anger and anger to resolution. Whether we bring our enemies to justice or bring justice to our enemies, justice will be done.” A few years later, Bin Laden said “we fight because we are free men who don’t sleep under oppression. We want to restore freedom to our nation, just as you lay waste to our nation. So shall we lay waste to yours.” Both men invoked the Gods of their respective religions when they spoke, and both invoked concepts of good, evil, and a love of freedom. No, nothing excuses terrorism, but I think that it’s fair to say that both men were speaking out against the wrongs that had been done to their people, and in the process, they were both spreading messages of anger and hatred.

This was the moment that it finally occurred to me that I too was part of a red-white-and-blue-blooded “they” that had been mis-educated by a we-the-people-freedom-of-the-press “them,” taught to dehumanise people of nationalities and religions other than my own. Despite being a citizen of the world’s most “exceptional” liberal democracy, from the age of eight, I had been taught a national mentality of fear that had at times morphed into hatred. It fed on a limited understanding of the world that glorified my own people and demonized others.

Bias is a treacherous thing. It slips into our consciousness, completely undetected. It tarnishes our thoughts and casts a shadow over our words and actions. Becoming aware of it takes purpose. Dismantling it is a consistent struggle.

Twelve years later, I’m still learning — and unlearning.

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http://surgegettysburg.wordpress.com/2013/09/11/on-learning-and-unlearning/