

EVERYTHING IS RELATIVE

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Humans are limited to two mastectomies, they say, so I was feeling cocky that summer of the Millennium. Newness and hope crept into my daily life again. Most of all, I felt that some control was returning. I reveled in it. For, of all the foreign feelings while lying on so many cold metal tables, I missed feeling in control the most.

For me, there was no agonizing over options or timing, no announcement of my decisions. Cancer pounced like a rabid wolf from an alley. Routine exam, red marks on the x-ray. Before I had my clothes on, an appointment was made for me with the surgeon—before I even heard the big “C” word.

Ten surgeries, several body parts, and a head of hair later, I thought back to my adolescent musings: “What will I be like in the year 2000?” Certainly my vision did not include a roadmap of scars, a shiny scalp, and a legion of doctors on a first-name basis.

A brochure from the American Cancer Society consoled: “You may not feel in control of your disease but, you *can control your attitude!*”

“How exceedingly perky of them!” I sneered. Nevertheless, I took this snippet to heart. I was determined to mark the Millennium in spite of my illness. I needed something completely drool-worthy, inspiring, out-of-character, and life affirming.

It came to me walking out of a super high screen deluxe theatre, having craned my neck to see a very tall movie about the Pyramids. “Let’s just go!” I whispered. “Let’s see it for ourselves.” Jaws dropped, tickets were purchased, logic was explained, bags were packed.

And so it was that my two teenage daughters and I were on our way to Cairo. The morning of the flight, I went through the motions of airline travel incredulous of my own actions. We had read an obviously misguided guidebook warning of the conditions in which we would sleep and relieve ourselves, and never having been outside the states before, afraid and unsure, we lugged suitcases full of clean sheets and toilet paper.

Lucky for us, we had Jamal, the guide, all to ourselves. He spoke impeccable American. His open-shirted demeanor seemed restored by the sneaker-melting heat as he conversed in centuries and aged names like an erudite professor on holiday (which, we learned, was exactly what he was). Jamal’s teaching was the beginning of my own “theory of relativity.” “That stuff’s only a thousand years old,” he instructed the driver. “Keep going so we can see the really old stuff!” Everything here, it seemed, was relative.

We were caught in a reverse culture shock. Jamal laughed out loud when I inquired if our hotel in Cairo was air-conditioned. He knew that our lodging was an elegant, two-room suite with fax machines, televisions, and DVD’s. This abundance, so contrary to our expectations, was disconcerting. It was as though we didn’t get our money’s worth without some squalor to abhor. From our private balcony, we were invited to a rollicking wedding taking place in the courtyard below. People spoke English, the food was great, the music was Shania Twain, and the water was OK to drink.

We felt a sense of home, and yet none of it. My physical perception of the place was yellow. It smelled yellow, looked yellow, and sounded yellow. My New England eyes wanted to shrivel at the endless vistas of dryness. Even the Nile seemed only a band-aid of relief flowing through, but never

relieving, the brown. Jamal told us he wanted someday to visit the USA to see “green.” He did not fathom that the emerald leaves caught fire with colors in the fall and then, extinguished, abandoned the trees so that they could be bathed in cooling white. Even more simply, his English could capture the word, but his knowing did not include a concept of “squirrel.”

But, as we knew deciduous trees and rodents, he knew ancient Egypt. We literally sprinted through the Cairo museum ignited by the sheer volume of sights. The relics and treasures almost tumbled into the crowded halls. No guard held one’s hand at bay, yet there was a tangible reverence for these objects. While we would hardly bellow with excitement at an American gravesite, we loudly moaned, “Ohhh!” at yet another display. “Quiet!” Jamal scolded. “You’re in a tomb!”

His story-filled tour was as destructive as instructive. Our American concepts of ancient Egypt were dissolved with his continual staccato declarations of, “That’s crap! You think slaves built the Pyramids? That’s crap!”

We trotted, we “ahhed,” we “ohhhed,” we visually caressed one object, only to spin around and be astonished again. They were so close, so accessible. Even the icon of Egypt, Tutankhamen’s belongings, were not lighted, sorted, or labeled. They were just there. The guide proffered an urn and removed the stopper. Millennium noses, that is, noses from *this millennium*, inhaled the essence of lotus perfume recovered from Tut’s tomb.

We were so caught up in the aura of timelessness, that when Jamal offered a visit to the “Temple of Relief” we were giddy. Newly respectful of the sacred, we whispered, “yes!” We had begun to treat Jamal as a shining oracle and tailed him like puppies after a bone. Yet here in the fortress of the ethereal, the wondrous, the extraordinary—one still needed—a restroom.

Of course I acted as though I had gotten the joke, and even though we had to pay “baksheesh” (or tips) for toilet paper, we found this inconvenience a charming cultural quirk. In Egyptian coinage, we paid “a pound to pee.” It was all cunning and funny, worthy of notes in our travel diary. After all, we were in the “Temple of Relief” in the Cairo Museum in Cairo, Egypt, for gosh sakes! Everything is relative.

On to the desert and the camels and the wind on the bluff that found us peering over, yet never down on, the Great Pyramids of Giza. It was an unworldly feeling as though standing in this new century on this old precipice gave me an insight that no Pharaoh could have. Too powerful for photos, transcending time and space and illness and control. The actual Pyramids. I was here to forget breast cancer. I would. It was my prerogative. Hmmm...those two cone-like shapes rising from the horizon look like...No.

Not even the name of my camel (Mickey Mouse) could dispel this exotic, delicate feeling of awe. I was here! I had done it! I was standing ankle deep in time. As tears dried instantly on my dusty cheeks, I hesitantly, reverently murmured to Jamal, “Do you suppose...could I...may I...have some sand?”

While expecting the answer to be a decided “No” in a bow to this venerable treasure, I still wanted to possess it. Perhaps a spoonful of sand would bring ancient Egypt to me. I could lord over a tiny measure of eternity. Each little nugget, each beige speck was to me a wonder, a confirmation of my being able and empowered and here.

Jamal, unperturbed, calmly spoke the answer that would determine my control of this life, this dream...

“Madame,” he sighed slowly with audible breath, “We have *plenty*.”

Not to be non-pulsed by this attitude toward my reign over infinity, I scrounged in my backpack for a suitable container. I could only come up with a four-gallon zip lock baggie. “Ah, this will fold over

and over my tiny bit of sand, my possession of this place, and protect it,” I imagined. I coveted the bag, curling my fingers around it like the Wicked Witch eyeing the ruby slippers.

Jamal took the bag from me and, with a chivalrous swagger, tendered, “Allow me to collect some sand with no camel poop.” I swear I heard him click his heels.

He strolled with very little reverence, in my opinion, bent over and turned to present me with the entire four-gallon bag filled to bulging with sand. Having plunked the multiple-pound blob in my arms, he turned to hurry us back to our air-conditioned van and our next stop of the tour.

“Uh, wait,” I thought. “This is not awe---some. This is not what I planned!” The possession and control of my own piece of space and time was not only a little smelly, it was heavy as all get-out! Loathe to reject this relic in zip-lock form, I crammed it inside the back pack and lugged it (or begged my daughters too) all the way home.

Everything, therefore, is relative. I realized that I never did control anything. Even that promise that I could steer and manage my own attitude was iffy. If one did not project optimism and humor and a desire to live on, well then, what exactly was the option?

Control, then, is a myth. Life’s plot is just as questionable as my mental record of a Pharaoh’s slaves contriving the Pyramids, the Pharaoh himself of course, resembling Charlton Heston. What I had missed, then, was not control, for I never had any. The hole in my heart was for the belief, the feeling, that everything would be OK in the end.

OK is relative. Hair and breasts and great checkups do not a seamless life make. The rotten times will come with the OK ones. The times that the word “awe” cannot contain will come, too. The hard moments will be balanced and tempered by love and humor. The OK ones will scarcely be recalled. And the places in life that rise above and fuse our hearts together with our minds—these moments may just have camel poop. Everything is relative. ■

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