

The Serendipity of Surrender

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Abstract

In a hybrid world, contemplative teaching practices have had to adapt, arguably making empathy, reflection, and surrender core teaching values. In an effort to tell an honest story of an educator, this paper traverses through the ebbs and flows of teaching in the unknown. Reflecting on two personal experiences—losing a parent and designing academic programming in the middle of a global pandemic—this paper reflects on the truth of educating during times of pain, grief, transformation, and courage. This paper is told through the intersection of how fortunate accidents can inspire us to surrender and be present in the monumental moments that shape who we are: spiritual beings having a human experience.

Keywords: hybrid, contemplative teaching practices, unknown, grief, transformation

It was not until my plane landed in the Kyrgyz Republic that I understood the gravity of what I had been asked to do. In 2015, the Dean of the University of Central Asia (UCA) asked me to serve as the University's Director of Summer Academic Upgrading Programs. With close to a decade of understanding youth development in the summer camp space, I was tasked with designing a three-week intensive academic upgrading program for the top eighty high school students from the region of Central Asia, encompassing the countries of Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, and Kazakhstan. I naively assumed that 16-year-old youth programs were all similar no matter what part of the world you are in. How unprepared I was to have my reality to shift, and to have that reality not only become my call to service but to inspire my spiritual journey toward a deeper understanding.

I was born into the Ismaili Shia Muslim faith. We have a spiritual leader named the Aga Khan. In my interpretation, much of the Ismaili faith is rooted in meditation, charity, and volunteerism. Some of our practices include holy water, a spiritual leader to whom we give a portion of our income, and a private gathering every month that requires a membership fee. I was never someone who really bought into this, but my grandmother and mother were women of faith, so mosque was an important part of my life. I was someone who volunteered and took my mother and grandmother regularly to mosque, but this was not my path of feeling united and connected with divinity. I grew up in a religious home and the people around me had a strong influence on my religious upbringing as I navigated issues of the spirit and soul. As a Muslim, we are taught from an early age that we

should be actively working to nurture our relationships with our souls. That commitment to self is one that can be fruitful not just to oneself, but also to the communities that we serve.

Growing up in a home with addiction and verbal abuse, I was always looking for a way out and a way to reconcile what I was learning about the role of parents from mosque, and the shortcomings I was experiencing in my home. For example, having an abusive father who was unfaithful to my mother was not consistent with what I was learning about the sanctity of marriage. When I was eighteen, an opportunity for a way out arrived. A religious summer camp that needed one more female counselor. Reluctantly I applied, knowing the application process was highly competitive and not free from nepotism. Luckily, I was accepted and from 2008 to 2016, I actively dedicated myself to youth development within the summer camp context. I worked my way up from counselor to director, feeling grateful for these moments of escape from my turbulent home life. However, in 2015, when I was asked to design and run an academic upgrading program for the University of Central Asia, I had no idea how all these years of youth development were going to bring me to what now I feel has been my redeeming feature.

Fast forward to 2015. At that time, University of Central Asia (UCA) was not a physical campus, but it was an idea that had lingered from 2000 when the Aga Khan signed a memorandum of agreement with the Kyrgyz, Tajik, and Kazakh governments. For context, the UCA is a tri-state university that is public, but funded by the private, secular development organization known as the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN). The memorandum between

the presidents of the three countries, and the president of the AKDN, His Highness the Aga Khan, was signed in early 2000. However, due to delays with construction, terrorist presence, and weather events, the physical university buildings took close to 15 years to build. As a result, in 2015, the summer program was not only an academic endeavour but a marketing one as well, reintroducing UCA to the Central Asian community. It opened its doors for its first cohort in September 2016. There was immense pressure on this program to be successful, coupled with a substantive budget to back it up. My mandate, to develop and conduct faculty training, design the summer camp academic and non-academic programming, was the first time I had overseen a large project. This was the first time in the entire region an intensive overnight program was created, and stakeholders were watching to see how successful it would be. Luckily for me, I was used to chaos, elevated levels of stress and anxiety, and awareness of the context I was working in. However, what I thought would be a simple cut-and-paste camp model from one country to the next would end up awakening a level of consciousness so powerful that I still feel its impact on my life today.

We had students come from all over the region, which meant arranging permits, visas and, most challenging of all, convincing parents to send their kids to this overnight program. This was particularly challenging when we were speaking to fathers of young girls and children who lived in places so remote the university had to send someone physically to speak to the families. Having worked with youth before, I was accustomed to dealing with trauma experienced by some of my students—sexual abuse, identity reconciliation, poverty, and more. I had never had to deal with trauma or with outdated views on the role of young women in a country where I was clearly the outsider. I remember we had a conversation with one father, who is a village leader who told us that he did not believe in education, let alone education for his daughter. Coming from a South Asian Muslim household, I was no stranger to outdated views on the role of women that ranged from patriarchy to misogyny. However, seeing it in this context where I felt powerless—for many reasons—became part of my DNA.

Although I was technically an outsider, I was determined to show these young girls an alternative life for themselves, and the more they could see women in positions of power and leadership, the more I hoped they would realize that there was more for them beyond the wishes and desires of their parents. Over half of our top eighty students were young girls, scoring well beyond their male peers and building community with other students. This was evident in our young students. Fortunately, collegiality was core to our program and in the end, the students left united, having

upgraded their academic abilities, and feeling more confident about what the future could hold for them.

At the end of the program, we said goodbye to all our students, staff, and counsellors, and I stayed behind with one student who was being picked up by her uncle who lived close to our campus. She waited with me. I did not have much time with the students during the program, so I cherished moments like this where we could just be. Right before she left, she ran back to me and hugged me. She nicknamed me her “Maat,” which in Russian, the communal language of the region, meant mother. I asked her why she honoured me with such a title. And she said, “You stood up to my father so I could come. Like a true mother, you fought for me, and now I have a chance because of you.” After that, she hugged me again and ran off to meet her uncle. It was the first time in my life I felt something so profound that I sat on a nearby rock and just cried into the sunset. I could not believe that all those years of summer camp, of escaping reality that made me unhappy, and of working in a very intense work environment would lead me to find my passion. Education. A woman who is educated, free and open creates her own pillars of stability.

A year later, I went back to direct the program a final time before it transitioned over for locals to oversee. That same year, I sat at a lovely little café known as Mercury Espresso Bar across the street from my dream graduate school, The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE). This school held international prestige and was a prize program within the larger landscape of the esteemed University of Toronto. I would daydream for months and months about getting into graduate school. Sipping lattes and working over the seventeen iterations of my admissions letter, I had never wanted something so badly as I wanted to get into graduate school and explore an arena I had worked in, fallen in love with, and felt purpose in.

To my surprise, I was accepted into OISE on a full scholarship with many opportunities to publish, network, and more importantly, grow. My relationship with divinity had shifted. I went from feeling nonchalant and living my spirituality for other people, to cultivating an understanding so deep that I felt whatever I wanted to manifest could happen. If I wanted it bad enough, put in the work, and trusted in the powers that be, it would all work out. This was the same mentality I adopted when I worked for UCA. If I could summarise this in one word it would be “surrender.” Surrender was my new faith. Surrender was my new divinity. Surrender was my salvation.

This re-imagining of spirit and self not only fueled me through graduate school but served as my foundation for when my mother and grandmother passed away. My mother and father were both diagnosed with cancer weeks apart, with my mother’s diagnosis coming just four months before

her passing. I was in school full time, working two part-time jobs and in the middle of re-negotiating a \$12 million contract with Global Affairs Canada. I was at the hospital every day for 12 hours a day until my mother transitioned. I was at every appointment, speaking to multiple doctors about her diagnosis and treatment, and praying every day that I could save her. I saw my father fall into severe depression, and my sister, who was a mother of a toddler, struggle in seeing their loved one fade. But I felt like I had no time to process; I just had to keep on fighting for my mom. I do not think I have ever fought for anything more in my life. Seeing my mother's lung cancer impact her capacity to speak, eat, and sleep was beyond comprehension. How could something like multiple cell division in the body take someone from walking and talking to barely being able to speak a sentence or walk to the bathroom without falling? How could it strangle my mother with each passing day without remorse? She was the kindest, most compassionate, and considerate person in my life. I prayed, bargained with God to keep her alive, and felt a new level of pain and anguish that I would never wish on my worst enemy.

In the end, I was holding my mother's hand at 2:25am on February 4th, 2020, when she finally passed away. In that moment, I realized that all I wanted for her was to be free and happy. All I wanted was for her to put herself first, and all I wanted for her was to be surrounded by all her siblings and children in her last moments. I am grateful that in her new form, she has found all these things.

The next day we had her funeral, and before the body came out, my father, sister and I had a private viewing with her to say our last goodbyes. It was in this moment that I really understood what it meant to surrender. All these years I had fought and advocated for my mother's freedom, especially out of the turbulent marriage she had with my dad. But her freedom was not up for grabs. In this moment, I realized my mother had finally done what I had always wanted her to—she put herself first. This led me to surrender. Surrender means fighting, even if you think or know the battle you are fighting may not have an ending you anticipate. But that should not stop you from doing it.

Surrender. When my mom came out in her coffin, I remember looking over her, saying my prayers, and feeling a serene calmness. I knew in my heart and soul that not only was she free, but that I was also confident in embracing her once again. It is through this experience that I was able to surrender to my pain and allow it to shape me into a softer, more compassionate person. It is this surrender that has allowed me to notice little signs of my mother all around me—in the butterflies around my bedroom window, in the sound of laughter in my nephew, in the humanity I chose to see instead of shielding my vulnerability for fear of judgment. Surrender allows me to honour her legacy, to be attuned to what is meant for me, and to trust my intuition to

guide me, push me, and to bring me to where it is right for me to be, or, at the very least, trust that it will offer me something for my betterment, even if I can't always see it.

These two experiences, my time at UCA and my mother's passing, taught me that we are spiritual beings having a human experience and not the other way around. We are not trapped by our human bodies and everyday struggles. We are not defined by one single thing, our occupations, level of education, or privilege. For when we pass, none of these things come with us. I think we are simple spiritual beings just trying to find our way back home. In the same vein, we are incredibly lucky, as educators, to be the custodians of other people's children, which is a massive responsibility. The ability to remember the spirit and soul as central to our teaching practices can serve as a guiding light in the darkest of times. Remembering that our spirit and call to service are tools that inspire community is truly a gift. There is no greater feeling than finding work that aligns call to service to spiritual purpose.

It is through these experiences that I remember how all beings are connected. How we work in tandem to build and sustain balance and to push our generations to hopefully be better than the ones before them. It is in this surrender that I realized control, being judgemental, and guarded are all shelters from pain. But it is surrendering to that pain that allows us to really appreciate our resiliency, fight for who and what is important for us, and inspire us to always be aligned to our call to service. These experiences have not only shifted how I view the world around me and my spiritual relationship to others and myself, but it has also become the foundation and mantra by which I live my life.

I am a *rendi*, a spiritual warrior, doing my best to live honestly, fight for what is dear to me, and advocate for those whom I can help through the power of my voice, actions, and privilege. It is through these experiences that I realize that education is not just a passion, but what I have been put on this earth to support. And most importantly it is through these experiences that I remember we are all someone's child, and if we can remember that everyone desires a shot, we can be catalysts for stronger individuals, and in turn, communities.

Surrendering taught me to embrace joy, happiness, laughter, love, and pain as they come: To welcome pain into the guesthouse of my soul; to host pain and remind it when it overstays its welcome. Surrender taught me that there is only so much we can control. The more I realized and accepted that, the more I could shift anxiety from the driver's seat to the trunk. It is in these experiences that I found my most profound spiritual awakening, the death of the ego. Fear was no longer a central feeling for me. Fear no longer dictated my truth, nor did it dim the good that was happening around me.

I found a way to live through grief and loss. I found a way to richness, light, and purpose, having lost two mother figures, and having had a severely depressed parent. I reconstructed my relationship with self and the world around me amid a global pandemic. These experiences allowed me to find my voice in pain and in triumph. I found my voice, not from a sense of ego, but from one of truth, rooted in knowing who I am and being that person with confidence, with love and with no apology.

Growing up with so much pain, I never had a good sense of my own abilities and strengths, let alone where I would have to tap into them to get me through the toughest experience of all—losing my mom. After all the things I had been through in my life, camp, home life, graduate school, working abroad, the death of my mother, for the first time I felt really noticed humanity, love, community, connectedness, faith, patience, time, and resiliency. It is these two moments, traveling abroad and the passing of my mother, that changed me. It is these two moments that have shaped me to who I am today. And it is in these two moments that taught me the power of fighting for something you believe in. Because even if the result is not what I want, the fight itself gives me the motivation to take on anything that comes my way. It is with these two experiences that I remind myself that life is tough, but the human spirit is tougher. And it is in these two moments that I realized the power of surrender, for the fear of falling is often worse than the fall itself.

Education became my call to service. It served as a safe space to awaken curiosity and cultivate creativity and expression. Educational settings can be a space where children can share and heal from their home lives, tap into their inner warriors, and seek for their own calls to service; a place where we can remind our future leaders that uncertainty is normal; a space where all of life's teachings can intersect in one spot; and a space where a connection can serve as a vehicle for good outside of the walls of a classroom.

As the great Kierkegaard once said, “that faith sees best in the dark.” Surrendering often means that you cannot see what is ahead, but you trust in your ability and your connection to the things that are true to you to guide you. Both experiences, travelling abroad and the passing of my mother, were powerful in their own ways. One inspired me to take hold of my future and apply for graduate school, and the other one reminded me of the beauty in trusting one's flow in darkness. It is with these two lessons that I live my life consciously, openly, and lovingly. I trust that whatever happens is for the best and that, at the end of the day, we are spiritual beings having a human experience.

Acknowledgement

Farrah Kamani has been in the education space for over 5 years. Her passion for education is inspired by community, and how we can use wellness, contemplation, reflection, and trauma as motivators to be greater than our circumstances. Farrah has her MA from the University of Toronto (U of T). Her thesis looked at the impact of COVID-19 on adult online learning within a comparative educational context. During her time at U of T, Farrah co-led a research effort on teacher program coherence of the teacher education program in Child Studies at OISE. Her areas of research included pedagogy, equity, and wellness. Farrah has worked in international developing consulting for companies like the University of Toronto and Deloitte. She is currently a Learning Experience Designer for a globally renowned digital learning consulting firm.