

You will have to swim upstream (or across the Atlantic), open paths and figure out brand new ways to do things, but the fact that you will have to be so resourceful to do so will make you truly excel. She showed me that you should make your own decisions, even if they are inexplicable to others, because if you can't be true to your own heart, you can't be true to others. She showed me that you won't get very far living on what you already know, that you learn the most when you decide to let go of things that make you comfortable, that you learn the most when you leave.

Four years later, as I stand here in front you, leaving again, I can tell you that I am eternally grateful for taking a chance on my dream, taking a chance on Egypt, and that you will never be truly successful until you dare to give beyond yourself.

If you decide to live by love and not by fear, to turn fear into power, then today is not the end, but the beginning of your learning.

Congratulations, Class of 2017. Today, we celebrate that we are ready and able to do beautiful things. Dare to go far, and may you have a great journey!

Ana Carol Torres Gutiérrez

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It was August 2013, and as TV channels in my country showed a bloody and chaotic Egypt, a constant question I was asked was:

“Why do you come to Egypt if we are all trying to get out of here *aslan?!?*”

I would think:

“Seriously? I’m Mexican! This is nothing to worry about!”

However, the atmosphere of fear, the curfew in the post-Rab3a days, the uncertainty of living in a new country, living in the middle of nowhere (because there was no Dunkin’ Donuts or Point90 in those days), and the fact that my Arabic was barely good enough to order McChicken sandwiches and decline marriage proposals from taxi drivers, soon — like all those who tried to dissuade me — challenged my optimism.

I’ve always believed that education is not confined to classroom walls. And although I am eternally grateful to each and every single professor and staff member who has made my passing through AUC a life-changing experience, I must admit that the biggest lessons and skills I’ve acquired during my master’s studies were facilitated by the mere opportunity I was granted, through the International Graduate Fellowship offered by AUC, to come to Egypt:

Crossing the streets in Cairo taught me that the only way to get to the other side is if you don’t hesitate.

Studying Arabic made me humble; it showed me that you can never know everything. However, as president of the Student Association of Latino and Spanish Affairs, teaching my native tongue (Spanish) taught me that you shouldn’t feel ashamed of your mistakes, that we’re all ignorant. We just ignore different things.

Surviving with my poor Arabic showed me that eyes and hands say more than tongues, and sometimes silence says it all.

Riding buses with drivers whose answer to “Do you go to Ramses?” is “inshaAllah” has taught me that fear, resignation and hope can actually coexist.

The times random strangers opened their homes and hearts to host me during my fieldwork in Upper Egypt taught me that people who have the least are sometimes the ones who give the most.

I learned that Muslim students can set Easter palms on the fridge in the dorms or decorate Christmas trees to make the Christian residents feel at home.

I learned that Christians can prepare iftar and distribute bags of dates during Maghreb ... that fraternity is a lingua franca that knows not of religion.

Fasting in Ramadan taught me that there are actually only a handful of things in life worth more than water.

I learned that Ramadan can be every day, that family does not depend on blood, that when things don’t work out you say “ma3lesh” and that even when life seems to crush you, you say “elhamdulillah” and move on.

Even the most tribal things such as *shaabi* taught me profound lessons like “el dunia zay el morgheha” and sometimes “mafish sahib yetsahib.”

Maybe you, as an Egyptian, might take these lessons for granted, but I would have deprived myself of all this learning if I had decided to listen to those who discouraged me to come.

Albeit painful, Mom gave me the greatest gift a parent can give a child: She gave me wings. She showed me that if you want something, then it’s true: