



Time to show Afghanistan's famous kindness and compassion to ourselves

Mina Sharif August 7, 2022



I grew up as a refugee in Canada, hearing about beautiful Afghanistan from my parents. It is a country I could not remember because our family had to flee when I was less than a year old. The stories of my parents' lives were part of my identity but the memories were not my own and they were decades old. The only things I got to see for myself as I grew up were tragic news headlines of war and suffering under brutally imposed ideologies.

In 2005, I moved back to Kabul. I don't know what I expected, but what I saw changed me forever. I discovered the strength, love, joy, music, poetry, and determination of Afghans. I reconnected with a land and a people of such beauty that decades of war had not broken their spirit. While I saw a lot of suffering, I also experienced the famous Afghan hospitality that leaves a lasting impression on anyone who visits an Afghan home, walks an Afghan street, or even shops in an Afghan market. All the time, I think about the kindness and compassion I see in our communities: when disasters like floods and earthquakes happen, street children donate from their light pockets; when suicide attacks pack hospitals with victims, lineups of blood donors form around the hospital. I remember that when there was a tsunami in Indonesia, our still-suffering country made a donation to help victims of a country much richer than ours. There is no question from what I've seen and experienced first-hand that compassion is a crucial part of Afghan culture. And now, after this horrific past year, I ask that we consider directing more of that compassion inwards, towards ourselves and our identities.

Let's start with the conversation of fault. Why is Afghanistan here today, and whose fault is it? I don't want to change anyone's mind when it comes to our former leadership being accountable and playing a role in the current situation of our country and suffering that it has brought us. I constantly hear Afghans say, "We must stop blaming others. We blame everyone but ourselves." In fact, I hear this so much that it has become the most common narrative in our internal discussions. Taking responsibility is important — but just as we should not only point fingers elsewhere, it is cruel to say or believe that the people of Afghanistan have only ourselves to blame.

If we pause and come from a place of calm and understanding as we do for others, we could ask how much fault actually lies with the everyday people of Afghanistan? How many of the farmers and labourers throughout our country were offered a say in what the leadership of our government or the international community did? Afghan citizens

were rarely acknowledged by leadership, even when mass movements organized against the lack of voices or inclusivity. When I lived in Afghanistan, it was obvious that regular people throughout our country were just trying to survive and make a sustainable life for their families. When an entire system is designed against including those voices, the weight of “fault” cannot belong on the shoulders of common Afghans.

If we allow ourselves to become comfortable saying we failed, our government failed, or our army failed, without adding more to our statements, we are once again showing more patience and compassion to others than ourselves. For 20 years, the superpower countries and NATO *also* said they could bring security. Generation after generation, Afghanistan has had direct interference from one country or another. Interference and exclusive leadership is the situation once again, with different names and faces, but the same continued suffering of Afghanistan, blamed on Afghans. We did not get here alone.

Away from the violence, at least physically, is our diaspora population. Just as my family had when I was a child, there are so many Afghan families resettling around the world. In the process of resettlement, we Afghans once again lack compassion towards ourselves and our loss, focusing instead on gratitude towards others. While we should be thankful for safety, we are again leaving out a critical part of reality. Afghans relocate because home has become unsafe. Let’s not forget that, when we begin a new life, it is at the heavy cost of losing one that we didn’t want to leave. I never met a single Afghan who wanted to depart Afghanistan permanently, for any reason unrelated to security.

When we bury the pain of our loss to begin a new life, it doesn’t disappear. Focusing on the good and dismissing the past may work for a while, but it will resurface in the second generation diaspora who must decipher their identities without the confidence

that they deserved better. If we can offer ourselves compassion, it will help us see that we are neither lucky, nor undeserving of the opportunity. We can be relieved about survival, but at the same time our loss of home, our displacement, is a process of mourning.

We are watching the vicious cycle of pain in Afghanistan repeat itself. This time, we must begin adding more nuance to our narratives. We can take responsibility for the Afghan leadership and add that our country didn't do this damage alone. We can be grateful for opportunities abroad while recognizing that displacement is a massive loss to Afghanistan and to our own connection with who we are. I begrudgingly accept that this is not a short nightmare that can be easily undone. With more attention to our own dignity and the rights we deserve, we can remain accountable while finally beginning to break the repeating cycles.

With deepest sincerity, I have faith that when we ourselves represent a more comprehensive story of how we got here, we will be equipped to create a better outcome. The time has come to show the famous Afghan kindness and compassion to ourselves, too.

Mina Sharif is a Volunteer fundraiser, Media Producer and Founder of the Sisters 4 Sisters mentorship program for women and girls in Afghanistan.

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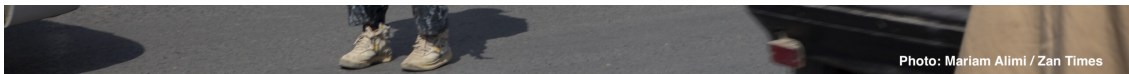


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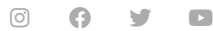
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