CHAPTER 8

FAMILY—"A BUNDLE of STICKS CANNOT BE BROKEN"

EVEN START

On a snowy night in late November, I arrived at my favorite conversational Even Start class. This class had three Vietnamese women, Yen, Ha, and Bao, and two Latinas, Rosa from Mexico and Maria from El Salvador. Even Start is a program offered by our public schools to teach English to the parents of ELL students. It is an expensive program, involving transportation, child care, special materials, and ELL teachers. Classes are held in different schools at different times of the day.

I attended an evening class of mothers from Latin America and Vietnam. They arrived on a bus with all their kids in tow and, while they studied and recited, their children played in the next room. Most of the mothers had been in factories all day, but they were happy to be in class and eager to learn.

Ha's husband was disabled and she supported him and five children by working at the water-bed factory. She was tired but good-natured, except when she talked about her teenage daughter. Bao was older than the others and she looked it. Bossy,

funny, and filled with newcomer zest, she had most of the attributes of resilience, plus a close family and a community of friends. With her ponytail and makeup, Yen looked like a teenager, but she had six kids and worked full time with Bao and Ha. Rosa was fresh off the bus. She was shy and didn't work outside the home. She had two preschool-age children and was pregnant. Maria, from El Salvador, had six kids and cooked at a Mexican restaurant.

The teacher, Miss Wendy, a redhead from Montana, was all smiles and greetings. Tonight after she welcomed her students, she asked them to tell the class what they had done over the weekend.

Yen spoke first. She looked too pretty and peppy for someone with a full-time job and six children. Yen said she had taken her daughter to the emergency room because she had a sore throat and fever. Wendy expressed surprise because the emergency room is so expensive.

Yen said, "I called Ask a Nurse and she said I'd better go."

Wendy said, "Then you did the right thing. Is your daughter better?"

Yen nodded proudly. "I bought her medicine."

Wendy pointed to the thick bandage on Ha's hand. Last week she had injured herself when a sharp tool slipped as she worked on a bed frame. Wendy asked, "How is your hand tonight?"

Ha answered, "Not too bad. The doctor said I should rest, but I am the only worker in my family."

Wendy asked, "Could the doctor write you a note for work?"

Ha vigorously shook her head no. "I don't want any trouble. Good job." She changed the subject. "An American lady invited me to a candle party on Saturday."

The others looked impressed, but Wendy only said,

days and make sure your children are dressed warmly. Be careful when you walk on ice."

I reflected on how much we take for granted. We Nebraskans know about hypothermia and wind chill; we have been walking on ice all our lives. Some of the lessons were verbal: "Walk on the grass, that sidewalk is too icy" or "Those shoes don't have enough grip. You'll fall down." But most of what we know has been learned through trial and error. Walking on ice involves knowing what kind of shoes to wear and how to step solidly and slowly, feeling our way, and it involves learning to evaluate surfaces for slickness and recognizing subtle gradations in texture and color that allow us to predict where we are most likely to fall. Newcomers, especially from the Global South, have none of that knowledge.

Wendy asked, "What kinds of food are good in winter?"

This led into a rousing discussion of food. Bao rubbed her stomach and said, "Fried catfish salad with eggplant."

Ha said, "Pizza is always good." Maria agreed.

Yen asked, "Miss Wendy, do Americans eat frogs stuffed with ants?"

"Not too often," said Wendy.

"Menudo is good in winter," Rosa said. "And pozole is delicious with Mountain Dew."

"My baby likes Mountain Dew in her bottle," Yen bragged.

Wendy asked, "Is this good for babies?" Three women said yes and two no. Wendy said, "Milk or juice is better."

Ha wanted to know why American grocery stores do not smell. "Vietnamese stores are very fragrant."

Maria said, "Shrimps in Mexico are much better."

Wendy said, "A shrimp must swim a long ways to get to Lincoln from the ocean." Everyone laughed.

Wendy joked, nurtured, and served as a cultural broker for

these women. She made class feel like a party. Her students arrived tired, but they grew less tired as the class progressed.

Wendy asked how everyone's kids were doing. Yen said, "My kids went to Chuck E. Cheese this week."

"I bought my daughter a new dress," Maria bragged. "She made straight A's."

"That is what I tell all my children," Bao said. "Make straight A's like Maria's daughter." Everyone laughed but Ha.

Ha shook her head sadly. "My daughter stay out late on Saturday night. She is a very bad girl."

"She is not a bad girl. She just has bad friends." Bao wagged her finger at Ha. "I told you, do not let her leave the house except for her job and school."

"My son is only three and already he has learned a naughty word from the boy next door," Rosa said sadly.

"Children are spoiled in America," Ha said. "Teachers here are too easy. In Vietnam if you made a mistake you had to kneel in the corner or teacher would hit you."

Wendy asked, "Do you want me to make you kneel in the corner if you make a mistake?"

Bao joked, "I am too fat to kneel in corner."

Ha remained serious and said, "In the United States, children lose their spiritual nature and become materialistic."

Maria said, "My oldest daughter comes home after school and takes care of the children. She cooks and cleans the house."

"If the oldest child is good, all the younger ones will be good," Yen said.

Ha said, "I worry my daughter is with gang kids."

"It is good you are learning English," Wendy said reassuringly. "You can help your children more when you understand our language."

Bao said, "I let my children study at an American school,

shop at the mall, and wear American clothes, but I make sure they think like Vietnamese."

"That is the best way to have a family," Wendy said. "Pick what is best from each culture."

She patted Ha's bandaged arm. "I am sorry your daughter is having trouble."

Bao volunteered, "Tell your daughter if she is a good girl, Auntie Bao will buy her a cell phone." Even Ha smiled.

Wendy offered, "Would you like to have an English lesson?" The women nodded happily.

Wendy distributed handouts and had them follow along while she read aloud a dopey story about a visit to a luxury beach hotel, an elegant place with tennis courts and a golf course. I thought it was cruel to make such poor women read about wealth. But, much to my surprise, they enjoyed it. They had no resentment of the rich. Instead, they all pretended to take a vacation to this hotel.

Yen said, "Someday I will go to a hotel like this. I will take my kids and we will build sand houses."

"Sand castles, you mean," said Wendy.

Ha giggled, "I would like to go there just with my husband for a honeymoon."

Rosa said, "What is a honeymoon?"

"Ahhh, chica. You don't know anything," Maria chided.

Wendy intervened. "It's good she is in our class. We can help her."

Bao pointed to the hotel scene on her handout and asked me, "Is it in Florida?" I nodded and she said, "I will make lots of money and buy my family plane tickets to Florida."

Maria said, "One time I went dancing at a hotel like this one."

Bao interrupted. "Dancing or kissing, chica?"

Maria blushed and Wendy cleared her throat and hid a smile. She said, "Let's look at the grammar in this story."

We worked on which prepositions to use when. The rules were complex and there were many exceptions—*on* the weekend, *in* the morning, and *at* night. We also worked on irregular plurals such as *foot* and *feet* and *child* and *children*. Wendy explained the difference between *flushed*, as in "a face is *flushed*," versus *flush*, as in "flush the toilet."

After a while Wendy noticed many furrowed brows and tired faces. She said, "Let's put the books away for now."

She wanted to end things on a happy note. She said, "Each of you tell us what you think is beautiful."

The women all looked thoughtful.

Ha said, "The flowers in the mountains near my village; beautiful red flowers bloomed along the road and up into the trees."

Yen said, "The faces of my children as they sleep are very beautiful."

Everyone nodded in agreement. Bao made a joke that wasn't a joke. "My paycheck when I have worked overtime is very beautiful."

Rosa said, "The snow is pretty on the pine trees."

Maria said, "Our teacher is beautiful. She looks like Julia Roberts." We all chuckled, but Maria was serious.

Bao put her hands together in prayer and pleaded, "Please, Miss Wendy, don't go to Hollywood and leave us here."

Wendy said, "I'll take you with me. We'll all stay at a hotel on the beach and make sand houses." Outside it was snowing. Inside, the weather was tropical.

ACCULTURATION BLUES

From the moment of arrival, families face dilemmas: Do they let their children drink Coke and watch cartoons? Do they try to

speak English or do they stick with their native language? What kind of clothes do they wear? Do they wear shoes in the house? Do they shake hands with strangers? Do they encourage family members to be individuals or to maintain a family-based identity?

Families arrive here intensely unified; they have survived great crises and stayed together. All have focused on the dream of reaching a safe good place. But once here, people develop individual dreams. These conflicting dreams create tension and sometimes break up families that have risked their lives to be together. It's sad to see a family that has survived bombs or crocodiles split up over a credit-card bill or a drinking problem.

Internal culture wars often ravage families. One sister may continue to wear her hijab while other sisters wear shorts and halter tops. A teenage daughter may want to dress like American girls and the father is horrified. Grandchildren watch *The Simpsons,* while, in the next room, their grandfather prays to his ancestors. A Laotian girl argues with her mother in a way the mother didn't even know was possible. A boy in high school wants to date and his father expects him to wait for his arranged bride.

There may be arguments about what language is spoken in the home. Wage earners pick up a new language more quickly than the stay-at-home parent. Old people have a harder time adjusting to a new country and a new language. Some don't even attempt to assimilate. They leave it up to their kids, but often the first thing the kids learn is to disrespect elders.

I once saw a vivid demonstration of power reversals in families. A psychologist asked members of the audience to stand in order of the power distribution of traditional families—old men first, then other adult men, then women by age, and lastly, children. He spoke about assimilation rates for the genders and different ages. Then he had the group stand in the order of who

learned about America the most rapidly. The order was exactly reversed—first children, then younger women, then younger men, and last were the elderly.

Gender issues raise some of our thorniest problems. In traditional cultures the lines of power and authority are clearly drawn. Men and older people wield power over women and younger people. Men and women have separate spheres and distinct cultural roles, roles that are difficult to maintain in America. Because of economic pressures and laws regulating education, property, divorce, and domestic violence, traditional roles are compromised. For the first time, many women experience the freedom to work, to go to school, and to marry whomever they choose.

However, women may experience a lack of protection and support. They may be frightened by all their new freedoms and uneasy with the responsibility to choose that comes with them. Ironically, the freedom that women have in our country can lead to a tightening of male control. Men feel threatened by the changes and react by becoming more controlling. Gender role strains contribute to domestic violence or divorce.

Parents tend to be poor and overworked, often holding two jobs or working endless overtime and double shifts. Many parents rarely see their children. A man from Honduras drives a truck long distances and is home with his family at most one night a month. The rest of the time he sleeps in his truck. He cannot afford to call home. Once I talked about a book I was reading with a mother from Croatia. She said, "I wish that one day I would have time to read a book."

Families from certain parts of the world have not been exposed to advertising, sexually explicit materials, or graphic violence in the media. American sleaze is everywhere, and everyone in the family is vulnerable. Refugees have the same problems

we all have with MTV, Howard Stern, slasher movies, and sexist music. But they are less prepared. I met a three-year-old Kurdish girl whose first word was *chalupa* from Taco Bell ads. She only wanted to eat what she saw on television. A Syrian mother told me with horror that her son had bought a *Penthouse* magazine. I talked with a Russian man who was one thousand dollars in debt two weeks after he received his first charge card. These are new problems for traditional families.

Refugees' families can be marginalized by poverty and racism. Newcomers learn to look at their cultures through American lenses, and what they see isn't positive. Psychologist Michael White describes people as being "recruited into prejudice," that is, they learn to see themselves as inferior by seeing themselves through the eyes of prejudiced others. Prejudice, what Latinos call "*mal trato,*" leads to depression and internalized feelings of worthlessness.

Among adults there are many psychological meltdowns. Immigrants often feel like small children. For a while they lose control of their lives and feel stupid, helpless, and lost. Lola's husband was a soccer star in Yugoslavia, but here he can't find work. He is depressed and helpless. Many fathers who are "retired" or "too sick to work" are really incapacitated by stress.

CUSTOMS AND PRACTICES ACROSS CULTURES

Children from traditional cultures depend on their parents for emotional support and moral guidance for as long as they live. Children owe parents lifelong respect, obedience, and love. Daughters live at home until marriage, and sons often live with their parents all their lives. In many countries, the old are revered and cared for. Nursing homes are unthinkable.

From conception until death, things are done differently in different countries. For example, in Vietnam, pregnant women are believed capable of influencing the character of their children during pregnancy. A woman who reads poetry, thinks lofty thoughts, and looks at beauty will have a more aesthetically sensitive child. Expectant mothers don't eat chicken during pregnancy because they don't want their babies to have "chicken skin." Vietnamese babies are not named at birth but are given a "milk name" until they are a little older.

In traditional cultures, a birth changes dozens of relationships within the extended family. Children fall into a carefully arranged web of family members. Mothers are expected to care for babies, toddlers, and young children. Fathers, cousins, older siblings, aunts, and uncles all have prescribed roles. Grandparents often live in the same home and play an important role in the education of their grandchildren.

I know an Asian family that consists of the parents, both university professors, their teenaged daughter, and the mothers of both parents. They live together and while the couple works, the older women cook, care for the house, and supervise the daughter after school. The mother told me, "Our mothers have gentled our daughter. If they hadn't been with us, I think she would have found trouble in junior high. But they were waiting for her after school with snacks, attention, and affection. They held her life in place."

The American custom of putting infants in day care is shocking to many newcomers. No day care even exists in most of Central and South America and the Middle East. Immigrants wonder why we, in such a rich country, leave our babies with strangers.

Developmental milestones occur at different times across

cultures. In the Middle East and Southeast Asia, children are toilet trained very early by American standards. Latino mothers have more relaxed time lines for toilet training and weaning. In general, Latino mothers are more indulgent, talkative, and affectionate with babies than mothers from many other cultures. This is great for young children, but sometimes increases their separation anxiety when they begin school.

Traditional parents keep kids more involved with family and less involved with peers than do American parents. Our American ideas of overnights for children or birthday parties for friends of children strike many newcomers as odd. Children are expected to be with the family when they are not in school. In fact, often parents don't want their children to have friends because these friends could lead them into trouble.

Different cultures have different ideas about discipline and physical punishment. What many cultures consider appropriate, we define as abuse. Refugee parents have been told at cultural orientation that they will be arrested if they discipline their children with physical force. They are afraid to use what may have been their traditional ways of punishing their children, but they have no new ways. Children sometimes use their parents' fears of the law to bully them. One boy told his mother, "If you don't let me watch TV, I'll call the police."

Attitudes toward retirement vary across cultures. Middle Eastern people retire as early as fifty. Latino men generally do not retire while they are healthy. Often elders from traditional cultures watch children while parents work. Sometimes this works well, but sometimes it leaves elders lonely and vulnerable. Without English, elders may be dependent on grandchildren for the simplest things—answering the phone, helping them read their mail, or translating cooking instructions on a can of soup.

Sometimes their grandchildren cannot speak the language of the old country.

ADJUSTING TO THE NEW WORLD

Parents must learn English or they will lose authority and control of their children. As mentioned earlier, Portes and Rumbaut documented the benefits of bicultural families. They found that the best pattern was one in which the family carefully chose what to accept and reject in American culture. Second best was a pattern in which the whole family moved into mainstream America at roughly the same pace. Least healthy, but unfortunately quite common, was a pattern in which the children outstripped their parents. If the kids were in the lead, everyone was in trouble. Whatever their current stresses and past traumas, refugee parents must still be parents.

When I work with traditional families, I stress the importance of everyone learning about America. I encourage respect for parents and elders and reinforce the closeness of children and grandparents. I validate the family's past history of sticking together. I say things like, "I cannot help you if you don't help each other."

I have even been known to do a rather hokey demonstration. I set a number of small sticks out on a table. I have a volunteer from the family pick up one of the sticks and see if he or she can break it. Of course he or she breaks it easily. Then I gather all of the sticks together and tie them in a bundle. I hand this bundle to my volunteer and again ask him or her to break it. When the volunteer cannot break them, I say, "A bundle of sticks cannot be broken."

On the other hand, I encourage parents to reflect on the difficulty their kids have with our culture. I stress that this is a new

place with very different expectations for children. Teenagers are not the same in the United States as they are in the traditional homeland. I encourage parents to listen to their children's point of view and to develop some empathy for the cultural switching kids must do.

I talk about the attributes of resilience. I encourage families to be flexible, focused, attentive, and hardworking. I stress that assimilation takes time. There is a lot of trial-and-error learning. Many of the problems families have are problems of transition. I reassure families that after a year they will have solved some of their current problems, although, of course, they will have new challenges.

I ask, What do you want to keep from the old culture? What do you want to accept from America? I reinforce the importance of connections to the ethnic community as well as to American cultural brokers. I teach families that time is their greatest wealth and they must spend it carefully. I recommend parents turn off their televisions and talk to and listen to their children. I urge parents to read to their children and practice English with them. I teach families to think carefully about choices and to be careful how they spend money.

I try to teach the best American parenting practices—how to set limits, to give feedback to family members, to hug, and to praise. We have the tools to resolve problems, negotiate conflicts, and respect everyone's point of view. My goal is to help people replace despair, stress, and denigration with pride, hope, and enjoyment. Pleasurable activities and laughter can bond families just as trauma can. Fun can be deeply healing.

Americans are good at having fun with children. Newcomers can learn from us how to have family vacations, picnics, and educational and recreational outings. In Nebraska, families enjoy

the migrating sandhill cranes in spring and the wild geese in the fall. We celebrate birthdays and milestones of all kinds. We like family reunions and potlucks, events almost all people can enjoy.

ART THERAPY

I attended a group held at a community center for Afghani and Middle Eastern women who met for cultural orientation, English practice, and emotional support. I was invited by Leda, a Kurdish woman, who asked me to help her group heal from the past.

I had known Leda for six months. Her family had suffered in about every way a family could suffer. They had lost their home, their country, and their relatives. Her husband, Ahmad, had been forced to be a soldier and he told me, "In one battle that lasted forty days, I saw thirty thousand young Iraqis killed." He said, "Men who wouldn't fight had their ears cut off; but if they fought they would die, so losing ears was good."

After Ahmad escaped the army, he and Leda had no choice but to flee their country. Their youngest child was born in a meadow. The other children were educated on the run. At one point Leda tied the baby to her back and the family walked across the desert for weeks. They moved only at night and hid under bushes with snakes and scorpions by day. They were thirsty and had only dried bread. The children cried soundlessly for hours. One night they passed so close to soldiers they could see the embers of their cigarettes. As Leda put it, "We had months when everyone we encountered wanted us dead."

But they were doing well in America. Many times Leda prepared me meals in their home. That was the only place she was without her hijab, and she looked very different. Her beautiful long hair swirled as she moved, and her mobile face was

filled with expression. Their small house was clean and calm, even with five children.

Our first meal together had been awkward. Leda served naan, shish kebabs and dolmas stuffed with rice, tomatoes, eggplants, and peppers. I knew that she had worked all week in the factory and then spent her weekend cooking this meal. I was embarrassed that she wouldn't allow me to help serve and that she wouldn't sit down with Ahmad and me for the meal. As the two of us ate and Leda served, Ahmad stated, "We Iraqis treat our women like queens."

Leda and Ahmad had an arranged marriage. However, they clearly loved and respected each other. For his time and place, Ahmad was actually a feminist. He cared for the kids while Leda learned English. When she talked about her current job at the dog food factory, he looked sorrowful. He said, "I want Leda to get an American degree."

Leda said her job was very difficult and unpleasant. Some of her coworkers were kind, but many were unintelligent racists. She felt humiliated by this work, but she would do anything for the family.

Ahmad worked hard, too. In Iraq he'd been an architect. Here he worked as a clerk at a convenience store and as a baker. He believed girls and boys should be educated equally. He felt they could study together until junior high, but then they distracted each other. He argued that adolescents were unable to work in the presence of the opposite sex, a point I found hard to dispute.

Leda disapproved of public displays of affection and the way American women show their bodies. She said, "Women are jewels, not toys. They should respect themselves."

Both Ahmad and Leda felt women should be able to divorce and keep legal rights to their children. Neither believed men

should be allowed to beat their wives. Still, they disapproved of the high divorce rate in America. Ahmad said, "In Iraq, marriage is a shirt you wear the rest of your life. If you tear it, you mend it."

Both Ahmad and Leda were unfailingly kind to me. In spite of their economic situation, they often gave me gifts, not only of the meals but of flowers or books by Iraqi writers. When I left, Ahmad would say to me, "I am your brother. Leda is your sister."

It was Leda who encouraged the women in the support group to talk openly to an outsider. Thanks to her, I had been greeted as a friend. I'd been coming for a while now and I approached the meeting with eagerness but also anxiety that my skills were not adequate to the sorrow of this group.

Tonight it was early June. I walked under linden trees, with their sweet aroma, and entered the community center. The women were waiting for me at a table with hot tea, nuts, and dried fruit.

The Afghani women had been in Lincoln only a few months. They had come to escape the brutal civil war, the repression of women by the Taliban, and the famine. When the Taliban came to power in 1996, it prohibited women from going to school, working, driving, or leaving home without a male relative. All women were ordered to be covered in "black tents."

The Afghani women were coming from a place where seven-year-old girls were sold as wives for a few bags of wheat; where women who taught girls to read, even in their own homes, could be killed; and where villages were invaded and all the men between seventeen and seventy were lined up and shot. They arrived from a place where families froze to death and all women's health facilities were closed.

Leda knew the Afghani women from her work at a dog food company, rather grisly work for women who had seen so much blood and death. The four women in this group, Leda, Ritu, Zahra, and Nessima, were a complex combination of similar and different. All belonged to the community of the bereaved and downtrodden. Yet they brought very different characteristics and human capital into their new situations. Zahra was in her sixties and alone; Ritu, who was only in her late twenties, was widowed, pregnant, and supporting three children. Nessima was stoic and a hard worker, but she had been an arranged bride at fourteen and couldn't read or write in any language. Her husband was unhappy in America and sometimes took his frustrations out on his family.

Ritu was dressed in slacks and a shirt. Leda and Zahra wore traditional head coverings, and Nessima was totally covered in a long robe that even had black embroidery covering her eyes. The women spoke broken English, although Leda's English was amazingly good and she often translated for me with the others.

Zahra had lost almost everyone, including her husband, her three daughters, two of her sons, and her grandchildren. Her husband had been shot in front of her, her daughters raped and killed. Her daughters had tried to hide their attractiveness by smearing their faces with engine oil, but the soldiers had made them wash and then had raped them. Her only surviving son was in prison in Turkey with passport problems. He could buy his way to freedom, but neither he nor Zahra had any money.

Zahra was actually about my age, but she looked much older. I compared her life to mine. While she had worried that her children would be killed, my worries had been about my

kids getting into graduate school or finding a nice apartment to rent. While she struggled to keep from starving and freezing to death, I had debated whether to become a vegetarian. Our lives showed in our faces and our bodies. Zahra had arthritis and decayed teeth. I had no serious health issues and had access to good doctors and dentists.

At first Zahra had worked cleaning office buildings, but she had been fired for moving slowly. She was unlikely to find a new job with her age, limited English, inability to read or write, health problems, and depression. Zahra was terribly lonely here, and she worried constantly about her son. I asked her once if she had any dreams and she had burst into tears and moaned, "I have no dreams."

She sat alone in her basement apartment watching the worst possible television shows and accumulating a great deal of misinformation. She had heard that Americans had half a million sex slaves hidden away in their basements. I said I doubted that. She had heard a computer could make all the airplanes in the world crash at once. I said I had never really thought about that. She asked me if all American men had mistresses. I offered a definitive no.

I advised her, "Please do not watch so much television. Sit outside under the trees or visit with your friends."

The one thing that gave me hope was that Zahra was interested in Ritu's pregnancy. She would feel Ritu's rounded belly and smile her toothless grin. "Baby," she would say. "Baby good."

Zahra had few visible attributes of resilience, no family, and a terrible history. She had no hope, energy, ambition, or trust. She felt cursed and wished she could visit a shrine and pray for forgiveness. She wondered what terrible crime Afghanis had

committed that their nation was being punished so heavily. If anything could save Zahra, it would be this community of women who included her in their lives.

Nessima had a better situation. She was hardworking and healthy and her family was intact. But her lack of education would keep her in minimum-wage jobs. Her husband's family had checked her teeth like she was a horse the day they met and inspected her. She and her husband had always had a troubled relationship and in Nebraska it had deteriorated. However, at least they could both work and provide their four children with a home and adequate food.

Nessima often quoted sexist old sayings such as, "A woman in bed by night, by day a walking stick." She told me that when she and her husband fought, she taunted him, "If you're a real man, beat me." I responded carefully, "That isn't a good thing to say in America. It is against the law to hit women here. Your husband could go to jail. And, Nessima, you could be hurt."

Nessima's husband also worked at the dog food factory, first shift, so that he could watch the kids while she worked. He felt Americans were sinful and unfriendly. Nessima said of him, "*Hello* and *sorry* are the only English words my husband knows."

Nessima appeared to have mixed feelings about Nebraska. The world she believed in had grown murderous. In this new place, she was working and learning to drive. Her values remained conservative, but she enjoyed her freedom to shop, go to classes, and to drive her kids to Kmart and the parks.

She didn't enjoy her job—after eight hours on the killing floor, her bones ached and she stank from dried blood, but she liked making money for the first time in her life. Even though she handed her husband her check, they were both aware that she earned half their income. In Nebraska, power was more

evenly divided between them; Nessima wasn't as humble as she used to be.

Ritu was a shy, pretty young woman. Looking at her in the support group, smiling and gentle, it was hard to believe she had witnessed the executions of all the men in her family. She'd escaped with her three children, traveling on foot to a refugee camp in Pakistan where they had survived a harsh winter with no tent. She had been raped in that camp, although no one spoke of this directly. Now she was pregnant with the baby of the rapist.

Generally in Afghanistan, rape is a great shame for the victim and her family. But this was America and the women were reacting in a new way. Ritu had no time for shame and the other women spoke of the upcoming birth with happy anticipation. They all did what they could to help. When Ritu worked double shifts, Zahra slept at her house. Nessima invited her home for meals, and Leda gave her used children's clothes.

Until the war came, Ritu had been a nurse, an educated woman with a husband she loved and healthy children. When the Taliban closed her clinic, she'd been forced to stay at home, knowing her patients desperately needed help. After her husband was killed, she and the children almost starved to death. Yet here in Nebraska, she never complained.

Ritu supported her family with a minimum-wage job. Her disposable income was probably about what I spent each month on café lattes. Still, she shared whatever she had with the rest of us. Today she kept passing me pistachios and encouraging me to eat. The only time I had seen her cry was when she told us about her baby's ultrasound and said the doctor believed the baby would be healthy. She'd asked me, "Why am I crying when I am happy? I never cried when I was sad."

In these women's stories, a lot of pain had gone under the bridge. But the women were clearly happy to be in America and in this group. They were delighted their children were well fed and learning to read. Ritu said, "We are grateful to Lincoln. It is a quiet, safe place."

Americans seemed lonely to them. Leda said in Iraq if a new family moved into a neighborhood, for a week they wouldn't lift a finger. Neighbors would bring them meals and do their chores. Fathers would help the men carry things and mothers would clean and cook for the wife to make her feel welcome. She sighed and said, "Everyone here is too busy." Ritu added, "In America everyone makes his own life, and that is a good thing and a bad thing."

As usual, the women discussed food and shopping. They all were amazed at the products in our stores. Nessima was surprised there were dolls that talked and that you could buy a mix to make a cake. The first time she went to Kmart she walked up and down the rows wondering what everything was for. Ritu told of seeing all the types of women's underwear at Kmart. At first she couldn't figure out what these objects were. She said, "They were so beautiful. All the colors of the rainbow."

The women all agreed that cooking was better in their homelands where food was sacred. Leda said Kurdish women won't cook when they are stressed. They believe negative emotions ruin the food. The Kurds eat together slowly, talking for hours.

Ritu said, "Middle Easterners eat slowly and calmly. We don't talk about bad things at meals. They are peaceful times."

Leda noted the casual attitude Americans take toward food. She said, "With Americans eating is just for physical need." She was shocked to see us eat on the run or while we were doing other things, such as driving or attending a lecture.

Nessima was amazed by vegetarians. Meat was very desirable in her country. She made a hand gesture near her brain to signal that she thought vegetarians were a little crazy. She told me, "They have never tasted my lamb curry."

All the women loved American buffets. Nessima oohed and aahed over the local Buffy's Buffet selection. Even Zahra had been taken there on her birthday. I remembered a *New Yorker* cartoon showing two pilgrims talking: "Actually the attraction wasn't freedom from religious persecution, but, rather, the all-you-can-eat buffet."

Ritu said, "Afghanis believe it is a sin to waste food." She was upset when her children made art with macaroni and uncooked pinto beans at school. She said, "I have many relatives who are hungry. It is disrespectful of the school to use food so foolishly."

At the mention of relatives, the room grew quiet. Leda looked at me. I asked gently if they remembered their assignment to bring pictures of their old homes. Leda brought out pictures of her house in Iraq. Then Nessima and Zahra showed pictures of their homes. All had nice houses with pretty gardens. As they passed these pictures around, all four women cried.

Nessima said, "Before the Taliban, Afghanistan was modern and happy. The streets were filled with neighbors talking. Now the streets are empty. Men are fearful they will be forced to fight for the Taliban. Women are prisoners in their own homes."

Zahra said, "Even young girls have to be completely covered to go outside."

"To escape, people walked or rode horses into Pakistan. Many died on the way," Nessima explained. "Children froze or fell off mountains."

Ritu spoke of her brother still in Afghanistan. "I don't even

know if he is alive. It is impossible to exchange mail or call him. There are no airports. There is no consulate."

Leda said simply, "I, too, have seen a life of war. Every day I thought I might die. No matter how hard America is, I am grateful to be here. My children have a chance in this country."

I asked the women if they would like to do an art project. There is an old chestnut: Art turns agony into ecstasy. I didn't expect any ecstasy, but I did hope that drawing might help these women express feelings they couldn't express in their limited English.

They nodded in polite agreement. I pulled out paper and colored pencils. The women marveled at my supplies. I said, "Sometimes it is good to draw sad events, to take them out of your heart and place them on a piece of paper."

I said, "I know this may be painful for you. I wouldn't ask you to do this if I didn't think it would help you. I want you all to draw a picture of fear."

Zahra hesitated for a while, but the others drew eagerly and unselfconsciously, like schoolchildren. I realized most had never had an art lesson or even an opportunity to draw. They had no one's art to compare with their own.

Ritu drew women in black clothes scurrying around the corners of buildings looking for food. They looked like crows, all in black, skinny, trying to find crumbs. She drew herself in the robes she had been forced to wear by the Taliban. She told me, "The first time I wore that heavy cloth over my face I had an asthma attack."

She continued, her eyes blazing with emotion, "The cloth was hot in summer and cold in winter. I couldn't wear my glasses with the eye veil and I was blind without them. I fell down many times." She paused to collect herself and then said,

"Walking across mountains in the snow I threw it away. I couldn't wait any longer to get rid of what I hated."

Nessima drew herself and her children in black boxes that looked like coffins. She said, "We were prisoners in our small hut. It was a very dark time."

Leda drew her family on the run, a line of people with the father in the lead, then the mother, then the children in a row like ducks. Everyone was holding hands. Above the family was a crescent moon. In the distance, bombs were falling.

Zahra didn't draw anything for a long time. Then she drew slowly, her nose almost touching the paper. Watching her work, I had the feeling she had never drawn anything before. When she finally finished and lifted her head, I saw that she had drawn a meadow with sheep.

To me, it didn't look like an unhappy scene, just a crudely drawn meadow with stick sheep. But Zahra's face had been drained of color and she was trembling. I asked about this meadow. She shook her head many times and said only, "Something terrible happened here."

The women passed around their drawings. Nobody said very much. We could all guess at the feelings behind these sad pictures. I thought about the difference between the last five years of my life and the last five years of theirs. I wondered how I had ever had the nerve to complain about anything.

I collected the drawings and said, "I want to teach you an important word." On the board I wrote "hope" and I said it aloud several times. I defined it. They all smiled.

Ritu said, "Hope is good."

After the drawings of fear, we drew peace. The women drew their homes in America. The pictures, with big flowers and round suns in the corners, looked like the drawings of

fourth graders. Leda put an American flag in front of her house. The other women admired that touch and they all drew flags in their front yards.

I talked about ways to relax. I suggested warm baths, lotions, and foot and back rubs from their families. I said that going outdoors and admiring the flowers and trees would be relaxing.

Zahra said her doctor said that swimming would help with her arthritis. Nessima said she would love to swim, but her husband wouldn't let her go to a public pool. Leda and Ritu both said they wouldn't feel comfortable swimming near men. I said, "I will check into a swim class for women only at the YWCA." I added, "Ritu, swimming is good for pregnant women."

The women gathered up their purses and books. Leda showed the others free tickets for the circus she had received from a local radio station. She said, "I will take my kids to look at lions and elephants. It will be a happy day for us."

Zahra looked sad and hunched over. She was heading home to her television with its tall tales and advertisements for things she would never be able to buy. I made a mental note to look into her son's situation. It would take time, but eventually we might be able to bring him to America.

Ritu touched Zahra's shoulder and said, "I am hoping you will help me with my baby. My time is soon."

Zahra straightened up as she agreed to help. As she left the room, she told Nessima, "Baby is good. Very good."

As I watched Ritu lift herself heavily from her chair, I thought about her coming baby. Ritu was already overworked, but she had never hinted that the baby would be a burden. In fact, she had told me she was very eager to see her baby take its first "breath of life."

I reflected on all of the stories from all over the world in which a child comes to end suffering. This may be our first and

oldest human story. The Christmas story is one example of the many birth and salvation stories. A family wanders far from home, poor and scared, looking for a safe haven. A stranger is kind and allows them a place to rest. A baby arrives in a time of darkness and fear. The stars in the sky signal the glory of this event. The newborn brings its family great joy and the hope that he will save the world, at least the small world of the family. It's an archetypal story because it reflects our deep belief in the healing power of children. The face of hope is a newborn baby, not just for Zahra, but for all of us.