

## *Insh'Allah*

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**W**hen my 25 American friends and I first arrived in Cairo, we already knew simple Arabic expressions—*assalamu alaikum* and *izzayak*, for example—but we had not yet put them to use, lived inside them, understood their deeper meanings.

Any student of Arabic who has visited an Arabic-speaking country will tell you that a simple greeting—the kind of greeting that receives little attention in our own language and culture—bears enormous significance. The difference is semantic, yet much deeper than semantics—it signals an ideological conflict at the very root of communication.

Rafat, our Arabic teacher, was tall and balding, with white hair and glasses. We liked him the most of all our teachers, most likely because he was the edgiest—the one who muttered, “May G-d destroy your home” in Arabic whenever we botched a certain phrase repeatedly. In Egypt, such a curse is not taken lightly. Like any good language teacher, he avoided English as often as possible. He would repeat a statement until someone said it back to him so he could teach us the appropriate response. *Izzayak?* means *How are you?* The response, *Ana kwayiss, alhamdulillah*, is basically equivalent to *I'm good, thanks*. But it carries a larger meaning that I was unable to appreciate at first.

“Someone who is asked how he is will always respond this way,” explained Rafat. “Even a man an inch from death will respond this way.” Though we never encountered anyone an inch from death, Rafat’s generalizations never seemed to be wrong.

When we say *thanks* in English, what we mean is, *thanks for asking*—our gratitude is directed at the asker, our peer, another mortal. But in Arabic, the phrase *alhamdulillah* uses a word for gratitude that can only be directed toward the Creator. It means, *All praise and glory be to G-d*.

An American traveling to an Arabic-speaking country may also be slightly disturbed by the mandatory addendum to any statement of future plans. Even when I wished my host mother good night, or said “I’ll see you tomor-

row,” she would respond with the same seemingly cryptic statement: “*insb’Allah*.” “If G-d wills it.”

At first, this response disturbed me. It was unsettling to be forced—even just for a brief moment—to acknowledge that I would only see my host mother contingent on factors entirely out of my control. And my initial discomfort made sense to my host mother and her sister, who told me about their experience living in the United States for a few years. What stood out most to them, they said, were the “calendars, clocks, watches, planners, manifestations of plans for the future—*everywhere*. We don’t make plans like this,” they told me. “We don’t schedule things like this.” Looking around throughout the rest of my trip, I found no calendars, no clocks or watches, and certainly no planners. An Egyptian who plans to meet his friend at a café will plan to meet “in the afternoon,” but the time is not important and his friend won’t be angry if he’s late. Another student on the trip told a story about her family eating dinner and refusing to rush, despite their plans to meet someone soon after. *This time is sacred*. Egyptians have a reverence for the present moment that is unmatched in our American culture; that reverence is reified moment-to-moment, instinctually, in expressions, responses, and greetings. Americans assume that we will still be around and our plans will go as expected tomorrow. My host mother, all the people I met, and even *I*, after a few weeks of immersion, did not carry such assumptions.

*Alhamdulillah* is a short prayer, requiring an exhale and a dancing tongue at the front of the mouth. It carries a meaning that is foreign to an American, but even an atheist like me can appreciate and learn from it. No matter how I feel or what is happening to me, *alhamdulillah* is appropriate: it is the acknowledgement of my gratitude for the simple and basic reality that I exist. *Insb’Allah* carries a complementary weight, similar in magnitude. *Maybe*, I find myself thinking, after saying “See you later” to a friend. It reminds me that I may never see the people I met in Egypt—or my friends from home—again in the same way. I may never see them at all. This notion has a morbid undertone, but I need not think that the only potential obstacle is death itself. Things change, at some times more rapidly than others, and they are out of my control.

In the United States, we maintain that children are our future, and teach them to plan for the future from an early age. But in his essay “Toys,” Roland Barthes criticizes the way in which children are “never allowed to discover anything from start to finish” because of the way we structure their play (689). That preclusion of discovery reinforces the mental geography of the region in which they have been brought up—“all the things the adult does

not find unusual,” which include many of the most disturbing preconceptions of adult life (689). One of those dangerous familiarities is the comfortable assuredness of our control over our future, the certainty of our plans. According to Barthes, toys “prefigure the world of adult functions” and “prepare the little girl for the causality of . . . her future role” (689). They constrict her understanding in a way that is reiterated and vocalized by our incessant questioning of children and young adults—“what is *your plan for the future?*” “What do you want to be when you grow up?” The future, as I realized in Cairo, is hardly ours. The future we imagine almost never comes to pass. When we express such certainty, such comfort, in our everyday expressions, we are but playing with toys.

The truth of our future is what *insb’Allab* acknowledges and *alhamdulillah* embraces. They coexist symbiotically; they suggest one another. The release of the audacious presumption that we know anything about the future (*insb’Allab*) necessarily invokes a reverence for the present (*alhamdulillah*). Humility has two sides.

From childhood to adulthood, our reverence for the present is corrupted and displaced by the drive to be something else, to have a career. Christopher Clausen in his essay “Against Work,” describes the “grim pseudo-religion” of work as both a “moral vanity” and “sheer self-deception” (675-76). He contends that we valorize greater misery, and that “fetishizing the labor itself is merely a form of bondage” (675). Worse than that, we perceive these chains to be noble, virtuous—evidence of a kind of masochistic honor—proudly displaying them to our colleagues, friends and family. Because “work is such an ingrained American value,” people “speak in reverent tones” of the concept of the “work ethic” (676). It does not matter that this work is “divorced from any particular achievement” (675). We are blind “worshippers,” reifying our worship through daily routines and everyday expressions (676).

Expectations of the future, so fundamental to our life in the present, consume us. They tempt us to relegate all meaning, all joy, to that phenomenon so foreign to my Egyptian host family: “plans.” The expectation of a different outcome necessarily involves postponement, and for Clausen, *work* means the postponement of happiness. *I will work hard for many years. The non-work, the happiness, will come afterwards.*

Such is the slogan of many students: *Things will be different once I graduate. I can be happy once I graduate. Life will begin once I graduate.*

*Insb’Allab*. Spoken or unspoken, the word is the foundation of the Egyptian day-to-day. Just as *see you tomorrow* assumes that the speaker will be

*here* for a tomorrow that exists the way he expects it to, wants it to, *insb'Allah* simply does not. One can only wonder which of these two phrases—each signifying an ideology—produces happier and more hopeful people. Ironically, the expectation of the future manufactures a sense of immediacy. *I need that delivered today. You must be on time.* No such obsession with punctuality exists in Egypt.

If you do not expect to do *x* or be *y* in the future, and if the past has already passed, what other time can you do *x*, or be *y*, but now? And if the *x* that you are doing, or the *y* that you are, is only certain at this moment, what is there to feel but gratitude? We can be grateful for the experience if it is positive, grateful for its transience if not. To say *Alhamdulillah* is to acknowledge without knowing beforehand.

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## WORKS CITED

- Barthes, Roland. "Toys." *Occasions for Writing: Evidence, Idea, Essay*. Ed. Robert DiYanni and Pat C. Hoy II. Boston: Thomson, 2008. 689-90. Print.
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