

In 1997, I was torn between taking a leave from my regular job and pursuing advanced academic study or taking a temporary teaching contract in Dubai. Choosing the latter was certainly among the worst decisions of my adult life...

First impressions:



The enormous tent erected in the empty lot outside the Dubai Men's College campus was a beehive of activity this afternoon in preparation for tomorrow's 'Open House.' Rumours have it that even Sheik Maktoum himself will make an appearance.

A key focus of the preparations is the display of the Department of Electronics. Showcased therein is the centrepiece project of the first year of the Certificate Diploma program.

Video monitors attached to a bank of speakers are set up for an interactive multi-media presentation. At an adjoining table are a stack of print outs of a study of the cognitive learning outcomes the students derived from what is described as a "hands-on electrical engineering." A few students will show off one of the devices they supposedly designed and constructed.

I asked the bearded student checking the plugs and sockets behind the main table if the metal box in the centre was what it appeared to be. Smiling affirmative, he bade me take a closer look inside the device. It looked very much like an 'Heath kit'— a simple device soldered together from simple instructions provided with such a kit that was once an ideal Christmas gift for technically inclined 10-year-old boys... I thought of the gold plaque hanging outside the principal's office— a Comenius Award conferred upon the college for "educational excellence..." Were the patronizing EEC officials (probably angling for contracts) who presented this honour know that the highlight of the Certificate Diploma program was the assembly of a *radio*?

The EEC official would neither have known that the radio was mostly assembled by the expat teachers themselves... The Brit department head will no doubt be standing behind the tables tomorrow obsequiously grinning when His Highness makes his entry. The hope is that the Sheik will be assured that Emirati lads who might otherwise be loitering in the malls are in the hands of the best educators that petrodollars can buy. Whether or not His Royal Highness is impressed by the "hands on electrical engineering" at DMC— plans are well underway for opening new Higher Colleges of Technology across the Emirates...



After just a few weeks in the classroom, it is clear that survival in this system does not depend upon demonstrating expertise. Indeed, if HCT recruiters really wanted the best possible teachers for these less-than-gifted Emirati school leavers, they would be hiring capable elementary school teachers... Yet in the pretence that this college really is an institution of 'higher' learning, the academic

qualifications of recruits are displayed like prize butterflies. For those refugees from the western PHD glut— no quibbles about teaching junior high-school level content given the tax-free salary and benefits!

Of course, I cannot claim any moral high ground. Despite a supercilious claim about giving my kids “an experience of living in a foreign culture” I would not have taken this job were it not for some mercenary motive... *Post-facto* guilt renders the motive even more unsavoury...

Meanwhile, the first impression is that most of my colleagues, especially fellow English teachers, are really no different from those I worked with back in Canada. Most are interesting people with long resumes of nomadic teaching around the world...

Yet there is also a type here in Dubai that I have never encountered before: expats whose primary qualification appears to be a PHD in self-promotion. The British head of the Electronics Department taking kudos for the radio assembly project must hold one.

Our neighbour, two floors above us at the Oasis Apartments also appears to hold a doctorate in BS. A computer science teacher from Kingston, Ontario, our neighbour has been apparently assigned by the college to help us in our settling in. Within our first week of arrival, the late 20ish go-getter with a chipmunk grin made 2 patronizing visits. His orientation chat was mostly praise for the “wise leadership” of NG, the college principal.

Not surprisingly, in my first meeting the principal on the afternoon after our arrival, he referred to our neighbour and fellow Canuck as one of his “top guns.” While still woozy from jetlag, NG struck me as a cross between a middle-aged hockey coach and an Ontario conservative politician. He greeted me with a wide grin and a beefy handshake.

“We have great expectations for you,” the principal said. “By the way,” he added, “Around here, we work hard and we play hard.”

I have since found out that NG was reciting his mantra—which I took to be vaguely threatening. (“You *will* have fun!”)

More honest advice would be: ‘*Do your part in shovelling the bullshit and we can have fun here and make a few bucks. Otherwise expect to be frogmarched into the next plane out!*’

So it seems that even in enjoying the beaches and restaurants; even revelling in squash, diving or ‘Wadi-bashing,’ the danger of falling afoul of the system sets every rat whisker aquiver... The nightmare of every expat in Dubai is being thrown back into a northern city where expertise in slinging bullshit is hardly good enough for selling used cars...

1997, September

The first and last visit to Bur Juman mall:

The eyebrows of the Arab proprietor of the Paris Boutique in the Bur Juman shopping centre jerked up as my kids and I stepped before his counter. Unlike Rodeo-Drive in LA where burly security goons keep the riffraff entirely off the premises, here in Dubai white skin alone qualifies one for entrance. But only until they get a second look.

"Do you have any clip-on sunglasses here?" I asked.

With a shake of his elegant checked *Keffiyeh*, he turned his back. For a moment, we waited as he adjusted bottles on a shelf of perfumes. Plainly he was hoping that when he turned back around, the unsettling apparition would disappear. No further prompt was needed of our unwelcome.

I grabbed MH's hand and nodded to TE... 30 seconds later as we glided down the escalator towards street level, I turned to 10-year-old TE standing behind:

"Let me tell you a little secret, honey."

"Yeah?" Asked my daughter, looking back up towards the massive chandelier.

"I despise shopping malls—and this happens to be the ugliest mall I've ever been in!"

Sensing our tracked image blipping across security screens, I pulled my fledglings towards the revolving doors.

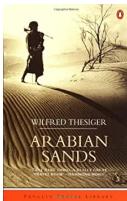
"We don't have to put up with this bullshit," I mumbled, "just because we look a little different."

We pushed through the revolving door, wincing against the blinding sun and blasting heat. In the 5-minute walk back to the Oasis Apartments, I vowed never to return to the Bur Juman mall. I also decided to ask the friendly Keralan at the Oasis reception desk where I might buy cheap sunglasses...

1997, October



Of mammon's lure:



There is one grainy photo in 20th century explorer Wilfred Thesiger's '*Arabian Sands*' (1959) that is especially riveting: it shows Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, current president of the UAE, as a young Bedouin prince of the former Trucial States, *circa* 1950. He is shown with his father in their mud-walled fort in the Buraimi oasis (near present day Al Ain), giving audience to a smiling Shell engineer. One imagines the oilman's pitch, as delivered through a translator:

'Trust us, O esteemed one—and we will bring your tribes wealth undreamed of.... Not only will every sweetmeat of the world be yours to relish—but you will command the service of thousands of westerners who will attend your every need....'

Cut to a half-century later:

In the midst of the International Shopping Festival, fireworks dance above the glittering skyline over Dubai Creek... Meanwhile, on the rooftop patio of the New Ramada Hotel in Deira, it is awards night for the Dubai Men's College 'Paper Rally'... With the makeshift stage partially lit by klieg lights, the event is being filmed for a Dubai TV news segment.

Students in immaculate *dishdashas* fill plates from the silver servers as Indian waiters stand by discreetly. Behind the serving tables are the prizes awaiting announcement: stacks of stereos, VCRs, fax machines, Play Stations, cell phones and refrigerator-sized TVs. The stacks tilt dangerously higher as sweating Indian 'boys' bear forth ever larger boxes of consumer cult cargo...

"The paper rally represents the very best of the spirit of Dubai Men's College."

At the microphone set up before the diners, the DMC Associate Director, a lanky Canadian business teacher, shows his mastery of Dubai education scam maintenance:

"The success of our eager teams today represents the best of the ingenuity of our college's students and faculty alike."

What the Associate Director sidesteps is any description of the paper rally itself. It involves teams of students racing around Dubai in their SUVs collecting items from a list (e.g. a shell from the beach, a stamped photo from a Shopping Festival pavilion, an empty milk bottle from Spinneys...). Ingenuity? Certainly, no more than that demonstrated by the 10-year-old winners of a summer-camp scavenger hunt!

With each announcement of the winners, the teams of 3 or 4 come forward grinning amid the whoops and applause.

"Yeah, man, yeah!"

Hitching up *dishdashas* to get their arms around the giant boxes, they lug their prizes away... No participating student is left out—even the teachers assigned the lowliest supervisory duties receive a goody bag of trinkets...

After all the prizes are handed out, the assistant -director hands the mike back to another fellow Canadian business teacher, dressed in tuxedo. Although among colleagues he speaks of himself as a scuba diver, a skydiver and a poet—tonight he is the Paper Rally MC.

After lathering praise upon the powers that be, the MC calls on the Student Council president.

"Can you come up here, Rashid, and say a few words?"

Porcine and bespectacled, Rashid adds *bon-mots* in faltering English.

"I thank Mr. Annas, Mr. Jonathon, Miss Hoor—"

In the hesitation, the MS leans forward and whispers in Rashid's ear...

“—and all the teachers. But most of all, we thank our principal. Yes, thank you, Mr. N.!”

The teachers loud claps and cheers prompt students to drum applause on the tops of their boxes of booty...



After the students drifted away, teachers lingered. They chatted and sipped soft drinks while south Asian busboys cleared the tables. I was moving towards the exit when hailed by my Lebanese supervisor.

"Didya see what our boys did?" he asked excitedly.

"Right, I saw that a couple of them got big prizes."

"Prizes? Shaikh Mubarak and his team came out in the top 3. Our CD Year One students—always on the sideline, always outsiders. Now here we are at the top. I'm really going to boast about this to the other supervisors!"

"Yes, do that, M." Ignoring the fact that the supervisor had previously singled out Mubarak for laziness, in Dubai fashion I played along. "Yes, we need to take pride in their achievement. It reflects well on all of us!"

It occurred that even if Mubarak, was one of those rumoured to have cheated by faking his car log, such shrewdness will serve him well in the UAE...

"*Mabruk, Mabruk*-- Congratulations!"

I joined the supervisor in duly smiling and nodding as the remaining students carted their loot towards the elevators...



Cut back to the *majalis* in Burami, *circa*, 1950. There is young Sheik Zayed, putting his mark on the paper held before him by the oilman. Outside against the mud wall, skeletal dogs growl and copulate...

1998, April



Power and grace:

The presentation at the Dubai Conference Centre on the investment of Microsoft in the UAE was sparsely attended. Most of the audience comprised students from both Dubai Men's and Dubai Women's colleges. The audience were largely listless— apart from expat business teachers— hanging on to every utterance of the rock-star speaker.

"Actually, I am a college drop-out."

The black-veiled girls from the Women's College who tittered when the guest speaker began with self-deprecating joke could hardly have appreciated that they were in the presence of one of the richest men in the world.

Steve Balmer, slightly stooped and unassuming, largely ignored the row of expat teachers leaning forward from the front row as if basking in the aura of a pharaoh. The founding partner and executive vice president of Microsoft began talking rapidly in a high-pitched voice that sometimes cracked.

"At Microsoft we look for smart people. People whose eyes light up when they talk about what moves them." He jabbed his fist. "People with passion!"

Several times Balmer repeated the word '*build*' in a sanctified tone ("build financial tools"; "build an operating system;" "build a company..."). Whether unconsciously or by design— the spirit of Carnegie, Rockefeller and Hearst was stirred...

After the brief speech the rumpled business superstar took a few questions.

"So what do you think, Steve," asked a preppy Computer Science teacher from the Women's College. "What do you think of Sun Microsystem's move to build a new operating system?"

The CEO slightly winced in the fawning tone. "If Sun would like to compete with us," he squeaked, "Well, we'll take them on any time!"

In the front row of devotees all lips rounded in 'wows'. Ah, to be in such a state of grace!

1998, April



Bedu in the Bordello:

The field trip to the 7-star Jumeirah Beach Hotel was hoped to stir student interest in the dynamically expanding hospitality industry. More Emiratis will obviously be needed in managerial positions for a token demonstration of local leadership in the industry. An Emirati national of even modest ambition could rise as high as the opulent skyscraper-hotels already under construction... Yet most of the CD Year One students were chatting distractedly or looking at their flip phones as we shuffled behind the blonde South African guide though the palatial lobby.

Yet when we stepped out of the gilded elevator onto the top floor, jaws dropped. Students took turns at the railing looking giddily down at the ant-figures in the central lobby. Then circling round the thickly carpeted hallway to the eastern side they gazed down the floor to ceiling window towards the Disneyesque marina, The turquoise Arabian Gulf, slightly curved from the height, stretched off into the horizon...

We were guided thereafter into what the guide described as “a popular bridal suite for European tourists.” On a marble side table, along with a bouquet of red roses, was a silver bucket between 2 bottles of champagne. A few more conservative students, glanced at one another in a shared disapproval.

Our group then stood in a semi-circle, momentarily stilled by the decadence of the super king-sized bed. Without warning, Khalfan, tall with straggly beard and notoriously mischievous, jumped forward and flopped onto the 2000 Dirham a night mattress. With his *dishdash* flapping, he tested the springs. Rolling over to the side, he opened the door of the minibar. 2 other students dropped to their haunches to check the contents.

“Whisky! Vodka! Black label!” shouted Khalfan.

The blonde tour guide jerked around with the horror of the Louvre guard who sees the glint of a knife. “Don’t touch anything!” she shrieked.

“Com’on, you guys,” I shouted, “take it easy!”

“If you can’t control them,” the guide said sharply, “we’ll just have to end this tour.”

“Khalfan?” I waved a finger and tsked.

He kicked his sandals and rolled off the bed.

I feigned a stern teacher’s look...

Yes, he is immature but there was something in his wild eyes very different from the blissed-out expressions of typical 25-year-old Emirati men— such as those recently seen frolicking on the Smarties bouncing castle at Mamzar Park. Certainly, Khalfan would never be among the boys comparing prizes from the ‘Kinder Surprise’ coin-machine in the college corridor.

Yes, he deserved an upbraiding. Yet I wondered just how differently his proud Bedu forefathers would have reacted to the vulgar opulence of the bordellos in which their future leaders would come to wallow!

1998, May



After dispensation of justice:

It was an ignominious farewell this afternoon to the 5 students caught looking at a printout of a cheat sheet during a computer exam. Rushing through the furnace blast on the way to my car, I met “the gang of 5” standing stunned on the steps of the annex. They had just emerged from the principal’s office, having just received the verdict of expulsion.

“Maybe next term you can reapply and get back in,” I said to Elyas, who was the “ringleader”, according to the supervisor.

“No chance,” said the boyish faced Elyas, shaking his head.

“It’s going to be hard for our families, sir,” said Nasser, eyes down.

Face wrapped against the hot wind, Khalid Hassan averted his eyes.

Holding their wind-whipped *dishdashas*, the 3 young men walked slowly along into the parking lot.

I accompanied them halfway, then stopped—extending my hand to Rashid.

“If there’s anything I can do?” I mumbled. “If I can put in a word for you, just let me know.”

Thank you, sir.”

In Bedu fashion, he held out his hand touching my fingers as we wordlessly walked toward our car. Then blinking up into the haze, he broke away. Like the accused camel thief, the pillager, the seducer— even if innocent— he expected no mercy.

1998, June



Hospitality on the beach:

“Here, try it. It’s tongue. Very sweet.”

There was a measure of awkwardness in receiving the hospitality of Mr. Juma, the Emirati businessman who hosted a ‘picnic’ at Jumeirah beach last evening. We were invited by RS, the late 30ish single Brit woman who was a favourite teacher of the host’s son. The invitation was extended to all of RM’s team-mates at the college. With the end of term just a few days behind, most teachers had already left on summer leave.

Perhaps desperate to show her student that his invitation wasn’t being snubbed, RS insisted that I was welcome to bring along my family... So it was that T. along TE and ME (MT was at a party with school friends) comprised 4 of the 7 who shared in a sumptuous feast that could have stuffed a party of 30...

We arrived at Jumeirah beach in late afternoon to find Mr. Juma, his son, Ahmed, and RS under the large white umbrella sipping drinks from cooler chests. I declined the proffered Heineken and chose a soft drink along with the kids. Although dressed in *dishdashas* (in contrast to his son’s tennis court attire) Mr. Juma sipped steadily at iced Smirnoff coolers. Ignoring the fact that alcohol is only allowed to non-Muslims (and certainly not on an open beach), Mr. Juma scarcely glanced towards the police cruisers patrolling along the shore...

RS was chatty— often playing the role of animateur. At one point she asked each of us to sing a “traditional” song from our country of origin. She sweetly sang ‘*Wild Mountain Thyme*’ and I droned a couple of verses of ‘*Four Strong Winds*.’ Before the meal, the kids went for a walk along the beach. T. answered RM’s questions about Africa while I primarily chatted with Mr. Juma.

Along with the slight strain of his limited English was a sense that my questions or comments might be taken as expectations of further generosity. When I mentioned that it was too hot for the kids to swim from the beach, he said:

“Really, you can come to my house and your children can swim in my pool.”

When I asked if the Gulf waters were got too hot in summer for fishing: “No, no— big barracuda. My brother has a yacht. I can take you fishing sometime.”

When I asked how long a drive it was from Dubai to Muscat, he said. “So easy to travel to Muscat. We can take a trip there together some weekend. I have friends we can stay with.” He glanced at T. “They’re very open!”

I took that to mean that there would be lots of booze and no problem with the mixed marriage...

But at one point I stumbled into a *faux pas*. “So, in rainy season,” I asked, “do you sometimes go hunting in the desert?”

“Hunting is not permitted in the UAE,” he said. His grimace seemed to convey mild affront from a request that was even beyond his wealth and power to fulfil... Yet with another Smirnoff cooler, conviviality was restored...



As twilight lowered the desert furnace temperature to a comfortable sauna with a hint of salt breeze, the ‘picnic’ dinner ordered from a luxury restaurant, arrived in covered dishes borne by Indian servers... The *piece de resistance* was a whole lamb with gelid blue eyes reposing on a bed of saffron-rice and currants. In deference to the western guests, there were forks and spoons for ladling from the massive serving dish rather than scooping with fingers (Especially appreciated by one who might have otherwise been unable to avoid using the *haram* left hand).

It was then that Mr. Juma pried apart the lamb’s skull.

“Try it— very special—cost 300 Dirhams—very young, very fresh. He was alive just this morning.”

He pinched a piece of spongy flesh onto my plate and beckoned me to chew. In complying, I could not avoid an image of the lamb bleating in terror...

As I painfully swallowed, my host grinned.



At 8:30 PM, with the girls fidgeting and MH dozing in T.’s lap, it was time to leave. Expressing profuse gratitude to Mr. Juma and his son (still chatting with his teacher, RS) I rose to shake their hands.

“Forgive me, sir. But I forget your name,” said Mr. Juma by then a little unsteady.

When he misheard my pronunciation, I spelled it out. “Just call me by my first name,” I said. “That’s easier to remember.”

Yes, Mr. F.,” he grinned. “First name just as in family. We are one family now, are we not?”

“We are, Mr. Juma.” I said in the grip of his arm.

Even in the mutually affirming clutch, there came a reminder of the depiction in '*Arabian Sands*' wherein the Bedu host is torn between lavishing upon the guest everything short of his wives—or slitting an infidel's throat...

Of course, that was Bedu hospitality before Mr. Juma was born and long before this mirage of a futuristic city rose up from the sand...

1998, June

Of a royal's intuition:

An oddly revealing response came in this morning's class from Shehab. An average student who rarely talks without prompting, Shehab is known to belong to the clan of Sheik Maktoum, ruler of Dubai...

We were working through a simple exercise in the *Keep Writing #2* text, designed for Arabic students working at the upper-beginners' level. The objective was to write a paragraph about future plans. In preparation, there were sentence-completion exercises following simple patterns (e.g.: 'I'd like to go to university...' 'I hope to be successful'...)

One of the exercises offered simple illustrations designed for oral practice before writing (e.g.: 'I'm going to take a vacation in Italy...')

One of the illustrations showed a male dishwasher at work. The blurb above, representing what the man was thinking, showed a male figure standing in a doorway seemingly welcoming 2 smartly dressed customers. The sign above the door read: 'Paradise Restaurant'.

The expected sentence was, of course: 'he's going to / he'd like to/ he hopes to/ open his own restaurant'...

"So, what's that guy thinking, Shehab?" I asked, pointing to the picture.

As usual, he flinched to be put on the spot. "I don't know, sir."

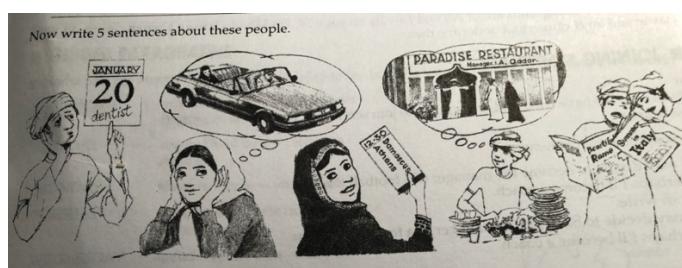
"You can guess," I persisted.

He hesitated with finger on the page. "I think sir," he said slowly, "I think he is dreaming of having a meal in the Paradise restaurant."

I was uncertain whether to give him credit for the creative substitution of a phrase, or to point out that even the most humble folk have hopes for self-improvement...

At the same time, I wondered whether it was something of the intuition of his royal Maktoum blood to understand that a dishwasher in Dubai could never even dream of owning his own restaurant. Just dreaming to one day eat in such a place—especially for a south Asian labourer—would be uppity enough...

1998, December



Dubai, 5 years on:

In the wake of the 911 attacks, I could not have guessed that Dubai would be able to rebound—and so quickly...

The revelation that Dubai was not only been a financial conduit for Al Queda but the home of 2 of the 19 hijackers had been deeply shocking for the USA... In the wake of 911, it was difficult to imagine for Dubai could regain its reputation as a playground of the *uber* rich and a staunch regional ally of the USA... Yet my prediction that the Maktoums would be humbled and that their ambitions would be brought to ground was dead wrong.

Rather than melting down in a death struggle of liberalism and fundamentalism: it seems that over the past 5 years Dubai has flourished like a triflad in a hothouse. It seems that ‘pressure’ from America to root out terrorism was the pure oxygen that Sheik Maktoum needed. A libertarian in *dishdashas*, he now unabashedly embraces the most garish avatars of mammon. At the same time, he serves not only the USA as a loyal servant in the war against terrorism but also remains beholden to his Saudi big brothers. The Saudis may pretend to recoil at Dubai’s whoring for western tourists, but they have no doubt of the loyalty of the security alliance—especially in hammering opposition to the royal plutocracies of the Gulf...



Tonight’s CNN report on Dubai, showed its typical *uber-kitsch* such as Maserati police cars and garish scenes from the Shopping Festival.

In watching this predictable report of how Emiratis are so uniquely liberal and fun loving—I was stuck that Dubai was rather like the girl who convinces herself that hooking to pay her way through college is not *real* prostitution... Whatever ordure they are rolling in, the Emiratis believe that their *dishdashas* remain as snow white as those of the fundamentalist Saudis.

In the images of skiing in artificial snow in the Mall of the Emirates, I wonder how wiser leaders might have used the freakish accident of monstrous wealth. Instead of building a Mecca of glitterati, the sheiks of the UAE might have followed the tradition of their desert forbears... They might have organized a retreat of elders, where careful soul-searching might have determined a path of development that would truly honour their blessings.

Perhaps in reflecting on the core Bedu virtue of generosity—they might have established a foundation dedicated to the eradication of global poverty. In keeping with their culture of frugality in a hostile climate, wiser leaders might have developed Dubai as a showcase of an eco-responsible economy.

Instead, the sheiks chose to create grotesque monuments to grotesque excess. In surveying such monstrous creations as an indoor ski-slope— do they not wonder how Allah looks upon their Disneyland in a sandbox?

2006, December
