

Cowry Reflection

By Masuda Sharifi

The fearless girl picked up the cowry shell because it revealed a world full of inner realities. She gazed with awe at the protective barrier of the delicate treasure. She gasped...it was a mirror that gave the warrior a glimpse of her central beliefs. She went closer to feel the surface of the rarity. A vulnerable soul began transforming into a protective shield within the mysterious jewel. It kept the shell powerful so that nothing would be able to alter its main characteristics. It allowed for reconnection to morals and ideals even if deterioration were to occur. The girl felt inexplicably drawn to the uncommon jewel. She suddenly realized that the appreciation of this sea shell ran deep in the red oceans and in the land of her birth. It was sacred to her roots and the story needed to be told.

I was brought up not by the sounds of musical toys, but by the sounds of guns and bombs in Kabul, Afghanistan. I endured and thrived in the middle of a domestic war waged by faceless tunics, loose pants, and knit hats. The monsters did not care for any human being's life or even their own, but their cruelty served as a greater reminder to keep the shell intact. They continued to play the tragic tune that hindered progress and sought out weakness, but my family's foundation could not be uprooted. I was raised to recognize the value and importance of respect for myself and others—the key to my persona that even the Taliban could not change. We needed an escape from the engulfing darkness and so a flickering candle allowed a pathway to New Jersey, U.S.A.

Upon my arrival in America, my unaccustomed senses finally exhaled the fears and breathed in solidarity. However, my naïve eyes saw beyond the shrink wrap and realized that everything was unlike anything I had perceived to be the norm. Eventually, I became aware of how I did not behave, act, think, or take actions like the other kids in my class and neighborhood. Since I did not speak or look like them, I was not one of them. The tree was my best friend and the soil gave me strength. Prominent thoughts of being excluded and the desire to feel normal danced and were engraved in my head. Reflections followed me and never left until the point of being lulled to sleep.

“Mom, why don't the kids at school like me or play with me?” I asked my mother one day.

“They don't understand you my sweet daughter. Just be patient and everything will be okay,” she soothingly replied.

I was tolerant, but the teasing and the silent stares burned deep until they galvanized feelings from within. It was not only unkindness from the kids, but from adults having preconceived notions of what kind of person I ought to be. After all, they assumed me to be the child of one of them “Muslim terrorists” who could be “no good”. I *had to* transform into another version of myself. I fit the mold and was the best adaptation of me for them—I ate pork and wore short shorts. The once powerful shell now had webs and cracks from outside influence. Pressure seeped into the jewel and began to take over. I began fitting into the wrong puzzle piece and felt

internal conflict every step of the way for not staying true to myself. I was disregarding my religion and core values all so that I could *possibly* be categorized into the group with power. I was a mean, bitter girl who made others feel unworthy because that was the energy I felt inside. I did not like who I had become. She was not the person I was supposed to be. Amidst this inner boxing match, my family decided it was in everyone's greatest interest to create a living in California.

My mother thought living in Fremont, California amongst many other Afghans would aid me in feeling like I belonged in a community—she could not have been further from the truth. In reality, the other Afghan students at school criticized me for not being more aware of the Afghan culture. I needed to become the dictionary definition of an Afghan girl, but instead, I was lost. I attempted many times to do and wear the same types of things that they did, but I could not display a disguise. They spoke lies about strangers, flourished in gossip, and wore flashy outfits. I, on the other hand, did not desire to participate in acts that made others feel inadequate or to put on a front that made me appear more superior than others. I could not once again become someone that I was not. I did not want to risk becoming an awful person to others—like I had developed into in New Jersey. I did not want to repeat that mistake. I was in the middle of a spectrum of opposite cultures—not quite blue and not quite red—being pulled and torn by the ends as a result. I was purple—a nice mix of the two. But not fully being one certain way made it difficult for me to feel whole. It made me question at times everything I stood for.

This uneasy feeling of being different from everyone else continued throughout all of my school years. I was not an obvious elephant in a field of zebras but it was an inner awareness of not ever being able to relate to those around me on fundamental characteristics and values. Individuals went further down an extreme path more than I had ever attempted to pursue. They dived in lava and drank poison, while I stood to watch. This destructive behavior shocked me because it was the complete opposite of what teens in my culture were expected to engage in.

In high school, students took part in the most harmful activities without giving a second thought on how their decisions affected not only themselves but also others. I had always considered how my parents felt and how they were affected by the actions I took. I found it strange, compared to how I was raised, that the teens in school were oblivious to their parents' feelings when it came to dangerous and risky acts. It finally hit me that I did not need to become someone else even though my values and beliefs seemed old fashioned compared to societal ideals—I was bullet-proof. In today's world, society puts less emphasis on respect and often girls and guys are highly sexualized. I was not going to become one more individual to add on to that statistic. I was not going to take actions that society expected of me. I was not going to crumble under the strong sea waves and salty agents.

I realized that my self-respect was what kept me upright despite the porous gaps that had formed in the shell. I had a human spine that had an additional component besides vertebrae, intervertebral disks, nerves, muscles and joints—I had self-respect for what I stood for and valued. I was going to recover and seal the outer layer of the sea jewel. My shell served as a reminder to always remember my roots and to stay true to my central character.

As an individual, I began to understand that I was not an object and that I should not be viewed by others as an object. I decided to break free from the long engrained tattoo—self-respect was not an accumulation of the respect one received from others. It was self-respect on my part that would ultimately move others towards appreciating and respecting me. As soon as I realized this, I turned inward to see if I had enough self-worth. In the process I

learned how to understand who I was, what I valued most, and what talents I had.

Now, although I respect other people's ideas, advice and perspectives and try to learn much from them, I also realize that my own perspective, experiences and personality matter even more in terms of developing a sense of self respect. The powerful ocean currents clarified my perspectives. Through learning how to respect myself, I understood how to respect others better. The beauty of self-respect is that nobody can take it away. It cannot be washed away and it is not a temporary fashionable ornament. It is rather an embodiment of character and genuine growth.

I have gone through a cycle that was aided and influenced by geographic changes. I have matured enough that change within me is now not dependent on others or outside pressures. I will not let my identity be altered just because of how society or people think I should be.

The shell was intact and ready to be torn, tattered, shook, and frayed by the stormy days of life. On occasion, the shell was under tremendous force but the resilient jewel was able to endure. It was held by the endless and infinite sea where it would always face strain, but it was where the cowry shell belonged—amongst creators and destroyers. The treasure would serve as a reminder to always stay true and pure.