

**First Place – Informal Essay**

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*Love Me Do*

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We came from Syria, Venezuela, Egypt, Mexico, and the United States. We held the faith of Coptic Christianity, Islam, and Roman Catholicism. Our native languages were English, Arabic, Spanish, and Urdu. What chance did we have to win each other's hearts?

At a small Valentine's Day party in a room with portable walls and a roof that leaked, we won the jackpot. Strikingly different origins and circumstances aside, we found love.

We had been meeting for an hour and a half twice a week for five years trying to learn the wickedly irregular language known as American English. We sat in folding chairs around a table I could never quite get clean from years of coffee and crayon stains. But you could feel something special in the air as we talked through grammar, vocabulary, history, nature, family, and especially food. Politics didn't matter. We sincerely wanted the good for each other, and we celebrated each other's goodness.

I love to sing, and I know the teaching power of something set to music, so each class I brought the printed lyrics of a song that coordinated with the topic of the day's lesson. We crooned the tunes of pop culture and Broadway musicals to practice the words offered by the lyrics. The melodies and rhythms reached us too. I have noticed a tear running down a cheek as the beauty of a song recalled a time with a loved one who was now far away in a country once called home. We cared.

The songs taught us well. Whether it was Eliza Doolittle's "I Could Have Danced All Night" or the Beatles' "Love Me Do," we picked up the many pronunciations of the fickle vowels English wants us to differentiate. Vocabulary this way wasn't a chore. Older folks wanted the children's song "Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes" sung faster and faster. As usual, we burst out laughing, making eye contact that brought about another round of laughter and affection.

Besides its songs, every holiday was an opportunity for our class to learn all manner of things about U.S. culture and related vocabulary. There's the green of St. Patrick's Day and mischievous leprechauns, the pastel dyes of Easter eggs and biting the ears off chocolate bunnies, stuffing the turkey at Thanksgiving and stringing the lights at Christmas. We even did the Chicken Dance for Oktoberfest. The students were already seeing the holidays represented in the stores and neighborhoods all around them. In class we could build on that.

The game we were playing on this particular Valentine's Day consisted of tossing mini-marshmallows into red plastic heart-shaped cups—I had a small budget. Numbers were written on the cups with a marker to indicate points earned by landing a marshmallow inside them. The top point earners would be first in line to pick from a collection of second-hand jewelry, kitchen items, treats, and miscellaneous objects I had gathered while scrounging around my house. Friends of mine added to the stash from their belongings.

Anyone's marshmallow that actually settled in a cup was met with enthusiastic yells and applause. These explosions of approval were not in proportion to the silly little game we were playing. They were the quality of the roar we hear when an athlete's foot crosses the finish line to earn an Olympic gold medal.

Cheers at sinking a marshmallow were the loudest for the woman dressed in full Muslim garb who had the least English among us. She stood out with the strength of her voice on the "Alleluia" in "Michael Row the Boat Ashore." She had power. Some days before, I had given her lined paper and a pencil so she could begin to copy the English alphabet when I noticed she didn't have the manual dexterity to make a mark with a pencil. The problem appeared to be lack of experience. Then it hit me: this mother and grandmother had likely never been to school herself. Our improvised classroom may be her first. I may have been the only teacher she had ever met. The other students may be her first classmates. It took my breath away.

I don't think I had taken for granted the good fortune and scholarships that made possible my formal education. But this woman's life called me to attention. Her husband and grown daughter would periodically appear at the door of our classroom to insistently talk to her in a manner clear even to us non-Urdu speakers that they wanted her to leave. She was expected to be elsewhere doing something besides learning. She held her ground.

Winning us over upon entering the room were a medical doctor from Venezuela and her

husband, a bank administrator. When her hospital in Venezuela no longer had running water or medicines, she knew it was time to go. Both of them could only find work at a Spanish language call center upon their arrival in the U.S. We taught them the words needed to transfer English calls that came to them by mistake. They brought us the warmth of their easy smiles and their obvious love for each other along with snacks packaged in perfect Tupperware. The husband told the story of his wife moving an enormous box containing her prized Tupperware collection thousands of miles to their new country because—hey—some things one does not leave behind.

The quiet Egyptian man beside us had won a green card lottery. His sister, without her brother's luck, fled Egypt to escape prison or worse for her human rights work as a young attorney. Receiving news of the death of the father who raised her, she couldn't return to Egypt for his funeral. We arranged a memorial service and sat beside her in her grief. Then we raised the money for the interpreter she needed for her asylum hearing. She found comfort and courage during the hours-long hearing in the necklace she wore, a small prize she had won in our class at a previous holiday party. She wore clothing dried on the rack we gave her for her balcony, adding usable space to the small apartment she and her brother shared. There she curled up to read on the furniture a friend of ours provided. It became natural to invite her and her brother to the Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners in our home. We would never get any sympathy from him when we complained about the intense heat of our Oklahoma summers. He would remind us he

was from Cairo. After a long wait, she was granted asylum, an enormous relief from a stress most of us will never know.

We couldn't have done without our teaching assistant, who holds dual Mexican and American citizenship, because she is bilingual and a talented artist. I knew that using all of our senses laid down a better neural track, so we consciously taught with rich sensory experiences in mind. I'm theatrical by nature and education, so I'm happy to act out the definition of a word that is escaping clear communication. I often arrived at class with bags of props. We all liked the humor and concreteness this added, but when it sometimes failed to get the meaning across, my assistant would draw a picture that illustrated the word in question to a depth beyond the page's two dimensions. Years before, this gifted woman had carried one of her three grandchildren, all with a crippling genetic disease, across the Mexican/American border.

A Spanish-speaking newlywed was delighted to learn the vocabulary needed to ask her English-speaking husband to clean up his mess. The marriage survived. We chuckled as she asked over time for the words she wanted to use to focus on other areas of their life together. These came to include dogs, the garage, and in-laws. Learning English was giving her a voice in ways we had not imagined.

Students often requested vocabulary that pertained to their jobs. The newlywed was in retail and wondered what people meant when they said they were "just browsing." When we explained that expression, she was surprised. After all, she was there to help! Others

employed at restaurants wanted to know how to respond when customers asked for directions to the nearest restroom. One woman who did housesitting was glad to learn how to tell a homeowner that the sprinkler system was broken. The thousand things daily life is made up of all needed a name.

A young mother deftly divided her attention between our lessons and her two sons. She spoke tenderly of a daughter who was stillborn. We anticipated with her the child she was carrying. She had a knack for imitating the sounds of the English language and aced our classwork. She treated us to her fabulous cooking and we liked the liveliness her little guys added to the room. We swooned over the newborn third son, named after his dad. Occasionally a child who seemed busy at play would call out the very English word a parent was struggling to say during a class exercise. The little ones were listening. We would say that even sleeping babies on hand were absorbing English.

People sat at our table who held side-by-side in their hearts the sorrow and joy of grandchildren: the ones they could no longer touch who loved the smell of their cooking and called them special names, and then the babies born in their new country to daughters long missed and now held in their arms and gaze. The stories, the lives, took us on a ride that went high and low, always together. How could we ache for each other and have another cookie and play Bingo and sing "It Had to be You" and know the pain of distance and wrestle a pesky verb and laugh out loud? How could we not?

Multiculturalism is a buzz word of our time. People take diversity training. We talk of going outside our comfort zones to foster common bonds with people unlike ourselves. I have listened to complaints after intercultural events that people stay in their language groups and the intended mixing and getting acquainted never happen. I understand the good intentions of truly kind and hopeful people who have filled baskets with sentence starters on slips of paper and placed them in the center of dinner tables. But if I am asked in a language I do not know to describe my occupation, or my family, or my favorite book, I don't have the words. It's awkward. I get back to busily eating my salad.

I have seen the other side. Like the day of our Valentine party, I have experienced the glow of eyes lighting up and grins spreading wide and whoops hollered as a person totally unlike oneself succeeds in the smallest way. It happens because it authentically says, "I'm with you. I'm for you."

Being together works when we do something together. Actions supersede language. The day-after-day beats once-in-a-while. If I can sand wood beside you, or chop vegetables, or paint shelves, I know we'll connect. If we are sharing supplies, we instantly need each other. It's my turn for that power tool—if you'll show me how to use it.

This was the message of love at our Valentine party. This was our common understanding of the ubiquitous red hearts. This was the result of all those hours of working together on a common cause. This was how we came to matter to one another, and we matter still.