

The Morning Greeting

Farkhanda Auranzeb

All the teachers in the department hated him. No one could stand his presence there. He didn't even greet anyone. His class-fellows feared him because he would bully everyone; the girls were specially the victims of his unpleasant habits which was what upset the teachers the most. All of us teachers wanted to provide a safe environment to the girls under our care. He had strong links with the student unions so we had to tread cautiously, fearing a reaction from the unions that would disrupt university activities. He would pretend to sleep in class and make loud snoring sounds; he would sprawl himself on his seat in the most inappropriate manner.

A month passed by. The Head of the Department called a meeting especially on this issue. It was decided almost unanimously that this boy should be expelled from the university under Disciplinary Action. Mine was the only dissenting voice. I requested that this decision be delayed for some time; I wanted to try to reform Akbar instead of sending him out as a menace to society. Reluctantly, my colleagues agreed to give it some time.

I started to warmly greet Akbar, something which no other teacher did. His response? He would respond with a loud and rude salaam. I would remain calm. Slowly his salaam tuned down to a normal one. I invited him to come over to my office if he ever had a problem. He would sometimes come for a chat. All this was not going unnoticed by my colleagues, most of whom did not approve of my welcoming attitude towards Akbar.

Akbar was from an affluent family. The parents had separated, leaving him at the mercy of extended family. He often had to hear taunts about how his mother had left him as a burden on others. And as for studies, he really didn't care. It was the girl whom he wanted to marry who had set this condition: she would only marry him if he had a Masters degree. But he was not going to actually study while he was in college. He could get his degree by cheating on the exams too. What gave me hope in Akbar was the knowledge that the hard shell that he had built around him was just a pretense, a defence that a lost little boy had erected around himself.

The snoring in class had stopped. He wasn't behaving as badly as he once used to. He had started to greet his other teachers too. I would repeat lectures in Urdu so that he would understand and remain interested in what was being said.

He told me one day that he had changed himself for me. That he saw his mother in me.

Things continued to improve. Akbar actually apologized, though informally, to his class-fellows once when they had gone on a picnic. After that the ice melted with his class-fellows and they too gave him a second chance. Before that, if he would walk up to a group of friends and try to join them, they would all go their separate ways. But not any more.

These milestones were reached in a period of 7 months.

One day he entered my office with a pile of books and said in his typical humorous manner, "Madam, the donkey has brought his load to you, now it is up to you to make these books a donkey's load or a human being's knowledge!"

I tried hard. I translated other teachers' lectures for him too. I helped him solve exam papers. Taking my advice, he joined a language center. His routine was now more focused around his studies. The girl he loved was also happy to see this change, and this encouraged him further!

Akbar completed his Masters in English Literature. Soon after he got engaged. I was a special guest at the engagement. Akbar is now the proud father of 4 children and is working for the police department. The boy he had once seemed to be a threat to his class-fellows safety had now evolved into a defender of the law. By that one consistent morning greeting.

The author is a Professor at the English Department, University of Baluchistan.