

WHY DO THEY HATE US?

MAKING PEACE WITH THE MUSLIM WORLD



STEVE SLOCUM



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PREFACE

My exposure to the Muslim world began when I was a student at the University of Arizona in the late '70s. I remember Middle Eastern students flooding the campus and driving around in luxury cars, apparently endowed with limitless cash from selling oil to the United States. I was appalled when I saw them demonstrating during the Iran hostage crisis, brazenly displaying signs saying “death to Carter,” taking full advantage of our freedoms to threaten death to our president.

As a newly converted Christian riding the wave of the Jesus-people movement of the hippie era, I took my exposure to Muslims as a challenge—to penetrate their community and convert them to Christianity. The first step was to get to know them so I could learn and understand their culture. Armed with this awareness, I could craft culturally relevant arguments and convince them Islam was wrong and that they should convert. Although my motivation was not pure, in the process of befriending them and learning their culture, I was greatly enriched.

My sense of intrigue for the culture of the Middle East Arabs continued to percolate over the years as I got married and raised my three children. I always found Arab students to invite over to the house for Thanksgiving dinner or some other holiday. I began researching opportunities to go to the Middle East as a Christian missionary. It took several years to convince my wife at the time, but we eventually packed all our things and headed to Kazakhstan with our three children. We lived there for five years. It was not exactly the Middle East, but it was a Muslim country and only a seven-and-a-half-hour flight from Kabul, and that was good enough for me.

While there were a handful of mosques in the major cities of Kazakhstan that had angry mullahs and orthodox teaching, the vast majority of city dwellers and villagers cared nothing for Islamic

orthodoxy and were more concerned about staying healthy and having enough food to eat. As such, the actual religious practices followed were pre-Islamic: shamanistic in nature and folkish, involving rituals for healing and invoking the blessings of ancestors.

The Kazakhs, who describe themselves as “a humble people,” take the practice of hospitality to the next level. Once, when visiting a Kazakh family for the first time, my family and I were treated with the customary generosity and given continuously replenished plates full of fatty mutton and succulent noodles. I was shocked to later find out we had consumed the last of this generous family’s food. I felt ashamed for not being aware of the economic realities nor clued in enough to politely refuse without bringing shame upon the family.

We developed a deep love for our neighbors and friends. These dear souls generously shared what little they had and patiently guided us every step of the way. From buying bread on our very first day to tipping workers with bottles of vodka, they taught us how to survive. Never will I forget the kindness shown to us. I was an engineer with an advanced degree, finding myself wonderfully connected to Kazakh families who had been keeping herds of sheep as their primary livelihood for generations. I was deeply enriched and forever transformed.

My goal was to learn the language and culture so I could convince them to become believers in the Bible and followers of my version of the Christian teachings. I actually never quite got out of the mode of learning their language and culture in the five years I was there, and I never changed anyone’s mind to become a believer in the Bible. It happened all on its own, as it did with many of the former Soviet bloc countries. Religion and spirituality had been the forbidden fruit during the seventy-year reign of the USSR, when communist atheism was the mandated religion. When this curtain of darkness was lifted, the people who lived under this oppression were joyfully discovering their spirituality and entering into a very real and lasting connection

with something greater. It was a time of transformation and great joy for many people. I merely sat in the front row and watched it happen.

In the process, though I went to Kazakhstan to change people, I myself was transformed. By uprooting myself from the comfortable and the familiar, by choosing to honor the local people by learning their language, culture, and customs, I was able to get past the barrier of strangeness, of foreign-ness, and see that, although this group of humanity lived in an alternate reality from me, they were truly no different than me.

The wise whitebeards and elderly women struggled with aches and pains, complained about how today's youth don't appreciate the ancient customs, eventually passed on, and families mourned. Hard-working mothers and fathers slogged through the days, doing their best to get their children fed, clothed, educated, and launched into productive lives. The voices of teen boys grew deeper, while teen girls grew beautiful and shy, and boys and girls went from playing games to flirting and finding a life partner. Small children played, ate, and were the delight of their parents.

This was my transformation. The ethnicities and cultures I had an opportunity to experience while living in Kazakhstan are a small fraction of all those represented on this planet. And were I to repeat this experience in nearly any one of them, I would see the same humanity—births, joys, struggles, and departures.

And so, when one child dies, no matter if he is a Syrian refugee who didn't quite have the strength to make the journey, or the Turkish toddler who somehow escaped from the arms of her mother and was run over by a donkey cart, or the four young Palestinian boys who were killed by Israeli artillery while playing on the beach, my tears are the same as if I had seen it happen out in the streets from my own second-floor balcony. Each child who dies in some faraway place is not some "other" kind of creature. I know their parents are crying the same agonized tears I cried when I lost my son.

And so, we are truly one.

Since returning to the states in 1997 and reintegrating into my life here, I witnessed the horrible tragedy of 9/11 play out on my television screen. I watched the subsequent response of two invasions, with round-the-clock media portrayal of Islam as a religion of terror. After sixteen years of this message being pumped into Americans' heads, it is not surprising that we view any Muslim with suspicion, and are, in general, not in favor of providing assistance of any kind to Muslim refugees.

"Why Do They Hate Us?" is my labor of love to attempt to repay my debt to the wonderful people of Kazakhstan. In it I tell the story of the silenced Muslim mainstream.

My transformation experience in Kazakhstan provides the backdrop for the content of this book. It is by no means a comprehensive academic work, but rather a broad sketch of the geographical, historical, and political background along with personal stories. I hope you read it and find understanding.

Humbly,
Steve Slocum

INTRODUCTION

I've never been more terrified. Fear gripped my chest. I could feel it surround my rib cage and squeeze, along with a palpable physical sensation inside my chest cavity. My heart was racing, and sweaty palms gripped the steering wheel as my eyes strained to pierce the whiteout conditions. I was caught in the jaws of a vicious snowstorm dumping several feet of snow on the road over the treacherous pass just south of Ouray, Colorado. To make matters worse, my teenage daughter was sitting next to me in the passenger seat. We were on our way to the Durango airport after a spring break ski/snowboard trip to Telluride, Colorado. Having skied all week in sunny, bluebird conditions, we were dressed for our arrival in the sunny Southwest and driving a cheap rental sedan, which had seemed like a good idea at the time.

Snow was building up quickly as I tried to keep the car moving without touching the brakes. I leaned forward and stretched my neck to get a better look at the taillights of the pickup truck some distance in front of me. My daughter didn't make a sound, but I know she saw the sheer drop off just outside the passenger window. I felt the front wheels lose traction while we rounded a hairpin turn, and I was forced to let my foot off the gas pedal. Regaining traction, I slightly accelerated onto a straight section with a steep upward slope on the passenger side and a steep drop on my side. The taillights of the pickup truck had now disappeared.

We rolled forward another hundred feet or so, and I no longer had any reference connecting my visual navigation system to the road. I suddenly realized all I saw was white. I was no longer able to distinguish sky from ground, up from down, or left from right. I had no idea where the road was in the three-dimensional space of endless white that had swallowed me up. It took about three seconds for the terror I was feeling to ramp up to the level of full panic. I remember shouting, "I can't see, I can't see!" and hearing my daughter scream.

My mental faculties barely functioning at this point, I instinctively slammed my foot on the brake, my panic overriding my awareness to only use the brakes with feather touch. I felt the car sliding, heard my daughter screaming, and I let out a long shout. And the car stopped.

As my heart began to stop pounding, my eyes were giving me no clues. I rolled my window down and stuck my head out to see if I could figure out what had just happened. I was so relieved to no longer be sliding that I didn't at first realize how close we had just come to disappearing until the summer thaw. I stared for a moment, confused by the mountainous pile of snow I had just plowed into. I slowly realized that we had narrowly missed being swept off the mountain by the massive avalanche now blocking about one hundred feet of the road in front of us. And I couldn't help wonder about the vehicle whose taillights I had been following. The highway department eventually showed up and guided the long line of cars that had begun to form back down the way we had come up. We were snowed in for several days.

Fear can overpower the bravest of us.

Terror is a tactic designed to trigger an irrational fear response in order to achieve political ends. My instinct to slam my foot onto the brakes while driving in a foot of snow was an irrational response to the terror I was feeling. And I contend that America, in response to the terror and trauma of the 9/11 attacks, has been in an ongoing state of fear toward Muslims. On a national level, we have responded with an all out "war on terror" across the ocean, including the invasion of Iraq, which had nothing to do with 9/11. The "war on terror" rages on in over a half-a-dozen countries, as of 2018. The fear has become so obvious and pervasive that a new term has been created: Islamophobia—the fear of Muslims.

Unresolved trauma often leads to the suppressing of associated emotional responses that are too powerful to face. So perhaps the fears related to our individual trauma from 9/11 remain on an unconscious

level. I found this to be true for myself, until I did some recent international travel and those fears bubbled up into my consciousness.

I was killing time at my gate at the San Diego airport, lost in deep daydreams of adventures that lay ahead on my long-anticipated two-week trip to the Austrian Alps. My concentration was reluctantly extracted from a world of mountain chalets and alpine views to the sound of a strange language, yet somehow recognizable. As I unconsciously turned toward the sound, I saw a dark, bearded man, unmistakably Muslim, speaking what must have been Arabic into his cell phone. I heard words I recognized like *al-hamdulillah* (praise be to Allah) and *inshallah* (if Allah is willing). As I became aware of a creeping fear beginning to squeeze my chest, I found myself consciously wishing this man was not on my flight. The fear nagged me throughout the flight as I kept tabs on his whereabouts. We, of course, arrived at our destination without incident.

In April 2016, passengers on a Southwest flight were about to depart on a quick hop from Los Angeles to Oakland. They overheard a young man mention ISIS in his cell phone conversation and close the conversation with *inshallah*. According to the CNN report, within two minutes he was removed from the plane, undergoing searches and questioning. Subsequently, he was told by the airline, “Southwest will not fly you back,” even though the FBI took no further action.¹ Unfortunately, this is not an isolated incident.

The psychological trauma produced by the spectacularly horrific 9/11 attacks has proven to be deep. How many of us can instantly recall the exact moment we received that phone call from a friend or loved one telling us something terrible had just happened and to turn the on the TV?? The emotional damage caused by repeatedly watching those video clips of 737s full of passengers smashing into the sides of the World Trade Center towers cannot be overstated.

With Americans in the throes of post-traumatic stress, nine days after we watched the horrific collapse of the twin towers onto

their own footprints, then president George W. Bush gave us the explanation our traumatized hearts were begging for in his address to a joint session of Congress. He started by posing a hypothetical question on behalf of all of us: “Americans are asking, ‘why do they hate us?’” His wholly inaccurate answer powerfully reinforced our fear and set the stage for America’s ongoing irrational response. He said: “...they hate our freedoms: our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other.”²

Now, over sixteen years after the 9/11 attacks, Islamophobia is at an all-time high, and the so-called war on terror is escalating uncontrollably. Islamic State groups are as resilient as dandelions, seemingly defeated and eliminated, yet only scattering to the winds of war and coming to life tenfold somewhere else. Meanwhile, hardly a week goes by without another news report of a disturbingly violent attack on random individuals in the West, both Muslim and non-Muslim, in reciprocating fashion.

Where is this runaway train car of violence and hatred going? With approximately 1.7 billion Muslims on the planet, representing 25 percent of the world’s total population, continued escalation and proliferation of wars and random attacks can only lead us to terrifying, nightmarish outcomes.

Donald Trump’s presidential campaign had a major anti-Muslim focus, and it is not a stretch to believe that this focus played a key role in his victory. As president, Trump has followed through with his campaign promise by issuing an executive order banning citizens from certain predominantly Muslim countries from traveling to the United States. He has also escalated military operations in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, while promising the Saudi King a \$110 billion arms deal and maintaining Israel’s annual allotment of almost \$4 billion in military aid. As of March 2018, the United States is involved in direct military or covert operations in at least six Muslim countries,

yet, after three heads of state, Americans still do not have an accurate answer to the question, “Why do they hate us?” And fear marches on.

Several years ago I set out to find the answer to this question for myself. I wanted to understand the origins of Islam, its history – especially the part about becoming an empire, the present day teachings of Islam and practice of everyday Muslims, and I wanted to understand the connection with modern day extremism and terror. In my literature search, I found books that focused on the politics; I found books about the positive teachings of Islam, mostly written by Muslims; and the negative teachings, written by Christians; and I found books about Islam’s storied history. But I didn’t find a single book that connected all the dots and answered my question, from the perspective of a non-Muslim. *Why Do They Hate Us?* is that book.

The process of healing the psychological damage caused by severe trauma is complex and laborious, requiring great courage on the part of the victims. This process can be aided by introducing truth-based awareness of the circumstances surrounding the traumatic event. “Why Do They Hate Us?” seeks to help with this awareness by identifying who “they” are, and then painting an accurate portrait of the rest of Islam’s 1.7 billion souls.

It is my hope that a better understanding of Islam’s mainstream will help Americans take important steps in the healing of our collective and individual psyches and allow us to move forward with individual decisions and political policies that are not founded in fear.

May God give us courage.

INTRODUCTION NOTES

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2. George W. Bush, “Text: President Bush Addresses the Nation,” *Washington Post* (September 20, 2001), http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/bushaddress_092001.html.

JIHAD AND SHARIA LAW ARE EVIL... RIGHT?



Islam's Roots in Social Justice

Terror is a weapon. The fear is real. 9/11 opened a gaping wound and left Americans feeling vulnerable. No longer was Islamic terror something that happened only in a crowded café in Tel Aviv. Since 9/11 we've lived with threat-advisory scales at airports and watched horrific news reports of mass beheadings in ISIS-held regions. It's no wonder that the fear of many Americans has grown in the years since 9/11.

Fear mongers exploit our fears for profit. Political opportunists fan the flames, brazenly using fear to expand their voter bases. And lies proliferate. A simple Ecosia¹ search on a phrase such as, “the Quran teaches killing,” will turn up multiple websites that are full of anti-Islamic gibberish.

It is the duty of every Muslim male to wage war against Infidels – not just by preaching and persuading, but by any means necessary and as the world has seen, by extreme violence whenever possible. It is one of the core beliefs of Islam.² [emphasis mine]

Since Islam teaches that the entire world is to be subjected to its laws, we need to prepare ourselves to withstand the

future attacks motivated from the Quran that teaches killing in subjection of the unbelievers.³ [emphasis mine]

Sharia is explicitly opposed to religious freedom, freedom of conscience and the free exchange of ideas. It is violent, openly bigoted toward non-Muslims, discriminatory, and unflinchingly sexist. Large sections deal with the practice of slavery.⁴ [emphasis mine]

Dozens of action movies featuring Muslim terrorists, such as *The Kingdom* which depicts the suicide bombing of an American oil company compound in Saudi Arabia, have grossed hundreds of millions in box office sales in the United States—even before 9/11.

The award-winning TV series *24*, featuring Kiefer Sutherland as counter-terrorist agent Jack Bauer, premiered less than two months after 9/11 and continued for eight seasons, spanning 192 episodes. It became the longest running counterterrorism television drama in history.

Even the most moderate of cable news outlets, incentivized by viewer ratings, provides continuous coverage and analysis of each and every violent act of deranged terrorists. “Expert” commentary on the teaching of Islam is offered as an explanation.

The unsurprising effect of the universal portrayal of the typical Muslim as a demented fanatic has been to normalize radicalism—to conflate the acts of an extremist minority with those of a vast majority who are also victimized by radical terrorism. By doing so, it is my contention that we have played directly into the hands of terrorist leaders by rendering impotent the most powerful force of Islam—its 1.5 billion mainstream moderates.

So let’s take the spotlight off of the extremists and shine it on the ordinary Muslim. What is the bearded imam with the white cap and flowing robes teaching in the mosque that’s in your city? Is he secretly teaching holy war against American infidels? And that mysterious woman wearing the hijab that you often see in the market—what about her? Is she biding her time until Sharia law is established?

With the truth about Islam shrouded in a mysterious fog, it's easy for such questions to formulate themselves in our minds. But the fresh sea breeze of awareness disperses the dark clouds of fear to reveal sunny, blue skies and crystal-clear visibility. The first thing we see is a helpless baby boy in the desert of Arabia, unaware of the fight for survival that lies ahead of him.

NO HELP FOR THE HELPLESS – MOHAMMED'S TRAGIC CHILDHOOD

The first Muslim was Mohammed. Before he had taken his first breath of desert air, the Hijaz had already dealt him its first blow. The Hijaz is the mountainous, desert region along the western coast of Saudi Arabia containing Islam's holiest cities. The year was 570 A. D. His father had succumbed to the unrelenting perils of caravan travel, where even the slightest mishap can be fatal, and died a young man, only days before the birth of his first child.

From the moment he was born without a father, Mohammed would be held captive by powerful, unarticulated, cultural norms, even as a member of the most powerful tribe in Mecca, the Quraysh. Unless he could create his own fortune from nothing and establish a family, he was doomed to be an outsider—a loner, a castaway. As no man's heir, he had nothing to inherit. With no family status or inheritance, no father would give his daughter to Mohammed in marriage. It was far more likely that he would be reduced to a life of slavery.

Mecca is situated in a stagnant basin surrounded by volcanic hills. Smoke—from cooking fires and a smoldering mountain of manure on the edge of the city—hovered in the air. In the 100°F desert heat, life was almost unbearable. As in all ancient cities, the child and infant mortality rate was high. Infants had less than the flip-of-a-coin chance of surviving.

Any family in Mecca with the financial means to do so sent their infants to wet nurses among the Bedouin tribes on nearby desert oases. But the punishing cultural and economic realities took effect immediately for tiny Mohammed. Cultural norms required that Mohammed and his mother, Amina, be taken in by a male relative on her side. They would have been provided with food and shelter--nothing more. The wet nurses required payment for their services. Their families depended on this for survival. Now branded as a widow, Amina had no chance of securing a wet nurse, and it was looking like baby Mohammed would be taking the long odds in Mecca.

But coincidentally, one of the Bedouin mothers had also fallen on hard times and had been the only mother unable to secure a suckling on their group visit to Mecca. Perhaps she hoped that Amina would remarry and be able to pay after all, perhaps she simply didn't want to be the only one in the group without an infant to take back to the oasis. Either way, Mohammed's chances of survival went up dramatically when she collected him into her arms and joined her group for the return trip.

The city dwellers, known as sedentary Arabs, and the nomadic Bedouins needed each other. Just like the inhabitants of New York and Los Angeles depend on Iowa corn and Nebraska cattle, the people of Mecca depended on the Bedouins for the basics of life. But they didn't like each other. The Meccans considered the Bedouins to be unsophisticated hillbillies. The Bedouins disrespected the Meccans for abandoning the traditional life of the Arab to live in permanent dwellings in the city.

The Bedouins were similar to the indigenous groups of other continents. It was a centuries-old society organized by clans and tribes. There were no physical boundaries and no local or regional governments. Tribes shrunk and expanded, based on the collective good fortunes of their members. With limited desert resources as

basic as water and grazing space—along with expanding flocks and herds—clashes between clans were common. And they were every bit as bitter as the Hatfields and the McCoys. Relations with other tribes and the social order within a tribe were managed by the sheikh. The sheikh was elected from among the tribal elders and did not serve as a ruler, but more as a judge. He had no authority to enforce his recommendations, which were made in consultation with the other tribal leaders.

Survival of the tribe in the harsh desert conditions depended on a cohesive social order. Anything questionable or under dispute was settled based on the group interest of the tribe. One of the key responsibilities of the sheikh was to look after the well-being of the weaker members such as widows and orphans. Characteristics such as patience, endurance, hospitality, and generosity were highly regarded.

In Mecca things were different. The fortunes of the Quraysh tribe and of the city itself were centered around an annual pilgrimage. It started out as a religious festival involving masses of people gathering around a small cinderblock enclosure covered in cloths dyed red and black, known as the Kaaba. Within the Kaaba were idols representing various deities. The crowds would encircle the Kaaba and walk around it seven times while chanting and worshipping.

Over time, the leader of the Quraysh, an innovative businessman named, Qusayy, managed to monopolize the organization and execution of the festival and ultimately took complete ownership of it. He next took steps to maximize attendance by including virtually all of the deities of the region in the religious rites, namely, in the circling of the idol-filled Kaaba. Worshipers from Arabia and the surrounding regions all made the yearly pilgrimage to Mecca.

Such a diverse gathering of clans and tribes was the perfect opportunity for trade, so the festival evolved to include a commercial fair. The Quraysh managed every aspect, including fees and taxes

for entrance, care of livestock, housing, and all buying and selling of goods. The brilliant Qusayy had succeeded in creating a universal religious festival, which he then linked to a commercial fair, fully administered by the Quraysh. He thereby guaranteed their economic, religious, and political supremacy.

The Quraysh elite became obscenely wealthy. The inevitable outcome was an oligarchic system and a breakdown of the tribal ethic. Widows like Amina and orphans like Mohammed were no longer protected by a wise sheikh who was duty-bound to ensure the survival of all—even the weak. The wisdom of the sheikh gave way to a ruthless, survival-of-the-fittest culture. The unviable were often trapped in a cycle of coming up short, borrowing just to get by, being unable to repay, then eventually forced into a life of slavery to their debtor.

Mohammed's two-year reprieve among the Bedouins came to an end all too quickly and it was time to return the waddling toddlers to their mothers. But the breakdown of the social order would force another interesting twist for Mohammed. Traditionally, a widow would have been remarried not long after losing her husband. One of her husband's brothers would have stepped up and taken her as a wife, even if he was already married. Taking a second or third wife in these situations was considered a matter of family honor—a means of providing for the family of a deceased brother. And this would have allowed a widow and her children to be folded back into a normal family with all the associated benefits: provision, protection, and inheritance. The whole family shared in absorbing the financial burden of the loss. In Amina's case, even after two years, she was still on her own, causing some to speculate that she suffered from a chronic illness or had some other defect.

But, when it was time to hand Mohammed over to his mother, the Bedouin wet nurse surprised everyone by asking if she could keep Mohammed for a little longer. Perhaps it was a moment of

compassion, or perhaps they were short a son for the task of tending flocks. Apart from the apocryphal stories of Mohammed's presence bringing abundance to the family, history offers no explanation. Amina, seeing no future for her son, consented. It was almost as if, in a moment of desperation, she had given Mohammed up for adoption. He would spend his formative years as a Bedouin.

As I consider Mohammed's early years living among tent-dwelling herders in the desert, I can't help recalling my own vivid experiences living in yurts among the mountain-dwelling nomads of Kazakhstan. Days are spent balancing the unpredictable forces of nature to eke out survival. Nights sometimes pass slowly, with only the felt coverings of their yurt separating a family from what lurks in the darkness outside.

For the Kazakhs, roaming about freely in the open spaces of the Tien Shan mountains or the Great Steppe—literally in Kazakh: “the great outside”—held profound meaning. The Kazakh word for heaven is simply “green.” The image of a solitary yurt lost in the vastness of seemingly infinite grass-covered hills and mountains makes it easy to understand why.

A constant connection to the elements that sustain life—fresh mountain air, glacial streams, rich green grasses, the stars, the animal world, and familial love—produces a quality of life that is profound in its simplicity. Each day begins with the first one awake stepping through the small doorway into the chill air of the great outside. Family members sleep side by side like sardines, covered by blankets filled with wool batting. Almost like part of the family, the large flock of sheep and goats are penned up for the night just outside of the yurt, only a few feet away. The thick felt coverings of the yurt provide little attenuation to the sound of animals breathing, and the eerily human-sounding cough of a goat.

After each rises and steps out for a moment of privacy and a quick splash of icy water to the face, the family sits down to a simple

breakfast of bread and tea, supplemented with milk, sugar, and jam. Afterward, the head of the family does a quick assessment of the flock and picks out any needing attention before sending them out for grazing with two or three of the boys. The boys take a stash of bread and dried curds and are not seen again until just before sunset. For drink, they take along animal-skin canteens filled with *kymyz*—fermented mare’s milk. Each family possesses at least one mare used by the head of the household to check on the flocks and survey new areas for grazing.

Mother and daughters, and perhaps a grandmother and an aunt, work nonstop from dawn until well after dark. They start and maintain cooking fires, bake bread, pour an endless stream of tea for breakfast and lunch, milk animals, prepare the evening meal, and keep up with all the dishes and housecleaning—all with only the most primitive of supplies and ingredients. By the end of the day, they look exhausted. And there are no days off.

Before dark, dad and the boys slowly make their way back with the flocks. After the sometimes-comical chasing down of the last wayward sheep and closing the pen, all traipse back into the yurt, pull off their boots, and sit down, expecting to be fed. A hearty dish of boiled mutton with fatty broth and homemade noodles is served up, and the long evening of storytelling begins. After an exhausting day of flowing with the forces of nature, the wealth of internalized experiences is released around the warmth of a crackling fire in the coziness of a warm yurt. Those of us who have had enjoyed a family camping trip can perhaps recall the magical feeling around the campfire. For nomads, this experience is woven into the fabric of their daily existence.

During the dinner meal, the lighter chatter takes place. The boys brag of adventures of the day and the girls catch up on gossip. Eventually, a teenage daughter kneels to the floor at the end of the low table that is closest to the door and begins serving milky tea—an

important part of the rites of hospitality that continue throughout the evening. She pours a spoonful of milk, some concentrated black tea, and hot water into a small bowl and hands it to the person on her right. This person then sends it all the way around to the head of the household, who is sitting on the floor at the opposite end of the table, in the place of honor. She does the same for everyone else at the table, and not long after everyone is served, the first sends his bowl back for a refill. The process is repeated countless times throughout the evening.

About the time that modern families turn on the television, the evening entertainment for the nomads begins. Nomadic cultures are steeped in all the facets of oral tradition—song, poetry, and storytelling. And the gifted spontaneously bring forth artistic creations in the media of language and song. As soon as they are old enough, kids participate, giggling and reciting simple poems. Both men and women take their turn uttering poetic verse or telling stories from the past. Everyday language is not used. A richer form emerges as they become mouthpieces of ancestral spirits. The complex and profound combination of phonetics, meter, rhyme, intonation, and meaning that flows from the mouth of the orators is captivating. I remember being spellbound, limited only to hearing and feeling. It wasn't until much later that I realized I was participating in an ancient tradition that few in the modern world have had the opportunity to experience.

During a pause, the family musician retrieves the two-stringed *dombra* and begins strumming in contemplative minor keys. The singer belts out a high-pitched song pregnant with extended, wailing notes at the end of each line—one of the haunting ballads about the trials faced by the Kazakh people. As the song goes on and fades into the background, faces become somber and eyes go glassy. Eventually, the children begin to drop off and the yurt grows silent as the ladies quietly go about the task of cleaning up after dinner. They are the last to crawl under the wool blankets and close their eyes.