



Paradise Lost

The headline in the *Kuwait Times* (June 6, 2013) jumped out at me: “‘Paradise Lost’ leads to bookshop closure.” The story was about an unfortunate expatriate trying to make an honest living selling books in her little shop in this country of contrasts. She had run afoul of the maze of unreasonable regulations that torment the Kuwaiti experience. A bookshop in Salmiya, an affluent part of the capital city, Kuwait City, was shuttered by the authorities simply because it was selling John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. In Kuwait, life can be tough for the innocent expatriate who unknowingly violates the rules of the Ministry of Information.

Paradise lost indeed. The irony was not lost on me.

I left Kuwait a month ago, after 2 years with colleagues and friends at Kuwait University, Faculty of Dentistry. My memories include incredibly positive students, intellectually stimulating colleagues from a community of nations who became firm friends, fascinating cultural experiences, and challenging photo opportunities—all overwhelmed by the “mess.” That is unfortunately the one word that sticks in my mind as I leave Kuwait. Things are a mess!

The word came to me as I was sitting in my car waiting for the person from the moving company to guide me to one of the many bureaucratic offices I needed to visit to get the necessary signatures and stamps to export my car to my next port of call, the United Arab Emirates (my car was to be shipped from Kuwait to Dubai). I surveyed the scene around me: dirty, dusty trucks pulled off the road helter skelter and left on the desert sand; intense, incredibly noisy traffic passing by in both directions; dust and exhaust fumes surrounded my senses . . . and the trash; trash is everywhere I look. “What a mess!” I said to myself—and that, most unfortunately, came to be the word that stuck with me to describe Kuwait.

It’s not fair, I know. I met some wonderful people and I never felt safer among strangers. But nothing works easily in Kuwait. The bureaucracy is stifling—a thousand signatures and stamps seem to be needed for every little step along the way; stamps banged out by mindless bureaucrats where “wasta” (the local system of favors and graft) is the only way to get things done in a reasonable time; the traffic is chaotic; rules are made to be broken; and, most importantly, no one seems to care. There is a pervasive lack of accountability that will drag the country down if it is not addressed.

So mediocrity becomes the norm and excellence is an elusive and foreign goal. The faculty and the students at the University do their best—but frustration is palpable.

It’s such a pity! Kuwait could be the Switzerland or the Scottsdale of the Gulf in terms of infrastructure and lifestyle. It *could* work. Instead you take your life in your hands every time you drive on the roads, and you live surrounded by a transient population in mind-numbing jobs. And then there’s the garbage, cast aside by a population with the attitude that, “Someone else will pick it up, so why should I bother?” The inevitable denouement, it seems, of years of reliance on maids and workers to do every little thing for the people. Paradise lost, indeed.

I was offered an exciting opportunity at the College of Dentistry at the University of Sharjah, the Emirate closest to Dubai. It’s the Emirate where the Ruler, His Highness Sheikh Dr Sultan Bin Mohammad Al Qasimi, has two earned PhD degrees from the United Kingdom. His vision and influence promoting culture and education for the Emirati people can be seen in the visually stunning Islamic architecture of the University of Sharjah campus. It’s hard to explain the anticipation of being in a place where education is so highly valued.

Things work here. There is no garbage in the streets and life is more civilized. The dental school is well-equipped, the faculty hard-working and fun to be around, and the dental students are, well, like dental students everywhere including Kuwait, just a joy to be around. The future looks good for our new colleagues in the Middle East.

And so my sights are set high. Just 20 minutes down the road is the spectacular and very beautiful Burj Khalifa, the tallest building in the world. The dental student association here in Sharjah is the most active and productive that I have seen in all my years of dental education. They are presently planning their third international student conference (and they do *all* the work!).

Education; it’s a paradise found!

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