

Collective Individual Change

In a recent care package I received from my parents, one of the items included was the *Time Magazine* "Person of the Year" issue. The "Person of the Year" in 2011 was "The Protester." As I found myself spending 6 hours on moving buses and 4 hours on non-moving buses over the next 2 days, I quickly read this issue cover to cover.

I found myself inspired by the stories of people no longer willing to accept the status quo and making the conscious decision stand up together, and risk dying together, to demand better.

The first "Protester" of 2011 may well have been Mohammed Bouazizi (محمد البوعزيزي), the Tunisian street vendor who lit himself on fire in December, 2010 and is considered to be the catalyst of the Tunisian Revolution as well as the Arab Spring as a whole. In the 14 months since Bouazizi's self-immolation we have seen governments overthrown in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya in addition to on-going conflicts in Yemen and Syria. We have also seen civil disobedience across the United States as well as in Mexico, Spain, Greece, and Russia.

Why then, wasn't Bouazizi the "Person of the Year"? I would venture to say that to name Bouazizi as the *one* "Person of the Year" would be an act of disrespect towards the millions of other protesters around the world in 2011. Though Bouazizi, along with 1000's of others around the world, may have died for his dignity, the Arab Spring prevailing in countries around my current home and the "We are the 99%" movement prevailing throughout my home country would never have happened if it had not been for individuals organizing themselves and standing up against authority and for what they believe to be right and just.

It is this spirit of protest that has characterized the headlines of 2011; however, just because

"The Protester" was the "Person of the Year" doesn't necessarily mean that protests have played any role in your life. I will admit that before June of 2011, when I learned I would be coming to Jordan, I ignored what was happening in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Yemen, and Syria. I was in agreement with the "We are the 99%" even before it was named as such; nonetheless, aside from attending one demonstration in San Francisco and signing a few Internet petitions, I did not stand up against what I disagree with nor did I stand up for what I believe in.

I have my own life to live and I put myself, selfishly, first.

People talk all the time about "inspirational stories," but rarely are we inspired enough to change.

Peace Corps Jordan strictly forbids me from participating in any type of protest or demonstration during my service as a Peace Corps Volunteer; nevertheless, the individual and conscious decision of others to protest in concert with other individuals is now a factor that affects my life in my village on a daily basis:

Firstly, the on-going teachers strike means that I cannot fulfill my primary responsibility as an English teacher in Jordan. Peace Corps Jordan requires that when a PCV teaches in a school that he or she co-teach with a Jordanian teacher 100% of the time. The teachers of Jordan have decided that they will no longer accept the minimal salary increases offered by the government at a time when the cost of living is rapidly increasing and the government has offered greater salary increases to workers in other sectors. Though the Prime Minister has stated that the Kingdom of Jordan "might be going through an unprecedented financial and

economic crisis" and has even proposed bringing in soldiers as replacement teachers, the strike continues with no end in sight.

Teachers have finally decided that they have had enough and will stand up, demonstrate, and protest until they believe that they are treated justly. Therefore, I cannot teach.

I got new neighbors a week ago. After a long day of bus riding, followed by missing the last bus back to my village and a 70 minute walk home from the city, a group of five children under the age of 10 knocked on my door and asked in very fast and complicated Arabic for some salt.

Everyday in Jordan a local asks me if I need anything, offers me a gift, or invites me over for tea or food. No one in my village has ever asked for me to give them a thing. I was quite taken aback when all these unknown children were asking me for salt. When I gave it to them, I asked where they lived and they pointed at the house right outside my window. At this point I was really confused as I couldn't imagine how I had never seen a one of these five children who live not 25 meters from me.

The next day their father came and introduced himself to me and told me that he and his family had just moved here from the city of Homs in Syria.

In Syria, just like Tunisia or Egypt or New York or Spain or Oakland, individual people have come together to stand up against a power that they do not believe in. In Syria, however, unlike any other place I have just named, those in power have made the decision to fight back against the protesters with excessive and sustained force and violence. In the last week alone,

or the time since I first met my new neighbors, hundreds of civilians have died in the city of Homs.

A couple days later I was talking with the same boy who asked me for the salt. I asked him how long they had been in Jordan and he said that they had come across the border in the middle of the night about 10 days ago.

Homs and Damascus are not close to the Jordanian border and the current situation is not one that merits concern for the safety of anyone living in Jordan, American or Jordanian. He did say, however, that the events in Syria do merit "carefully following the situation on a daily basis".

After hearing a knock on the door yesterday, I was greeted by the smiling face of my new neighbor along with a small tea kettle and two tea cups. I invited him into my one carpeted room and we sat on the floor and drank tea and talked just like I've done dozens of times in Jordan. I got to practice explaining in Arabic my work, Peace Corps in general, and my background. He told me that he was a taxi driver in Homs. He told that he had seven children and an eighth on the way. He told me that he was scared in Homs. He told me that his four oldest children were in school in Homs, but that he didn't have the appropriate paperwork to enroll them in school in Jordan. He told me that he saw 10 dead bodies lying in the street. He told me that he really likes to practice his English. He told me that he has seen children shot in the chest. He told me that he wants to go home to Syria.

He noticed I had a computer and asked if we could look on Google Maps. I asked what he wanted to see and without hesitation he stated, "Homs." I pulled it up and he showed me

where both he and his kids went to school. Then we zoomed in a little closer and we found his house and he showed me his garden where his family grows fruits and vegetables. Then he started giving me a tour of the neighborhood showing where his relatives live as well as the road the "hooligans" drive down and the corners they stop at to start shooting down the street. Lastly he showed me several of the places where he found dead bodies in front of his house.

Then he closed the computer, thanked me, and stared at the ground for a minute with his face in his hand.