

Different Strokes?

by Lesley Dawson

It was one of those March days when the sun shone hot, and the wind blew cold; when it is summer in the light and winter in the shade. It took me a few minutes for me to realize that, yes, I was in England.

I was so used to the weather at this time of year being much hotter. This time last year we had got up early and travelled to the Garden Tomb in Jerusalem for the sunrise Easter Day service at 6am. An inspiring event made even more amazing because the Garden Tomb is one of the traditional sites of the resurrection. We had sung “Up from the grave He arose” in sight of the actual empty tomb, but if we looked over our shoulders to the right, outside the compound, the bus station was busy with people eager to head off to Ramallah and Hebron.

Not considered the real site by Eastern Christians, that is inside the busy, noisy Church of the Resurrection complex in the Old City where you waited in line to enter the small grotto where an Orthodox priest allowed you a few moments of grace to pray by the side of the stone slab where the body of Jesus was laid and from where it disappeared three days later.

Easter in Eastbourne was very different. Much more civilized. Much more restrained. The only remnant of my Easters in Jerusalem were a Syrian family who would greet me with the words, “Al masih qam” to which I replied, “Haqqam qam”. When non-Arabic speakers in the congregation looked at us in surprise, we would explain that the traditional Easter greetings were “Christ is risen” and “He is risen indeed.” Not quite the same as being where it all happened, but better than nothing.

This feeling of summer in the light and winter in the shade was also enveloping me at work. I couldn’t get used to classes starting at 9am, I was used to a 7.30am start in my office with students lined up to speak to me before their 8am class. The fact of the two-hour time difference meant I still awoke at 6.30am Middle Eastern time and was always beginning to flag when 5pm UK time came round.

My colleagues at university could not understand that I had not developed a clinical specialism in physiotherapy. They were all specialists in teaching musculoskeletal, neurology or paediatrics and were confused when I said I had taught all these subjects in Bethlehem.

With a small staff, many of whom had never taught at university before, meant that I had to turn my hand to anything. This concentration on specialism had come about in the UK during my eleven years abroad.

Being interrogated by two visiting lecturers in musculoskeletal physiotherapy they were totally confused when I admitted that my specialism could be said to be the effects of culture on healthcare education and practice. This was obviously not considered proper at all.

I was conscious that my learning curve was solidly vertical. The students were different, they did not come for advice unless they were desperate, they queried everything you said and checked it out on Google. The staff were mostly younger than me and appeared ultra confident. It took me quite some time to realise that despite appearances, students and teachers had the same problems and fears but their ways of showing them were different.

Despite the change in temperature, it was wonderful to be able to walk for miles along the seafront without being asked how I was, what my name was and if I was married. Nobody twitched an eyebrow as I walked past on my own, deep in my thoughts and memories.

It was also refreshing to know that visitors would only visit when invited, that I would not be interrupted in the middle of marking scripts or having dinner with a knock on the door, followed by a host of smiling faces saying "We thought you might be lonely, so we have come to visit you." It was also true that I did not receive as many invites myself to visit colleagues. I was reminded of my advice to Palestinian colleagues coming to the UK "If someone says you must come round for dinner some time. Don't assume it is a proper invitation."