

FRANK LIGHT

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## Old School New School

If you worked for the U.S. government in eastern Afghanistan in 2003, any trip in a vehicle required two American soldiers and two Afghan guards, double that and double the vehicles if you went out of Jalalabad, where we had a small base—some 40 soldiers—to deal with three provinces. We couldn't begin to cover it all. So when one of our two four-man civil affairs teams set out for the Sur Khrod (Red River) valley south and west of town, it seemed a good idea for me, the State Department's representative and the only unarmed U.S. government employee east of Kabul, to go along for a look-see. True, my motives were more personal than professional. But one can feed the other. Unlike other Americans thereabouts, I had some experience in the area. Admittedly, it happened a long time ago. Not all of it was pleasant. I'd call it mixed, in some ways even premonitory, though I didn't know that at the time.

My first year in the Peace Corps I taught English as a foreign language at Faqrullah Lycee on the outskirts of Sultan Por village in the Sur Khrod. It was a hard sell. The students could not envision a future in which they would ever use the language, which was a required subject from 7<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade, and the culture permitted, in some ways encouraged, passing courses through cheating if you had a friend (helping the less fortunate), bribery if you had the wherewithal, or threats if you had neither. The merit system was as foreign as the subject. Going to school got you off the farm for the morning. You learned a little. You socialized a lot. Rules to the contrary, many came armed.

I think both the Afghan and U.S. governments just wanted Americans in the provinces. It didn't matter so much what we did. Not really tripwires, we served as reminders of U.S. interest in Afghanistan's nonalignment.

Near the end of the year a 12th grader who could barely get past hello in English pointed a pistol at me after class to emphasize his desire to succeed. Now any volunteer worth his salt would see in this an opportunity to help the student reassess his approach to life's challenges. Call it cross-cultural jujitsu. You had to be quick on your feet, and you had to leverage not only guidance received but also that which was implied. In all our training, for example, the subject of guns never came up. There was a reason they called us the Peace Corps.

The student looked at me and then at the pistol to accentuate the connection. Around the school he was known as a "badmash," which translates as *bad-ass*. His mustache added to the effect. It was even bushier than mine. He had on a shirt that was as black then as it was the first day of class, probably because like everything else around there it'd been a little dusty to begin with and had rarely if ever been washed. You help me, he said in Pashtu.

We were standing in the shade of the eaves, to the right of the front entrance. At first nobody noticed, or if they did, they didn't react. The temperature was pushing 110, 115, degrees. A dry heat. You dealt with it through economy of motion.

Thinking maybe I wasn't cut out for the pedagogical life, let alone two years in the Peace Corps, I grabbed that black shirt and slammed the young man in it against the schoolhouse wall. That surprised him. It surprised me. The students knew I wasn't the impetuous type, nor was I brave or pugnacious. But in those halcyon days foreign status provided an invisible shield, and I guess my body just got ahead of my mouth. At a loss for words, I was overcome by the compulsion to communicate in a language he was sure to understand.

His classmates gathered to gawk. All were male, ages 12 to 20-something. The girls' school went only as far as 6th grade.

My black-shirted charge sneered and strutted away, the pistol back in his trouser pocket. Although he failed English, he had what it took to develop into a hero of the resistance. Or a bandit. Or Taliban. A man with gumption could aspire to all three.

A few months earlier, on the third day of a student strike, Kabul dispatched a helicopter full of soldiers. No one native to that valley had ever seen a helicopter until we heard and then saw it coming from over the dark, hazy bluff to the west known as Black Mountain. Nor had any of us given the government in Kabul much thought. Confusing lack of resources with lack of interest, we thought the feeling was mutual. Education wasn't Kabul's objective, of course; order was. Having learned their lesson, the students returned to class.

The strike involved the mullah, the religious teacher. He was a small man, thin and short, with hunched shoulders, frequently clasped hands, and a long, scraggly

beard. He never said much to me but was pleasant enough in his taciturnity. Some liked his interpretation of the Koran; some just didn't like him. There was more to it than that, but neither students nor teachers wanted to air their dirty laundry in front of an outsider like me.

I helped him proctor his final exam. Summer was full upon us, and the desks had been moved onto the hard-packed dirt in the shade behind the school. He asked a student to put away a cheat sheet. Twice. Second time, the student pulled a Jim Bowie-sized blade from under his clothes and jabbed it into the desktop. The handle oscillated as the mullah turned on his heels and walked away. He had a slight limp. I hadn't noticed that before.

The following year, in continuation of the mullah discussions a 12th-grader struck a classmate with his pistol. Heat of the moment and flash of metal spurred others to go for theirs. Triggers were pulled. Two students bled to death on the classroom floor—a quiet, one-eyed kid who came to school every day in a Boy Scout shirt like they sold in the used-clothing market and a well-dressed, chubby, cheerful kid who had been the best English speaker of all my 250 students. Nine were hospitalized; the rest were jailed. So I heard. At the time I was doing food-for-work at the other end of the country.

More interesting than English as a foreign language was getting the students to consider why things were the way they were. The novelty amused them. All Americans are good, they insisted, because all Americans believe in God. All Russians are bad, went the corollary, because all Russians are communists, and communists *don't* believe in God. Although I made little headway, there were some bright-eyed exceptions who posed questions of their own, including the age-old "why are you here?" I must have screwed-up big time, they figured, run afoul of some powerful mucky-muck or transgressed the cultural norms, to end up so far from my native soil. They had a hard time accepting that I had volunteered, especially when I told them I could have made more money by staying at home. Maybe I was a spy, they posited. That's why the Governor made me live in Jalalabad, they said: so the police would know my whereabouts.

The Director of Education said he was doing it for me: there were no police in the valley, just bandits and badmashes. Other than students and their families, he meant. I was tired of the commute. I wanted to live in the village, do the real Peace Corps thing. It fell to the Governor's deputy to hear me out. I told him I had nothing of value. A cheap Chinese bike. A battery-powered cassette player that ate its tapes. Who would bother? I asked. Besides, the villagers would protect me. The culture required it.

Pakistanis, the deputy concluded. He'd heard enough. Like many an Afghan, he often didn't reply directly. You could attribute that to language or culture. Most of the time you'd be wrong. Take this guy, burly and self-important. He reminded me of a politician at a podium. He said what he wanted to say. Or communists, he added since I didn't seem to get his point. Criminals will do *anything* for money.

The students scoffed at that. So did the faculty. Even if you aren't a spy, they said, the government has to be careful. They had always wondered if there wasn't more to their hardscrabble piece of the rock than met the eye. However remote, the possibility comforted them, as my denials unsettled them. They knew my country was competing with the Soviets in Afghanistan as England had with the Russians in the previous century. They knew Kabul didn't get you much of a foothold; the key to Afghanistan lay in the countryside. Where better than here? Hadn't Britain's first expeditionary force to Kabul retreated through this valley, my students' ancestors in hot pursuit of the last man standing?

Although our soldiers hadn't heard of Faqrullah, I knew the school still existed. The current Governor had studied there, and at our first meeting we tried to determine if he had been a student of mine. We thought not. He remembered one of my predecessors, caught in *flagrante delicto* with a Western woman in a cave. Or was that me? he asked with an impish smile.

It's not the same, he warned. The old schoolhouse had been destroyed by the Soviets or in the fighting after the Soviets left, depending on whom you talked to. A German nonprofit had built a replacement that was already showing its age.

Some things hadn't changed. The brick kilns where our two Toyota Hilux pickups turned off the highway still sent plumes of black smoke over the road, which despite a few gravel patches remained as rough and rutted as ever. Many of the buildings along the route seemed different, or new, though I couldn't say how. Nondescript then, nondescript now. Jouncing along in the Hilux cab, I wished I had kept up with the students and faculty but I didn't miss that old black and green Volga in which I used to rub elbows with so many other paying passengers. The seat of honor was next to the driver, straddling the gearshift, but I preferred the running boards. Inside, it seemed to take forever. I forget the fare but it wasn't much.

The hard part for a type A like me was waiting for the vehicle to fill up. I could never time it right. Once the passenger count reached double digits I would have offered to pay the difference if I hadn't sensed it would not go over well. We were all in this together, and Afghans did not see time as money. The drive itself took close to an hour what with all the stopping, starting, unloading, and reloading.

I rode my bike when I knew I'd be in Sultan Por after the taxi stopped running. I couldn't do it on a regular basis. The road tore up not only my tires but also the frame and working parts. As the school had no well or running water, I'd walk into class those mornings with dust caked on my sweaty skin. The students liked that. It brought me off the pedestal. "Mr. *Light*," they'd exclaim, "you ride the bicycle!"

The new school stood right where the old one had been. It looked flimsy, as though the lesson learned from its predecessor's destruction was don't bother building anything to last. Indeed, a white-bearded caretaker ambled out from the village to show us cracks and misalignments in the foundation and ceiling. In the winter the roof leaked, he complained. They had no heat. I should come out then and I'd see why they needed a bridge.

The Governor had mentioned that. It would span Sur Khrod stream, which ran between the school and Black Mountain. The previous civil affairs team had proposed it, and this one had been out to take a look. It was doable, they said. They just didn't know if it was worth it. Highway 1 crossed the stream about eight miles north. That was too far, the Governor had argued. Students who lived on the west bank couldn't make it to class when it rained.

I told him I didn't recall that being a problem.

It's dangerous, he insisted. There were no roads to speak of on the far bank. The police couldn't get there. The farmers couldn't sell their crops.

Does it rain that much? I asked. Drought was the problem, then as now. That's why I left to do food-for-work.

It rains in the mountains, he explained. Or snows.

Given that in the valley, anyway, there had been no rain for months, the school smelled surprisingly musty. When I thought about it, however, I remembered the school always smelled like that. The classrooms were empty. As I feared, the students were off that day, the second anniversary of Massoud's assassination.

It felt strange, eerie almost, to stand on ground I'd last trod 32 years ago. Make that 31. I took a side trip here on my way out of Kunar at the end of my second year. A few of my former students were in a crowd clearing a tree that had fallen across the road. Mr. *Light!* they exclaimed. Others ran up, leaving their fathers in the dust. They admired the pakol I'd picked up in Nuristan, then a part of Kunar. Pakols, the woolen cap Massoud made famous, weren't so common in those days. Not in Sultan Por. How much did it cost? You give it to me? Please. *Please*, Mr. Light. They were teasing. Where had I been? Why? Do they have badmash in Kunar? More than Sultan Por? Was I coming back to teach? Did I get married? Was I still a Christian?

In turn I asked about them. Unh-unh, I interrupted, partly to tease them back, in *English*.

Other teachers *bad*, they contended; they don't *know* English. No volunteer had replaced me. Sultan Por was back to being just another Pashtun village.

I expressed regret about the classroom shootout. They shook their heads. All but three were out of jail. And those three were in for their own protection, the students insisted.

The sun was sinking toward Black Mountain, and a small cloud passed in front of it. As I looked that way, a student invited me to his house for dinner.

*My* house, another chirped.

The year away had elevated my status.

I introduced my Afghan driver and counterparts, noting that their families expected them in Kabul that night.

When will you come back? the students asked. That was poignant. You could hear it in their voices. I could feel it flushing across my cheeks.

Never say never, a student said with a smile. I had taught them that, and he was one of the smartest. Smarter than me, as it turned out.

The new, decrepit building looked familiar. *Recognizable* is the word. Same size and layout, with a dim, dusty hallway down the middle. No electricity then, none now, even though the Derunta hydroelectric that the Soviets built wasn't ten miles distant. At least a well had been sunk out front. Dry, the caretaker said. In a change for the worse, students no longer had desks as they did when I taught there, though they had to share. Each classroom had a blackboard, no erasers, bring your own chalk. I once brought a film, with projector and generator the Embassy provided to prove Americans had landed on the moon. Few believed it. We hung a sheet in the middle of the one, long hallway. Half saw it from one side, half from the other.

As I recall, the astronauts' movie camera failed, so the film relied on stills and re-creations. The students howled with derision. The hokey presentation confirmed for them this was all propaganda, an empty boast.

Apart from the soldiers who helicoptered in, the only other government delegation my year there arrived in the guise of a malaria team from the Department of Public Health. I found them on the front steps, where the light was good, pricking each student's finger and putting the blood on glass slides along with the student's name. They were going to take the slides to a lab in Jalalabad and then return with the results.

Will you give medicine? I asked.

They smiled. In Afghanistan, they explained, people buy their own.

Is that your only pricker? I just realized what they were doing.  
The smiles faded.  
Once you get a kid with malaria, I blurted, you'll give it to everyone who follows.  
It's what we have.  
Same for hepatitis.  
We're not testing for that.  
Please stop.  
They paused only long enough to trade glances. The government has a program, their leader explained.  
The students in earshot didn't know what to think.  
I went to the principal, and he sent the team away after a long discussion. They never came back, at least not the year I was around.  
So many from that time are gone now, to disease, violence, or a new life in Pakistan. I'm lucky, I know, lucky to be born American.  
Do they still teach English? I asked the caretaker.  
He looked at me funny.  
My Pashtu wasn't what it used to be. Only our interpreter understood. And his first language was Dari, not Pashtu. He translated.  
We should ask the principal, the caretaker replied. In contrast to the old days, nobody joined us. The villagers watched from a distance. I don't think they were scared, or hostile. Wary, perhaps, and wondering if they were welcome.  
Is he around? I asked.  
The caretaker shrugged in a way that meant no. He stood ready to talk. Stay for tea, a walk by the river, dinner at the khan's place—history and memories would begin to tease out.  
But we had to run. The soldiers were anxious to get to a nearby village to settle on a site for a well. The previous team had proposed it, and unfinished business kept showing up the wrong color on the spread sheets at the daily briefing. The recommended site had turned out to be private property. A rich man would get richer. The fallback was at the west end of the village. But men from the east end didn't want their women walking by prying eyes for their water.  
Driving through what was left of a long-dead king's gardens, we got lost despite our GPS, and then we had to hike for a couple kilometers after the road narrowed to a hard-baked path that led past high and then low walls on through farm fields where not much grew or grazed. Trees were few; I was glad for my sun hat. Finally we came to a leafy shelter, where elders sat on a rope bed as though they had been expecting us. That would have been a breach in our operational security.

Anything's possible, the captain conceded; but they were sitting in that same place the last time the team was here.

We chatted while waiting for the tea that facilitated serious discussion. The Karzai government was good, the elders said when I asked, because it brought in donors like us. No donors helped the Taliban, whose leaders came from Kandahar. Or Pakistan. Nobody local.

I brought up Faqrullah.

They looked at me blankly.

A donor built that, I reminded them. It must have been when the Taliban were here.

This elders dismissed it as a replacement. They were looking for something new. This was their sixth year of drought. Refugees wouldn't return because the springs had dried and the old irrigation systems no longer worked.

Food-for-work taught me the importance of self-help. Civil affairs believed in it, too. People were more likely to value and maintain a project if they contributed to its construction. Something for nothing never lasted. In practice, however, self-help was management-intensive, and civil affairs was spread thin. Headquarters demanded results—wells dug, clinics built, villages assessed. A bureaucracy as large and task-oriented as the Army was always trying to quantify progress.

So we listened to accounts of mice falling into the well despite every effort to keep them out. People were getting sick. Poor and getting poorer. A new well with a tight cover open to all in a central location would solve a lot of problems. Maybe one in the east, another in the west. A sergeant told them two was one too many when other villages had no new wells at all. Elders and neighbors came by to make their views known. The eldest of all suggested digging by the mosque. Others noted the existing well there had gone dry. Dig it deeper, the eldest cried. We hit *rocks*, the others cried even louder. *Big rocks*.

Democracy, Afghan style.

I believe I went to a wedding celebration in that hamlet. The other English teacher's brother was the groom, and, this being Afghanistan, I never met the bride. I remember we men devouring in a few, furious minutes a meal that must have taken the women all day to prepare. And I remember being advised not to ride my bike back to Jalalabad. It was too late in the day. When I persisted, a teacher named Salim pressed a pistol into my hand.

No need, I said.

The Peace Corps had rules against that. Besides, I didn't know enough of the language or culture to employ it judiciously.

Bandits, he warned.

Who are these bandits? I asked in exasperation. You were always hearing about them. They were like the bogeyman, everywhere and nowhere. Do they come from Pakistan? I gestured toward the White Mountains behind him and Black Mountain at my back. Kabul?

My ignorance amused him. His arms reached wide. Mr. Light, they are *us*. Two men had been killed on that road in the last year, he added, and an American had been robbed.

What American? I asked. Was it my predecessor?

He didn't know.

The pistol jammed when he showed me how to use it. He put it on the ground and tried to clear it with the heel of his sandal. The barrel jerked this way and that.

*No!* the principal called. He and his coterie hurried over. Eventually they cleared it, trying hard not to point the barrel at their foreign guest and apologizing when they did, all of us laughing with embarrassment and because nothing happened. Maybe it wouldn't fire no matter what. Since I insisted on leaving without it, they decided Salim should take it and ride with me as far as the main road. And they gave me a kerosene lantern to hang from the handlebar. It emitted just enough light to make us a target. I blew it out as soon as we got out of their sight. The stars—no moon that night—were enough to get us down the road.

Salim was young for a teacher, blithe and sociable. The previous month I had spent a night in the guest room at his family farm thirty minutes by bicycle up the valley. It gave this Jalalabad resident a taste of country living, at least at the upper end of the scale.

The adobe walls at his homestead encompassed a compound larger than most, but otherwise they looked pretty standard—one gate only, strong and bolstered, no windows, just embrasures in the upper section for shooting at unwanted visitors. The interior, in contrast, was welcoming, spacious, and green with fruit and shade trees, bushes, flowers, and crops. Water trickled through irrigation channels. At dinner I met Salim's father, two brothers, and even his wife briefly when she and his mother brought the food. Altogether, 150 people lived inside those walls. He told his wife to let their two boys come out. They were too shy to give more than mumbled responses to my questions.

As the wealthiest teacher at the school, he explained without bragging, it was his duty to invite the Peace Corps teacher for a visit. My predecessor had been out several times. A very funny guy, Salim said of him, and he spoke excellent Pashtu,

meaning better than I did. Salim's father was a gentlemen farmer; he said he liked to read history. Salim was a gentleman teacher.

Halfway to Route 1, gunfire broke out in front of us. We dove into the irrigation ditch beside the road. Fortunately it was dry. More gunfire followed. Although we heard no pings, cracks, or whizzes to indicate it was directed at us, we saw flashes through trees near a building—a house, perhaps—about 100 meters ahead. No lights or other sign of life. The road was deserted. We pulled our bikes into the ditch. After five minutes of no activity, our breathing the most prominent sound, we crawled, dragging our bikes with us, then walked in the direction from which we had ridden until we came across two guys working on a broken jeep.

I relit the lantern, and they were grateful for the light. They had heard the shots. Both shrugged when I asked the cause. They and Salim exchanged tolerant smiles. I had a pack of cigarettes to share. After a while two tight-lipped brothers, students at the agricultural school in Derunta, came along on bicycles. Salim and I rode with them as far as Route 1. No shots, no lights, just a quiet ride down a country lane. Salim went back by himself, with pistol and lantern. Don't worry, Mr. Light, he said, a cheerful lilt to his voice. Everybody knows me.

The students turned left toward the ag school, and I headed down the highway, which in those days was paved, to town. Above the whir of my tires on the asphalt, the clinking chain, the clicking pedals, I heard gunfire from the Sur Khrod, further up from where Salim and I experienced it. He was heading in that direction but wouldn't yet be that far. Waxing and waning, it continued until I pedaled out of hearing.

I never did ascertain what was behind the ambush, if that's what it was, that Salim and I rode into. Maybe another wedding, he said the next day. I had caused him to miss the celebratory gunfire at the one we attended. That must have been what I heard as I biked into town. Maybe bandits, he allowed.

Soon after that the teacher whose brother got married was fired. A nice guy, pure country, he had been nervous at the beginning of the school year when I invited him over for dinner with my Peace Corps housemates. I remember his mustache hairs being the length and bristle of the ones on his head. He was fascinated by the flashing, battery-powered candle and inflatable Thanksgiving turkey my mother had sent. He refused to take either home with him. As neither his English nor my Pashtu was good enough for easy conversation, we took our cues from visual aids. He had never seen the fly-poison papers we put in saucers with a little water, so I gave him our supply. A shop in town sold them. While my buddies watched, I made a Mobius strip from a page of *The Kabul Times* and cut it lengthwise to show him

how the circles still interlocked. Afghanistan and America, I said portentously like a magician. He liked that, too, and I later used it in class. I can't remember his name. Sometimes he'd grab my hand at school. So would Salim. Aren't we friends? he'd ask. In training the Peace Corp said we guys had to get over our hang-ups. Notice, they said. Afghan men are always holding hands. What they didn't point out was many of those men were bisexual.

Kohl-eyed dancing boys performed at that wedding. I thought they were girls until Salim corrected me. Afterward they mingled with the guests, and arrangements were made. A student asked why I was holding back. It's not in my culture, I said. I mean it's not the way I was brought up, I explained.

The only other time I saw dancing boys—these were men, actually, the top of the line—was in Kabul on national day, at Pashtunistan Circle. Pashtun Afghans called the Pashtun part of Pakistan Pashtunistan. They said it belonged to Afghanistan, pointing to the absence of barriers until the British imposed the Durand Line toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. *Afghan* to them meant *Pashtun*. They said they spoke *Afghani*. That was also the name of the currency. *Afghan* without the *i* was a person, or an adjective. It was a man's world. The patriarchs kept the women so far out of it they had to bring in male prostitutes to celebrate holy matrimony and their irredentist claims.

I was thinking about that, not really caring where the well went, when a large explosion boomed from the other side of a nearby knoll. The elders were unfazed, a good sign or a good act—they smiled, they shrugged, they implored us to stay until we talked it out—but the soldiers had orders to evacuate whenever anything like that happened.

We walked back the way we had come, just faster. The elders would have more time to decide on a site. Democracy took time, and tradition required it. We were not able to ascertain the cause of the explosion. Best guess was Afghan deminers. Employed by Western donors, they had their work cut out for them.

On the ride out I had this idea that talking to the kids and teachers at Faqrullah, even if I didn't know a soul, would help validate the year I had spent there. That black-shirted student had crossed the line. So had I, from the opposite direction. It was a line in the sand, as things turned out.

A couple months after that, the new principal accepted an invitation to my farewell dinner in Jalalabad. Before we sat down, he said some former students remembered me. They wanted me to return for a visit. I secretly hoped one of them might get a chance to say I had made a difference. But that was delusional. The Soviets made a difference.



Faqrullah Faculty - 1971



Faqrullah Lycee - 2003

**Author's Note:** An abbreviated version of this appeared under a different title in *Even the Smallest Crab Has Teeth*, an anthology of Peace Corps nonfiction published in 2011. The author's employer at the time of the events covered in 2003 asked that the following disclaimer accompany this piece: "The opinions and characterizations in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent official positions of the United States Government."

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**FRANK LIGHT** has been writing his way through retirement. "Old School New School" is adapted from a draft memoir titled *Adjust to Dust: On the Backroads of Southern Afghanistan*. Seven other adaptations from that memoir have been published in literary magazines and anthologies. A few of his poems and other essays have also recently been published, including one about a family trip to Vietnam in last year's *War, Literature & The Arts*.