

REFLECTIVE NARRATIVE

Breaking Bread (Naan) Together

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They will probably eat in the back room because you are new guests,” Jessica, the director of Preemptive Love, explained to us as we took our seats in the front room, which also doubled as the playroom-bedroom-living-room-dining-room-and-only-room-with-a-fan in the humble home of Zido and Marwa located in Kanakawa, Kurdistan, Iraq. Jess elaborated, stating that out of respect for their foreign guests who were used to a different eating style, Zido, Marwa, and their children felt most comfortable eating in a separate space. I later found out that the very nature of their shared eating style, often having one common platter for the entire family, was indicative of so many aspects of their functional culture: everything was shared, even the act of *breaking bread*. Only after two months of consistently interacting with this family did some of the kids come and sit to eat with us. This was one of the most profound and meaningful moments of my time in Iraq.

The act of sharing food on a common platter is a stark contrast to what I am used to as a Canadian, having always been used to individual servings. I was deeply intrigued by the way that sharing food was but an extension of the shared responsibilities and livelihoods the family divided up each day. I saw older siblings take care of and help discipline their younger siblings. I saw the children preparing food with their mothers and helping their fathers with outdoor farming tasks. Extended families lived within a block of one another and shared everything from the cooking ingredients to the family farming and soap making business. After engaging with the families for two months, playing with and teaching the children English on a daily basis, learning their culture and vice versa, we were able to build a level of mutual trust. This trust led to the development of

comfortability in allowing us into their family and communing with them as they would with their own.



This image, by my friend and colleague at Preemptive Love, Audrey White, was taken at a team outing where we often met at a local restaurant. At this particular restaurant, not only did we receive individual plates, but with each plate came individual condiment sections (jam, honey, walnuts, cream cheese...etc.). I distinctly remember reflecting on how *individualized* these platters were. Having spent so much time with Marwa, Zido, and

their children, I was becoming more accustomed to shared plating. I wondered if this was the way it was served to everyone else ordering the same dish, or if it was a special circumstance because we were evidently foreigners. This was a contrast to Marwa and Zido's family of eight children, crowded around a large platter, older siblings scooping up dolma (a popular Kurdistan dish of rice wrapped in tea leaf) for the younger siblings because they couldn't reach the plate, everyone talking over one another, and enjoying the most communal experience of sharing a meal. I wonder if perhaps the individuality of the Western society has robbed us of the experience of truly communing with one another. We bring platters to share at potlucks, only to then divide it up into individual servings on our own plates, choosing the items we know we already love and enjoy. We use individual utensils and cups and, at a large gathering, often label our names on these items so to not mix them up. In the same way that the act of *breaking bread* reflects the shared nature of livelihood that exists in Kurdistan, and many parts of the Middle East, the individualistic nature of North Americans is reflected in the way we "commune" together: though we exist and commune in the same space, we still function through the individualist lens, focused on feeding our own needs, often without consideration of those around us. It was only when I let go of these customs and this individualistic perspective and embrace the communal and collective nature of the Kurdistan people, did I begin to appreciate so many other elements of the Kurdish culture—one that always returns to the act of *breaking bread* (or naan in many cases) *together*.