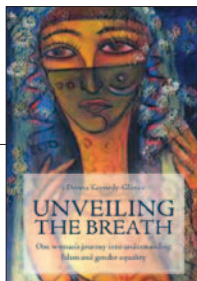


Unveiling the Breath

by Donna Kennedy-Glans
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The French diarist Anaïs Nin once said that “We don’t see things as they are; we see things as we are.” Donna Kennedy-Glans, a self-identified white Christian woman of some privilege, has undertaken a noble effort to see, feel and comprehend things as they are for Islamic people in *Unveiling the Breath: One woman’s journey into understanding Islam and gender equality*. The author—a lawyer, businesswoman and humanitarian—was the first female VP of a Calgary-based energy company operating in the Middle East. She travelled throughout the region, negotiating with local officials and earning a reputation as a businesswoman with a sharp eye for the bottom line and a big heart for the less fortunate. In 2001, Kennedy-Glans founded Bridges, a charity with a mission “to build capacity in locations where others do not go.”

Unveiling the Breath details this lofty, ambitious exercise. In settings as diverse as the Bedouin townships of Yemen, the streets of Tehran and the farming communities of her prairie youth, Kennedy-Glans deconstructs and reconstructs her impressions and prejudices, all to further her dream that “we might see each other as we are.” Again and again she is drawn back to Yemen to “learn more about universal gender equilibrium.” Kennedy-Glans writes: “I’ve found that patriarchy exists in subtle ways in the West that we might not want to acknowledge; conversely, patriarchy in the Muslim world isn’t as extreme as our Western view of it, either. Which brings us closer than most people realize.”

In addition to her impressive intellectual rigour, the author has a most appealing capacity for self-reflection. A gentle narrative about yearning to accept and to be accepted is woven using an eclectic mix of references and sources. Nadia, a Yemeni woman, hosted the author in her community. The Yemenis peppered the Canadian with questions betraying a fear that Bridges’ programs were designed to “westernize” young Yemeni girls. A sense of trust and solidarity seemed to settle over the room and the women sat down to share a meal. At the end of the evening, however, Nadia cornered Kennedy-Glans and demanded that she swear an allegiance to Islam. The situation escalated until “the pressure suddenly broke—calmly and from the bottom of my heart, I looked into her eyes and asked: ‘Nadia, can you understand that my values and beliefs mean as much to me as yours do to you?’ And then I hugged her, really hugged her.”

Unveiling the Breath is a bold work, rich with insights into the murky realm of culture, religion and gender. One senses that the author could have shared even more; hopefully in time she will.

—Alison Azer

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