

A Plaza into Eternity, or One Step Closer To Self-Discovery

Zeynep Ece Esikara '19



I realize that my slow-paced, distracted walk becomes faster and faster as I align myself with the rush around me.

The plazas around downtown Boston make you feel small. As you walk down the financial district of this beautiful city, you might think how little you have an impact on this world, how small you are compared to these huge plazas, to the system, to the order, and how hard it is to make a difference. This might make you feel depressed. It made me feel depressed.

I walk among the buildings of downtown Boston. They are huge. I bend my neck back and raise my head to see the sky. Concrete, brick, and glass block the light and make it so that I can only see a little bit of the sky. Light, pale; pastel color varying from pink to grey and brick to glass makes you think they should look humble but they do not look humble at all. Instead, the enormous walls and indestructible glass windows look intimidatingly pretentious. I wonder if the light and pale color is supposed to keep them from being overwhelming. If that is the plan, it is not working for me.

The wide steps in front of each building look as if they are scaled and built for giants. I look at how oddly people climb down, climb up, and walk across these stairs. They are for sure not made for normal human legs. I wonder whether the people walking across these steps are aware of this irrational scale. But they seem unsurprised. In fact, everyone around me looks far from overawed or intimidated. It is only me, it seems. People of downtown Boston know where they're going and what they're doing in their summer business formal clothing, at this morning rush hour. They carry important looking briefcases. I wonder what is there inside those important looking briefcases. They must have important papers in them. I am wearing old blue sateen pants and a white blouse, and carrying my black purse that I bought yesterday. It looks uncomfortably new and uselessly small and matches with my vulnerable clothes. It is almost empty

other than having the confirmation letter of my two-month internship at Jewish Vocational Services.

It is not just the scale and the height of the buildings. Each time I look at the reflection in a glass window, more and more plazas – a plaza into eternity – stretch out ahead of me. I see my own reflection in the corner: a small woman facing a walk into infinite plazas with no clear end. Not being able to see around the buildings because of a plaza blocking the view across the next plaza contributes even more to how incompetent and insignificant I have been feeling since I stepped out of the subway this morning.

Squaring my shoulders, I join the human flood and walk down towards the financial district with my empty-feeling small black leather bag. As we all as one body pass by Winter Street, the main street leading to the

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financial district from the Park Street Station right in front of the Boston Common, some of us turn off at Caffè Nero for morning coffee, some of us decide to wait until the next Starbucks, and some of us start heading towards CVS for who knows what. We divide further into several streams after passing Downtown Crossing.

I check the maps on my phone for the millionth time, as I realize that it is time to leave the main body of rush-hour pedestrians to find my building. I find Federal Street, where JVS should be, and look for 75. I walk down. There is 75-101. What does that mean? I walk up but there is no just 75. I am bad with maps. And of course – I am late. Ten minutes late. I stand in front of building 75-101 and stare at all the floors, or should I say the stairway to heaven? I turn around. Oh there it is – the biggest bank I have ever seen, with huge glass windows. Wanting to do something rather than stand there, I enter 75-101. Inside, the walls are gold and the marble floor is shining. As I walk up to the information desk I see signs for 75, thinking how silly I was to look for 75 alone, and start walking in that direction. I am relieved to find JVS, but the gold walls and shining marble floor make me doubt myself again. I wonder how refugees feel when they enter 75-101.

Trying to find my way in the building, I see Devi, my supervisor for the summer, walking towards me, with a huge smile on her face. Later, Devi shows me around, introduces

me to her coworkers and other interns. I cannot help but be surprised that everyone treats me as if I am one of their coworkers rather than an intern who will be there for just two months. Almost all the employees are young, new college graduates and other people in their 20s. I do not see a single important looking briefcase around. I will be working in the Refugee Services Department, and Devi introduces me to everyone there and trains me for two hours. She explains via PowerPoint how JVS works in general, and then gives me the specific details about the Refugee Services Department.

“The Refugee Services Department provides direct employment services to local refugees, political asylees, Cuban and Haitian entrants who are the majority of their clients, and other work-authorized immigrants. Direct employment services include job search assistance, resume and interview preparation, vocational English language classes, cultural orientation, job placement and post-employment support.”

She talks about the differences between the backgrounds of clients and differences between the statuses refugee, asylee, parolee, and immigrant.

“A refugee is a person who cannot return to his or her country because of persecution or fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership to a particular social group, or political opinion. A refugee receives this status before entering the U.S. An asylee is a foreign-born resident who is not a United States citizen and who cannot return to his or her country because of persecution or a ‘well-founded fear’ of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion, as determined by the Department of State or the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). An asylee receives asylum (also called “political asylum”) status after entering the United States. A parolee is an alien who has

been given permission to enter the United States under emergency conditions or when that alien’s entry is considered to be in public interest. Cuban/Haitian entrants are all nationals of Cuba and Haiti who applied for asylum, or are in exclusion or deportation proceedings but have not received a final order of deportation, as well as persons who are granted parole status or special status under the United States immigration laws for Cubans and Haitians. Cuban/Haitian entrants are eligible for federal benefits in the same way as refugees. Refugee Services Department also serves other immigrants with work authorization, including those who hold Permanent Residency (Green Cards), Temporary Protected Status (TPS), and marriage visas.”

I did not know the differences between the legal definitions of these words before Devi explained it to me. I would realize later how learning all these would contribute to my worldview, which in return would affect how I interacted with the clients at JVS.

After telling me about her department, Devi shows me where I will be working, a huge cubicle with a bunch of computers for the use of interns and volunteers. After that, I help with the setup of the celebration of World Refugee Day.

If I had known I would be welcomed this much, I would have slept more last night rather than staring into the dark, awake.

At the end of the day, as I leave the building, I see my reflection in the glass door. I do not look quite as small as before, I think.

The rest of my week goes slowly as I learn my job at JVS. My second and third days at work are not as instructive as the first one. It is more doing than sitting and hearing about things I will be doing. Amy, the volunteer coordinator, divides my time between the Refugee Services and Secure Jobs departments.

On Wednesdays and Thursdays, I am expected to work for the Secure Jobs Department. "The Secure Jobs Partnership is a regional collaboration aimed at demonstrating a replicable model for connecting homeless families to career ladder employment and for improving coordination of services among the local housing/homelessness and workforce development systems." Unfortunately, Secure Jobs doesn't have a lot of work for me right now, and so I do not have a lot to do. I help Aisha, my supervisor at Secure Jobs, find some jobs for a client who is interested in restaurant services, which involves providing assistance to customers and offering dining and table service. Other than that, I have a few small tasks such as creating an Excel spreadsheet for clients' appointments. I had hoped, especially after my orientation, to be doing less in the Secure Jobs Department. Later, I talk with Devi and Amy about it, and tell them that I would prefer to learn more about Refugee Services than Secure Jobs. They take care of the situation by reorganizing my schedule.

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An office is a space used "for commercial, professional, or bureaucratic work," according to the *Oxford Dictionaries*. Everything has an order in the office. And I am learning to fit myself into that order since I have started working in JVS.

Although this is my third internship since I began college, I realize that I have not been taught before how to be professional. My first internship was in an office in a think tank in Istanbul, Turkey. I wore jeans to work, I left early when I did not have work to do, and I even chatted sometimes with my coworkers during work hours. Just like my clothes that I wore to work every day, everything was informal in that office. This year, before I started working at JVS, I had another internship in Hamburg, Germany. That was also far from requiring standard office protocols, since I was assisting an anthropologist in the field.

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I fail at a couple of tasks. Katherine, one of the career coaches, gives me a task to finish in two hours. I am supposed to organize two client files, print out missing forms and complete some intake forms based on the information provided in the files. At the same time, I am emailing Amy and Devi for a change in my schedule. I realize now that I did not know how to prioritize one task over the other so I fail to finish Katherine's task on time. And I do not inform her beforehand that I will not be able to finish it. Luckily there are no serious consequences. But I've learned some important lessons about doing three things at one time!

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The next week I start working directly with a client from Haiti. As we look for jobs in cleaning services, I learn that she was a biology teacher with a master's degree back in Haiti. Until that moment, I was unaware that most of the new immigrants and refugees are starting from the bottom; highly qualified refugees find lower level jobs, and this is the way to make local integration faster and more efficient. This is a way for JVS to empower its clients from diverse backgrounds to build careers through fighting racism within the system itself by forming close bonds with employers and sponsors, and to prepare clients for their jobs through vocational English classes and/or job workshops and trainings. All this creates a good reputation for the agency, and thus for the clients and the skills and work ethic they offer.

As I work with the client on her job applications and interviews, I realize with surprise that being an international student



Plazas of Boston from Ece's eye.

does not really help foster any bond between us. I remember how I thought the clients would feel closer to me than to an American person since I am a foreigner here, just like them.

As we do more and more of the mock interviews to prepare her for the cleaning job interview she will have in the afternoon, I realize that while dreaming about the bond I would form with my clients I forgot to consider my privileges or the fact that

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coming here was my choice. *How simply I had been thinking*, I whisper to myself.

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I am at my desk doing job applications as usual. Devi approaches the intern/volunteer area. She has a big smile on her face. After sitting down next to me, she tells me that the client I have been working with got a job yesterday at the company that we applied to together, and JVS exceeded the minimum quota of clients getting hired in order to get the amount of financial assistance they need from the government. My heart warms as she congratulates and thanks me. I think about all the “boring administrative work” I had to do. Helping someone to start a new page in their life by doing so little amazes me. This must be the source of the motivation that keeps people working here.

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As days pass, I think I am becoming more and more professional. I observe my coworkers so I can change the way I dress. I expertly manage numerous tasks in

order, every day. I speak to the clients as a representative of JVS. The glass door makes me seem more like an office worker at JVS than just a summer intern. One afternoon, however, a client makes me realize that professionalism is more than what I have learned so far. And my “business formal” clothes, the training I’ve had to speak in certain ways and with certain words, and all the knowledge I’ve acquired about my job does not make the personal go away.

My task for the rest of the day is to help a woman from Bangladesh with her bank job application. As we are doing the application, we start to chat. She asks where I come from. When she hears about my home, Turkey, she asks if I am Muslim or not. Considering her age, about 50 years old, and her headscarf, I tell her that I am a Muslim. In reality, I am culturally but not religiously Muslim, neither practicing Islam nor actually believing in it. Because of experiences back home, I know where this kind of conversation can go, where I am being judged for not practicing. But I decide that a discussion about that would be inappropriate. I am her JVS coach assistant; she is my client. So I keep it simple and short and try to move on.

As the conversation goes on I see the lady looking at my tattoo very carefully since usually Muslim women do not have tattoos. Then she goes on: “Do you celebrate Eid?” I know this is a question meant to find out if I am a practicing Muslim or not, although Eid is celebrated among most communities regardless of whether those communities

practice other traditions as well. At the same time, I am concerned about how having this conversation is breaking down the professionalism of our interaction. But I do not know what to do or how to stop the conversation. There is no way for me to tell her, “None of your business.” So, I uncomfortably go on: “Sometimes.” Then comes the question “Why?” And I stutter. Then comes another question: “Do you go to a mosque?” I shake my head no. And it goes on for another 20 minutes. I listen to this lady talk about why I should go to the mosque and why I should practice the Muslim tradition. I try to be respectful and preserve the client-employee relationship as much as I can. This was not in the training, I think.

As a victim of political Islam back at home, however, it is hard for me to stay calm and do my job. I am trying to find something to say that will emphasize the professional relationship between me, the JVS employee, and her, the client. But everything is so



At the volunteer/intern area, working on organizing the case files. Case files have information for clients. (Intake forms, photocopies of their ids, resumes, Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance referral forms, etc.)

personal right now. I am judged for what I believe in or don't believe in, even though I did not have any intention to start a discussion on religion, and my religion or lack of it has nothing to do with helping her get a job.

I do not know how to separate my job from my personal experience. I feel desperate when I think about being a minority at home. I feel desperate when I think about being here but not being able to express what I am thinking while still being professional. I also think about how much this woman has suffered from discrimination because of her religion. Everything starts to get mingled. I cannot get out of this situation in my mind.

The client leaves, and my mind is full of questions. How can I act professionally when my personal experience, identity, and beliefs become part of a conversation with a client? How can I keep calm when I belong to a minority, and someone who has the same rhetoric as the majority but from a different country and context questions me?

I certainly acted professionally in avoiding

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the argument I had the impulse to have. But what I wanted was to make the client understand that it is not professional to ask so many personal questions or try to persuade me to believe in what she believes in. I stuttered. I got annoyed. I got sad. Professionalism kept me from saying what I feel I needed to say. Lack of professionalism, on the other hand, kept me from putting more distance between me and the client. So, is professionalism something that can protect me or something that keeps me quiet in a way that hurts me? Or both? Maybe neither.

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My job at JVS showed me that my two years in the United States had given me more knowledge about navigating the infinite plazas of Boston than I would have imagined before I started the job. There is a day on which I help a woman to get to the office of Child Care Choices of Boston (CCCB) to re-apply for childcare for her six-year-old son. It takes less time than I anticipated to walk from the financial district to Chinatown. I am perplexed that I am not lost. We find the office easily and submit the required forms, hoping to get the aid soon.

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When I look back at my time at JVS, one of the things that stands out is how different my days were depending on what part of the mission I was working on. Sometimes I was taking clients to doctor appointments, childcare meetings, and interviews, which was a lot of fun. Sometimes I would spend five hours doing file sorting or organizing, which got boring

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JVS is a place of acceptance. Respect and acceptance are what I have observed here. Clients, volunteers, employees, and employers, regardless of their background, get help from and work with each other. I believe that I fit into this picture.

over time. Now I understand that both of these kinds of things are part of making the mission of JVS happen. Looking ahead, I am thinking about what it might mean to find a good balance between these two parts, which I do fit into, differently. I wonder where I will go next to keep learning and discovering more about myself and the world around me.