



Learner's Name: Adila Tahawi

Age: 15

Location: Minneapolis, Minnesota

How would you summarize your background?

My mom and dad met at graduate school here in the States. Mom was a first generation Arab-American, and Dad was a student from Egypt. They are both pretty liberal really, and grew up in Westernized families, but I think the events of the early part of the century changed them. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and some of the anti-Muslim sentiments that began to be expressed in the West, made them feel split—their cultural identity and their communal identity were suddenly at odds.

Tell me more about your experiences and your family's background.

My family doesn't have a lot of money, partly because my mom stayed home to teach us, rather than working outside the home. My dad's a physics teacher at one of the remaining local colleges, which isn't very well funded. He makes extra money selling lectures. He probably could have made more money if he'd gone into industry or if he had developed a career as a networked learning agent, but he's very committed to the value of education, and believes strongly in the power of public education.

We have a very rich intellectual and cultural life. Both of my parents have always encouraged us to read widely, and we discuss film, art, music and theater as a family. We also take regular trips to local galleries and exhibitions. We can't afford to travel far, so we experience others through holograms. Since my dad's from Egypt, and the events of the early century made my parents more interested in their Arabic heritage, I think we also have more knowledge of the rest of the world than most American families.

How do you like to learn?

I don't really know if I have a particular learning style. I know people talk about that a lot. It seems as if it was big fashion around the time I was born. My mom has really decided how my brothers and I will learn. She tries to mix it up as much as she can, but I'd say we have a pretty old-school experience—lots of reading and remembering and discussing. We do draw in some free learning resources from other sources. But we haven't really had access to some of the equipment we would need to do science experiments, for example. My dad has brought us into his physics lab at the college, but they don't have much there either because they rely on public funding. When he describes the kind of stuff he used to do as a student, it seems incredible to me.

My parents have had big arguments about enhancements—Mom's against them, and Dad's for them. One of my brothers is dyslexic, and Mom worked really hard to adapt what was teaching to help him. But neither she nor my dad had had any experience with dyslexia before that, so they were just learning their way. Dad wanted my brother to have some new augmentation when he was about 10, but Mom said no, and it was very expensive anyway.

How would you describe your current learning experiences?

We haven't traveled much—that's something I definitely want to do when I get older—but we do a lot of research about different countries and cultures in the world. We spent three months last year learning about Italy. We learned the history, started speaking the language, cooked Italian food, and watched Italian films at home. This year I think we're going to do Northern China.

We don't really learn subjects as such. We pick a place or a time or a material, and then we kind of learn everything we can about it. My favorite thing is learning about the interactions, like how history affects science, or climate and geography affect social life and politics.

Please provide an overview of your learning experiences so far.

I think I've been very lucky with my learning. We're a tight knit family, and we learn well together. Sometimes a couple of neighborhood kids join us if they need extra tutoring on something—although I think we're more advanced on most things. I like the way my mom teaches, most of the time, and my brothers and I help each other a lot. Although we do help each other, I think she's taught me to be a very independent learner. Basically we operate like a team, and we each learn stuff that we bring back to the group.

What do you find most motivating?

I think my parents have given a lot up for us, so I want to do really well in life to pay them back. I'm also proud to be a Muslim woman and feel that I have a kind of mission to show people, whether Muslim or not, that a lot of their preconceptions of what a Muslim woman is, or can be, are wrong. I deliberately wear very traditional dress. My mom wears it too, and started around the time I was born when she read that headscarves were going to be banned in France. She thought that was such a terrible infringement of liberty that she wore traditional dress as a political act. I wear it to play with people's preconceptions.

What you hope to do when you are older?

I don't know what I want to do for a career yet. I know I want to travel, and I know I want to work outside the home, but apart from that I'm not sure. I have been doing some advanced study in geography beyond what my mom can organize at home, and may go on to pursue something related to that.

It will be strange to go away to college, but I think it will be good for me. After so long being at home, I'm looking forward to being around more people my own age. It will be the start of my travels. And I want to experience a campus. Not the local kind my dad teaches at, but the kind where you live communally and self-organize around your interests and engage in ongoing dialogue with the professor-guides and educators.

What worries you as you think about your future?

What have I missed by being home schooled? How do I deal with racism and ethnic hatred? I've been protected from it by being home schooled, but at some point I'm going out there and will have to face it.