



6 Life Lessons from a Tunisian Taxi Driver

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In Chicago on business recently, I took a taxi from the airport to my downtown client. On the trip, I didn't talk more than a couple of words with the driver, just to confirm the address.

When my several hours of meetings were complete, I headed out to the street to hail a cab for the trip back to the airport and a taxi was parked at the curb. When I opened the door, I recognized it was the same driver who had dropped me off four hours earlier! He also recognized me.

We both were struck by the coincidence, laughing at the unlikely event. He indicated that he thought "it was God" that we would connect again. He explained that airport trips were much more lucrative than short, inconsistent rides within the city, and that he felt blessed that day to have two such rides. I noticed his taxi license this time; his name was Walid.

On the way back to the airport, this time in much heavier traffic, we started a conversation. I learned that Walid was originally from Tunisia, but had wanted to leave because there were no opportunities there. Six years ago, he was chosen by lottery to be able to come to the U.S. on a temporary workj visa. He was now within a few weeks of taking an exam to become a legal citizen.

Still living in Tunisia, Walid had a wife and small daughter whom he travelled back to see every several months. He also had extended family, all of whom had difficulty making ends meet with the lack of jobs and opportunities there. It was a depressing story of hardship that mirrored the grey Chicago sky-- families broken up and separated, years of hard work and scrimping. What struck me most, however, was his infectious smile and positive attitude.

This taxi driver from Tunisia was college educated, but was reduced to picking up fares and hoping for long runs here in the U.S. And he was smiling. He missed his wife and daughter terribly, but recognized that his goal was bigger and longer term—to create a life of opportunity for his precious child. He smiled with a slight tear in his eye. He lived in a small apartment in a not so great part of town, but it was hundreds a month cheaper than one closer to the center of the city. He smiled again as he thought of creating a better life for his family.

When he dropped me off at the ticketing door, Walid smiled broadly and shook my hand, and I wished God's blessing on him and his family. He thanked me, and I walked into the airport, knowing that I would likely never see him again.

But I thought about the Tunisian taxi driver for much of my flight and realized that Walid represented the kind of individual that I do not read much about, nor meet in my day to day life. This cab ride had been a special moment for me, a glimpse into the life of someone I would otherwise have never met, a degree of insight that I would otherwise not have had.

It occurred to me that Walid represented 6 lessons for any life:

Choose to be upbeat. From my perspective, Walid's life seemed rather difficult—leaving his home, wife, and daughter to work in a foreign country; having to learn a language unfamiliar to him and work a job beneath his college degree; living in minimal housing and working long hours. Somewhere along the way, however, he seems to have discovered that life and work go much better when one smiles and approaches people with warmth and energy.

Focus on life's priorities. Walid's priorities were clear—to send financial support to his wife and daughter, as well as his extended family still in Tunisia. He saved enough money to also visit them every several months and recommit to his love for them. His work and career were important, but being there for his family and building for their future was the most important—except, perhaps, for the next lesson.

Trust in God. I still don't know how he ended up sitting in the right spot at the right time in front of my building, waiting for me when I left my meetings four hours after he dropped me off. Had he sized me up—not carrying a suitcase, only a shoulder bag—as someone who would be back at the curb in several hours? Or was it, as he said, a God thing? He trusted in God to guide his steps and his cab stops. It seemed to give him perspective, faith that things would work out for him, and support in the tough times.

Chip away at your goals. With most people I know, chipping away at goals and making only gradual, sometimes zero progress toward them is frustrating and discouraging. For Walid, however, he continued to focus on the goal of a better life for his family, and, at some point, having them join him in the U.S. Every day, he counted on the fares he would make that day, and then planned his strategy for the next day, when he would chip away some more.

Be patient with obstacles. Walid had waited almost six years to take his citizenship test. Each one of those years was an obstacle that separated him from his family, yet he displayed an amazing and unusual degree of patience and faith that he would get past the obstacles. He was ready to take on his last hurdle—the test—in the next couple of months. I got the sense that, even if he failed the test, he would wait patiently for the next testing date.

Be thankful for your blessings. I asked Walid if he qualified for any public assistance or other aid, and though he was still smiling, he seemed a bit offended that I would ask. “Oh, no,” he said, “I know I could get money in this way, but there are so many others who need it more. I am okay; I'm doing just fine without it.” What a refreshing attitude, much like the early immigrants to this country, who viewed the U.S. as a land of opportunity and were thankful just to be living here.

As I look back on my 40 minutes with Walid, I am inspired and humbled by his story. I hope you are, too.