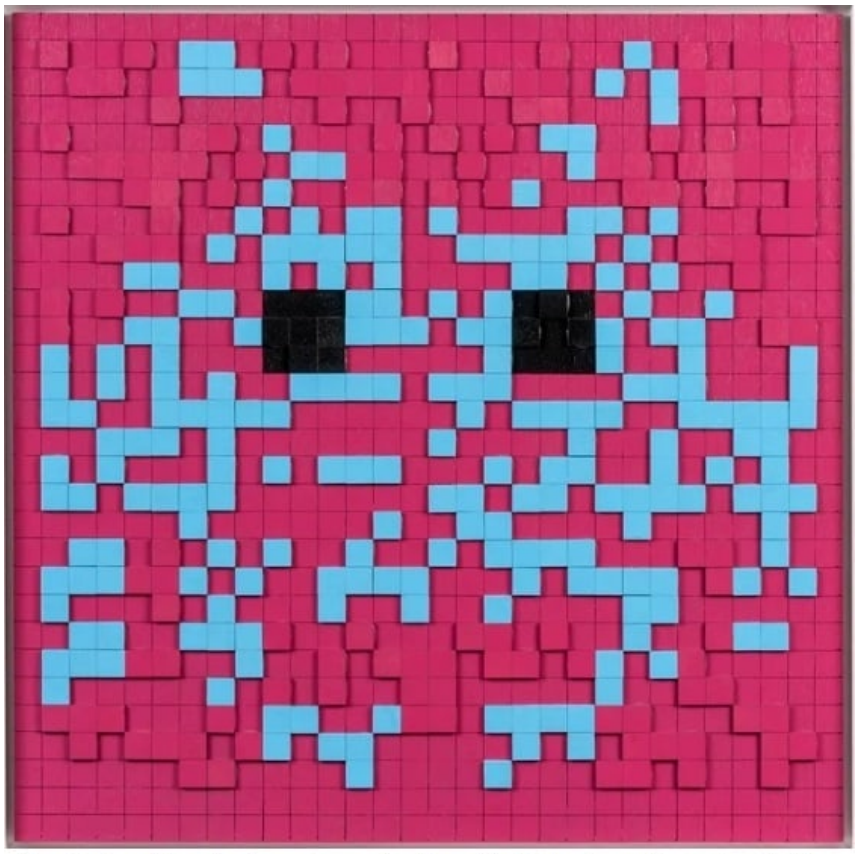
I Will Always Make Mistakes

By Itto Outini

For two years, beginning when I was in eleventh grade and continuing into my twelfth, I used to travel from Meknes to Rabat once or twice a month to have my lecture notes printed in Braille. Whenever I made this trip, I would spend the whole taxi ride thinking about how to talk to the woman who owned the Braille embosser. Braille printing is not cheap, and I had never paid her. I couldn't. I didn't have money. I was homeless. I always promised her that I would pay next time, and she always accepted my promise without question. She knew the truth, of course, but she was kind enough not to confiscate my last shred of dignity.



Reynolds hopes his work will pave the way for others with sight loss to work in creative industries

In her office, I would sit on a metal chair across from her assistant while the embosser clattered away in another room, noisily transforming the notes on my flash drive into a format I could read. Sometimes, her mother, who lived next door, would invite me for breakfast. Starving as I was, I never turned her down, but the food, no matter how delicious, would lose its flavor as soon as I recalled that I was a beggar, penniless, in unwashed clothes, with nothing of my own. I couldn't bear the shame of receiving all these costly favors and giving nothing in return. I would sit uneasily at her

table, cracking my knuckles, waiting for the ordeal to end.

Little did I know that the worst shame was yet to come.

One morning, the assistant wasn't in the office. I gave my flash drive to the owner, sat in my usual chair, and waited as unobtrusively as possible until her mother came and invited me to eat with her. I made quick work of the meal, and just as I was finishing, the owner arrived and put a hand on my shoulder. "My assistant isn't here," she said. "I'll show you to the taxi."

"Thank you, Sister." I rose, my cane folded, clasping her hand in both of mine. "Thank you so much. May God smile on you. Because of you, I get good grades."

"I'm glad to hear it," she said mildly, walking me down the steps and out to the street, where the taxi was waiting. "I know you're working hard."

"Sister, your support means the world to me. I'm always grateful."

"Here's your taxi," she said. "Don't worry, I've already paid the driver. And here's twenty dirhams." She pressed the bills into my hand along with the stack of freshly printed Braille notes. "I'm telling you how much it is so that no one out can take advantage of you. There are some cruel people in this world."

"That's true, Sister," I agreed. "But there are also people like you."

"Oh, and by the way." She held open the door of the taxi, still gripping my arm. "In case you come next time and don't find me here, just ask for Ibrahim. My name is Ibrahim."

My heart stopped. My face burned. The words "Thank you, Sister" turned to dust on my tongue. I had to clutch Ibrahim by the hand to keep from toppling over—a soft, smooth hand,

not like those of the farmers and laborers I'd known, as deceptively effeminate as his voice, but evidently still a man's.

"Travel safely, Daughter," said Ibrahim, guiding my numb body into the taxi. "Study hard. I'll see you in a few weeks, God willing."

The heat didn't drain from my cheeks until I was in Meknes. The worst insult anyone can throw at a Moroccan man is to call him a woman; and yet, instead of taking offense, Ibrahim had shown me yet another kindness, correcting me in the most tactful way possible.

Sadly, there aren't many Ibrahims in Morocco—or, for that matter, in the world. Since 2017, I've lived in the United States. I've also been to Türkiye and Malaysia, and being a Fulbright scholar has connected me with people from every country you can name. While what counts as a capital faux pas may vary from culture to culture, I can report that the same guilt, shame, embarrassment, and ostracism are brought to bear on transgressors, always and everywhere. In the US, for example, you might be able to get away with addressing a man as "Sister," especially if you're blind—but God forbid you're talking to a trans man.

Born, raised, and educated in a culture where same-sex attraction is demonized, same-sex liaisons are practiced only in secret, and same-sex marriage is absolutely impossible, I was, in the US, guaranteed to step on my fair share of landmines. I had nothing against gays and lesbians per se. Necessity had made me dependent on strangers, and some of the people who'd helped me had been in the closet—a few had even been openly queer—and so I'd come to see them as people like everyone else, capable of the same kindness, the same treachery, the same generosity, the same miserliness, the same nobility, and the same depravity as the rest of the humanity. I had no strong opinions on concepts such as

“heteronormativity” or “gender fluidity.” I’d never even heard these words. I had heard of “pronouns,” but only in the grammatical context. And so, when the nurse at the University of Arkansas’s student health center asked me for my pronouns, I blurted out the first thing that came to mind:

“I guess I’m an it. ‘I’ and ‘t’ are the first two letters of my name!”

The rattle of her fingers on the keyboard ceased abruptly. The only sound in the lobby was the squeak of a swivel chair in need of grease. Then her voice, flat, gray, stern, and unforgiving:

“That’s not appropriate. You shouldn’t joke about those things.”

Years later, my husband, who’d taught at the University of Arkansas, shared a story about a student from somewhere in the delta who’d responded to this same question, “I don’t really know…I guess my pronoun is Sir?”

I couldn’t help but feel an instantaneous affinity with that poor, young, American man.

I don’t mean to give the impression that in America, there are no Ibrahims. Not long after my trip to the health center, I was invited to a drag show at a local LGBT bar. It was my first drag show ever, and I had no idea what to expect, but I was eager to sample any experience America had to offer.

When the first queen began to perform, the friend who’d invited me stuffed a wad of cash into my hand and whispered, “Now give it to her!”

I thrust my hand in the direction of the brash voice belting out an unfamiliar song. The next thing I knew, I was holding a large, round, plush bosom.

“That’s all right!” shouted the MC, who’d apparently seen the

whole thing. “If you can’t see, you might as well feel! Don’t trust the voices! Don’t trust what anyone else says! Just go ahead and use your hands!”

Everyone in the club burst out laughing, including me and the drag queen. Some even began to applaud.

The next day, by chance, I ran into the MC on my way to the university.

“Hey,” he said, pulling me aside, “I didn’t embarrass you, did I?”

“Oh, no,” I assured him. “Not at all.”

“I just figured we were all having fun,” he continued earnestly, “but, later, I was thinking about it, and I was like, wait…was that appropriate?”

“Come on.” I squeezed his arm. “Life is short. We have to laugh about these things!”

Having endured more suffering, physical as well as emotional, in the first thirty years of my life than most people ever even see on TV, I can say with authority that laugher is medicine—if not the best for every ailment, then certainly the most affordable and versatile. Humor boosts the spirits, helps the body heal faster, eases social tensions, opens up new ways of thinking and feeling, and may even lay the groundwork for friendships that bridge ideological divides. It’s the best of all off-label drugs. It’s the treatment that can’t be denied by your health insurance company. It’s organic, hypoallergenic, and side-effect free. To the nurse at the student health center, who said we shouldn’t joke about these things, I would like to respectfully propose that we *should* joke about these things. We *must* joke about these things. If we don’t joke about these things, we’re handing a needless victory to the forces of darkness, suffering, and pain—and they get enough of those already.

There is such a thing as cruel laughter, of course. There are bullies who use mockery and scorn to instill embarrassment and shame, thereby shutting down all growth, all learning, all human connection; but, if that's the case, then what, precisely, is the difference between such bullying, on the one hand, and the rigid social norms deployed to curtail it on the other?

In America, as in many other parts of the world, such norms have been proliferating in recent years. Cultural outsiders like me—ostensibly the very people these norms are meant to protect—are bearing the brunt of the cost. So it was the chilly winter day when I told an instructor that my hands were too cold, I couldn't feel my Braille books anymore, I must have finger dyslexia, and he stopped speaking to me: total excommunication. So it was the day one of my friends was accused of racism—not transphobia, confusingly—for referring to somebody by the wrong pronoun. And so it was the day in 2020 when another friend, a righteous liberal, broke my dishes and slammed my door because I said that all lives matter.

For the record, I hadn't been on social media, I was unversed in the finer points of America's racial discourse, and nothing in the literal content of that statement suggested controversy.

Also for the record, I stand by what I said then: all lives do matter. If this troubles you, then I would like to know which lives that you think don't matter—and who appointed you the judge?

Social tripwires like these make it difficult for people with imperfect knowledge—i.e. all of us—to function in the public sphere. They have the same effect as the bullying against which they supposedly safeguard: they shut people down; they set friends and loved ones against each other; they allow the strong to trample on the weak; they sew fear.

I will not give in to that fear. I refuse.

I will not stop laughing at my own mistakes. And I will not stop making them. I'm human.

I will not expect you to be anything other than human. I will not get offended if you ask me where I'm from, or if you call me "he" instead of "she," or if you say, "See you tomorrow!" instead of "Meet you tomorrow!", or if you mispronounce my name. My name sounds different in every language anyway. Whether you say "See you" or "Meet you" makes no difference; what matters is that we've got an appointment. My name is rare and ends in "o," a masculine marker in Spanish; it's confusing. I'm from Boulemane Province in Morocco, but if you think I'm from Morocco, Arkansas, it's no skin off my back.

Two thousand three hundred years ago, after what I can only imagine was a great deal of observation and contemplation, Aristotle came to the conclusion that when evaluating someone's words or deeds, we must consider not only the impacts on others, but also the intentions behind them. Not only whether they've caused someone harm, in other words, but also what the perpetrator is likely to learn from it, and whether they are likely do it again.

Intentions matter. We cannot afford to jettison this principle. Not now. Not ever. What's more, when the "harm" done is purely emotional, intentions matter far more than anything else. This applies to the victims as well as the perpetrators. Some people intend to cause emotional harm, it's true; but others intend to suffer emotional harm in order to commandeer authority, gain support from the masses, and reap retribution. They are just as culpable. Perhaps even more so.

Ibrahim, of course, was not one of those people. The nightclub's MC was not one of those people. And I am not one those people. I choose not to be one of those people.

I'm a lot happier for it. I have more friends. I'm a much

faster learner.

I hope you will make this choice, too.

END