Ataturk, His Incredible Gift to Inspire: A New Nation Built on Equality and Justice—an Enduring Spirit for the Future

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The United Nations’ 2015 Goals for the Millennium seek to overcome despair and poverty in emerging countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the
Caribbean. Gender equality is included in the measures set forth to achieve the goals. Women will be empowered through education, health standards, increased paid employment, social integration, placement in managerial positions, politics, and elected seats of governments. The Millennium Goals are possible triumphs of the human spirit—goals successfully realized in the past century from 1923 through 1938 in Anatolia and Thrace. Mustafa Kemal, who became Ataturk, the leader of the movement that led to the Turkish Republic, instilled his people with an inner strength that empowered them toward achievement and resolution. Ataturk’s words and actions encouraged individual integrity. Those words continually highlighted the utmost importance of each citizen’s unique role in the moving of the nation to a renaissance. Through health, education, elected government positions, social modernization and integration, and many other fundamental means of progress and respect, Ataturk pushed gender equality and women’s empowerment. Following his Great Offensive victory, Ataturk said, “If henceforward the women do not share in the social life of the nation, we shall never attain our full development. We shall remain backward....”

I intimately knew and loved a Turkish woman who lived through the Balkan Wars. As a young wife, she became actively committed to Mustafa Kemal Pasha’s progressive ideals, revolution, and subsequent new republic. Her name, Adalet, means “Justice.” She was my mother-in-law. When she was ninety-one years old, Adalet asked me to write the story of her life. “I’m not important,” she said, “but my story is.” Adalet experienced, first-hand, the results of Ataturk’s inspiration and his nation-building programs. She hoped that the world would long-remember her nation’s triumphs.

My novel, Forty Thorns, is based on Adalet’s oral memoir. It blends past with present in a war-torn love story that parallels the new nation during the critical years of the emerging state. With illuminating changes, dramatic events, and Ataturk’s positive role in the universal women’s struggle for self-determination, Adalet maintains wisdom, humor, and hope despite great loss. Laid against the tapestry of a crumbling empire of the past and the great effort of building an emerging progressive republic, Forty Thorns is a woman’s view of personal and societal upheaval, and of how she, as a common foot soldier of society, found courage to provide order and sanity in her world. Folklore, mysticism, suffering, and hope unfold within the framework of documented history. With a passion for each other and their ideals, Adalet and her husband, Burhan, travel all across Thrace and Anatolia throughout the 40 years of their erratic relationship and seven children, unfurling deception, desertion, jealousy, rejection, and their account of a new republic of heroes, heroines, and villains.

Burhan was appointed governor of Kusadasi in the beginning years of the republic. Adalet and her first child lived in a house in Izmir, since Kusadasi was little more than a malaria-infested village. The following passage from Forty Thorns reveals Adalet as a woman enjoying the possibilities of the new republic:

In January of 1923, Kemal Pasha’s mother died in Izmir. Since Muslim burial took place within twenty-four hours, he was not able to make the funeral. He was
busy pulling the country back together, inspiring them to study, naming equality as the key, especially for women. Furthermore, he proclaimed that the future meant engaging in the invention of art and science. Turks should not continue the ways of the conservative, submissive past. Education was the first duty, ignorance the curse. Pasha soon arrived in Izmir to give an elegy at his mother’s gravesite. Gazi Kemal said that women such as his mother had been victims of the sultans, and that society had restrained women like prisoners.

Adalet had heard the report of his passionate words when she visited the cinema near her home, where she went often to see silent movies and to hear the news. She wore a headscarf—or not, at her pleasure. In the afternoons, she was free.

Izmir’s parks, public places, mosques, and theaters held lectures on political and social life. Curious Adalet went as much as she was able. Her husband came up to Izmir Wednesday evening through Saturday morning, when the week began. Burhan continued to engage his wife in intelligent discussions. Adalet studied the new choices for women and the poor. Gazi Kemal had the gift of vision, explaining the rights of people in a common language they could understand, and outlining programs that would enable progress.

In her own cups, Adalet saw that Pasha was to be the master-artist who could create something out of little, and the master-teacher who was going to show Turks how to perform such miracles themselves. Adalet conceived creative spirit to be like the genie from Aladdin’s lamp in The Arabian Nights. What a kismet they held in their hands—to be living at the time of a rebirth. Adalet woke up every day wondering what new thing was written on her own forehead as a part of it.

Burhan’s first cousin was a congressman named Dr. Fuat Umay. Together, they were invited to one of the wedding receptions in Izmir for Kemal Pasha and his bride. In the next passage, Adalet personally encounters the charismatic Kemal Pasha:

Throughout the evening, Adalet could not help but to gaze at the professional soldier-bridegroom. It seemed to her that he was surrounded with an aura. Firm and lean, his burnished hair was combed neatly back, highlighting brows that feathered at the ends above his eagle-sharp, gray-blue eyes. She could swear that his every gesture softened each as he moved among the company. A poet might express the inspiration of his very presence—where everyone wanted to share his light, his mountain spring energy and his resonating voice, as captivating as a meteor across a summer’s night sky. She had never felt adoration for a person, but she knew on that evening that she could never be truly devoted to anything less than what he represented: The future.

In order for a great and just nation to rise out of the ashes of ruin, many members of that society must be led to find their inner strength, understanding, and determination for their cause. They must be inspired to trust equality and justice for all, and to possess a creative consciousness, adaptability, courage
greater than fear, remarkable wit, constant hope, a zest for learning, and a great heart. Adalet represents the fortitude that founded modern Turkey in 1923. There were thousands more just like her who were inspired by Ataturk.

Throughout *Forty Thorns*, the narrator researches Adalet’s historical period and reflects on how modern Turkey evolved over the years. In this passage, the narrator has returned to Istanbul after Adalet’s death. As she watches Istanbul through the late-night windows, she contemplates:

*Through the windows that wrap this nook, I look out onto the hundreds of lights and think how—of all the lights that must be turned on in Istanbul at this moment, these I see from my windows are only a few. I imagine all kinds of lights all over Turkey, over the nighttime world. I remember the gold lights on Ataturk’s shrine and museum in Ankara. I could see them at night from my hotel balcony. There were also lights on the relief that honors the female founders of the republic.*

*I sink back into the booth. Let’s be honest. Regardless of all of Adalet’s contemporaries’ fortitude in building a new secular republic, there’s still the same old religious and social conflict today, still the fanatics with swords in their eyes. There’re also conservatives of good will, but Ataturk might be disappointed to see so many women on the streets in black coverings. Granted, a lot of them are Arabs and immigrants from Iran and Saudi Arabia. And, there are still plenty of old houses and palaces where life floats up in its waves of soft music, gatherings of progressive ideas and sleek people having drinks around pink tablecloths. Candlelight and talk is fairly free here today even with the traditionalists. Istanbul is still a place with wide enough heart and mind to take in people and trends from all parts of the world. The masses are still restless, still anxious, still driven for survival on the streets and highways, on the move in and out of spaces, filling up all niches in a frantic rumble, trying to stay on top of their fate. But tonight, in this amber, looking out on a cobalt and golden Istanbul, I can almost think Ataturk’s motto of “Peace at home, peace in the world!” is a nice thought, if not a reality. There was a lot of sacrifice in order for these skyscrapers to be standing here tonight in the moon’s calm glow. The same is true of America, as a matter of fact. But, does the contemporary world care?*

Adalet grapples with tremendous change. Hers is the universal twentieth century woman’s dilemma of repeatedly repositioning herself. As she is forced out from the western provinces of the weakening Ottoman Empire and into the heart of Anatolia and the establishment of the new republic, Adalet embodies both the dreams and struggles of the times. She is disowned for her love. She fights for the new ideals of tomorrow and for her children. She is engendered by war and an era that gave Turkish women a secular voice even before much of the west. But she never is able to overcome the traditions and dilemmas faced by a woman determined to own her independence. Adalet was born into the grace and education of high Ottoman society, where European ideals fostered the uprising of the Young Turks. She is one of the many builders, wives, and mothers of the new state whose bold pride secured a revolution. As Adalet’s life unfolds, dreams become deception, love becomes rejection, and birth becomes loss. An inner strength forged in both East and West emerges and rebuilds on faith in the
Almighty and a belief in justice and equality that does not die even through the dismal times.

In the next passage, Adalet is with her family in the southeastern province of Hakkari in 1938, the year Atatürk died. Through the years, she has been a teacher, avid reader and thinker. As Burhan, the children, and she have moved over Anatolia, Adalet has helped establish schools, taught the new alphabet and hygiene to the public, and is even now pressing forth with her own small factory of making dresses for her students with her small Singer Sewing Machine. Here, she ponders from where her country has come and to where it will go.

Adalet reached up her right hand and turned the wheel and began pedaling with her feet, quickly bringing her right hand back to guide the material so the seam would be straight, keeping a steady eye on each even puncture the needle made into the dark blue cotton with the white flowers. Her machine clacked along with a rattle like a wooden-wheel cart on a cobblestone road. Burhan had asked the province governor of Hakkari to requisition this machine last August after she passed approval that allowed her to teach in a school. She recruited two additional teachers. Adalet’s children helped her cut and sew uniforms.

The reading and writing program that Atatürk began ten years ago in 1929 was now used throughout most of the country. From the beginning, Burhan and Adalet learned the Latin alphabet quickly and then began to teach it to others of various ages. Kemal Pasha had led the teaching example personally, standing in his pinstriped suits and wide-brimmed hats in the public parks throughout the towns and villages, taking chalk in hand to the blackboards. In the cities, the program that should have taken five years was largely accomplished in five months. By the time Adalet and Burhan arrived in Hakkari in the summer of 1937, the national literacy rate had risen from nine to twenty-two percent.

Adalet stopped pedaling, then cut, and trimmed the threads with the scissors. She held to the light the cuff already prepared for the sleeve of the dress, examining the stitches. The sleeves would fall just below her elbow. The cuff would give the dress a bit of style. Her flowered dress would have a neckline that came down in a point toward her bosoms. Half of her arm would go bare, and her ankles as well. These were modern times. Of course, in the cities like Izmir, Ankara, and Istanbul, women like the Turkish Women’s Union wore all sorts of fancy hats, shoes and short skirts that fell just below the knees. These members met regularly and were determined to wash ignorance from the walls of Turks’ history by starting libraries, museums and theaters. Pasha said that it was the females who would lead the nation, and he meant to enforce that idea legally. Now, there were female judges in courts throughout the land to make decisions for society. The ladies of the Union could be seen in the newspapers and on the streets and in the parks with open smiles on their faces. Freethinking women didn’t have that look of unspoken regret and the downcast eyes. Adalet had been a Women’s Union member eight years ago in the town of Bilecik.
Kurdish women in Hakkari would have a harder time coming into the modern world, for in this almost forgotten edge of the country’s farthest southeastern boundaries, a wife was a servant to her husband’s family. The best that Adalet could hope for in this desolate place was to open a few doors by teaching reading and writing. There were only three teachers for the school here.

She held up her flimsy dress against the window’s glare. The material had been sent to her from the office of the President of the Turkish Republic. Adalet was told that Pasha had received the report of her school here in Colemerik, Hakkari last September, and had ordered this fabric sent to her for a nice dress. She imagined that Ataturk had taken pleasure in awarding her, for he respected teachers so much that he once said that he wished he could be only the Minister of Education—were it not for his many other duties too numerous to mention.

Under the Presidency of Ataturk, the republic rose from the ashes of ten years of continuous wars, devastation, starvation, and disease. The years of Ataturk’s guidance are filled with concrete examples of how the United Nations’ worthy Goals for the Millennium might be achieved in today’s world. Advancement of such principles will always require intelligent, creative, humanistic, visionary, and progressive leadership. However, few leaders move their nations ahead with the rapid pace of the new Turkish Republic. To repeat, I emphasize that in addition to his many other skills; Ataturk had the remarkable ability to inspire the masses in a positive light. Ataturk’s great gift of inspiration still lives in the hearts and minds of people around the world today, even as his republic enters its ninetieth anniversary.

The next passage recounts Adalet’s dream:

Before the November of his death, it had been widely rumored that Ataturk was very ill. And so, Adalet had been more shocked than surprised with the news. And furthermore, Adalet had been given a dream. It came a few nights before the president died. In the dream, she was in her home, and a knock came to the door. When she opened it, there stood Pasha.

"Can I come in?" Ataturk asked. Overwhelmed and overjoyed, she brought him in and gave him the best seat in the parlor. He sat there in his nice suit with the tie and handkerchief in its pocket, his fine hair slicked back. There was not even a speck of dust on him anywhere. He gazed at her as if he could pierce her heart. Adalet picked up a small box wrapped in gold paper and handed to him what was a present of her special cheese. He held it on his lap and smiled at her. "Adalet," he said, "I am very tired. Would you give me a drink of water?" She gave him the best glass in the house, filled with cool water from the spring. He drank it down and told her, "Thank you for everything." And then he appeared to vanish into her hearth fire.

To those who asked Adalet for the meaning of her dream, she told them:
“Pasha has left us; but it is up to those who are enlightened to feed the nation’s thirst and continue to teach the children.”

Women like Adalet breathed in the new life found in Ataturk’s words. Today, their stories bring inspiration and universal hope into the new millennia.