The Accidental Alchemist

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The first time Gemma Bulos almost died, she was harnessed to a parasail ten stories above the ocean somewhere in Mexico. The harness had been fastened too loosely under her arms and rather than providing her the soaring experience that she expected for her 20th birthday, with each upward surge, her arms were being stretched so tautly that the pain eventually resulted in loss of consciousness. When she came to, still 10 stories above the earth and in agony, she wrenched her arms free only to find herself dangling from the apparatus by her knees, performing a feat that even a trained acrobat might think twice about. "This is supposed to be fun," she thought, but only for a moment before a wind gust wrenched her free of the harness. She fell, covering the dizzying distance in moments, perhaps her last, then smacked the water as if it were concrete and passed out again. This time, floating and serene, she was at one with the water that buoyed her even as she lay face down, drowning in it. Perhaps it was those mystical, breathless moments when her bond with water was formed, giving up its secrets to her, secrets that would take years to dissect and disseminate. She could have died there, but instead, water spit her out and told her to come back later. "Water had plans for me," Gemma says of the incident. Her back was broken, but her spirit renewed. Rescued from certain death and unprepared to face an uncertain life, she took months to heal while the drops of water that would form her path were gathering to create the ocean before her.

Fast forward to present, and you'd be amazed at how difficult it is keeping up with this self-styled "under-achieving over-achiever." She talks fast, for one. That's because she spent her formative years in New York City in her past incarnation as a professional jazz singer. Her

Source: Author

voice sounds like water running over rocks--not the ones way down in the valley, but those high up in the hills, the headwaters that get the whole river going, first trickling and then racing down the hill, bringing blessings for all. She thinks fast, for another. How else to explain the success of two social entrepreneurial enterprises she has had a generous hand in, A Single Drop for Safe Water, and the Global Women's Water Initiative. I interviewed the California native by phone, for me, a cold December day in Pennsylvania, for her, a decidedly warmer one in Oakland, California, one of the nation's most ecologically-minded and sustainable cities.

PL: *What's a typical day look like?*

GB: I'm one of those crazy people who sleeps with the computer and phone next to them. I roll out of bed, check my email quickly and spend the rest of my day working online when I'm in the US. I have a bunch of meetings and conference calls, which is what I end up doing almost every day, keeping track of my projects abroad via email and Skype. I also do a lot of speaking engagements and am co-teaching a class at Stanford University as a Social Entrepreneur Fellow which is great fun. I have an office at the Women's Earth Alliance in Berkeley and I go into the office sometimes once a week. When I'm in

the field, in Africa or the Philippines, it's a totally different story.

PL: *Sounds like the ultimate telecommuting job*

GB: It is.

PL: *You were the founder and Executive Director for A Single Drop for Safe Water, headquartered in the Philippines. Tell us about that organization.*

GB: First I need to tell you about what came before A Single Drop for Safe Water [Philippines] and A Single Drop [USA]. I was an aspiring performer, working in NYC before any of this began. I taught preschool during the day and was also a professional jazz singer. I was supposed to be in the World Trade Center on September 11 and would have been getting out of the subway when the planes hit, but instead I didn't want to go to work, so I called in sick that day. I couldn't stop thinking of that horror and me - by chance or luck - not being there. Following the September 11 attacks, New York was this amazing place where people showed the best sides of themselves, coming together and supporting where they could. Months after 9/11, I traveled to India where his Holiness the Dalai Lama was leading a world peace prayer, where over half a million people packed into the tiny village of Bodh Gaya to pray for peace. I can barely explain the amazing energy that comes from a group of people all praying for one thing and how I felt like a single drop of water in a sea of peaceful souls. All of us are single drops with an incredible power and when we unite, we can make changes. I was a few days into a silent meditation retreat when a song popped, fully formed, into my head. I wrote, "We Rise", a song about people coming together and rising from tragedy because that's what I had witnessed in NYC. I envisioned people around the world singing it together from all over the planet, and the vision to build the Million Voice Choir was born.

PL: *To get a million voices together is quite an undertaking. How did that come about?*

GB: I recorded "We Rise" and made it available for free on-line, created a website, and then I sent an invitation to my small following in NYC and LA, telling them about my idea for a million voices all singing together, united in a cause and I asked them to forward the email to their friends if the idea was something that spoke to their hearts. The first week, we got 14,000 hits on the website - and this was before Facebook and Twitter. As people started to make contact, I discovered that they all seemed to want to be part of something bigger than just themselves. So I left my life, quit my job, and my career as a jazz singer, released my rent controlled apartment, gave away all my stuff, and took my guitar and backpack and started to travel around the world, inviting people to be part of this global movement with the single mission of bringing people together. Before I ventured out to build the Million Voice Choir, I had always been a worldwide wanderer and would work to make enough to travel, happy to get myself to my next destination. I'd buy open ended "around the world" tickets so if I ran out of money and didn't want to go home I'd work wherever I was and earn enough money to keep traveling.

Here I was with this song and this mission, traveling with practically no money, making simple decisions and totally trusting in the grace of the universe to get me to my next destination. I did this for four years building the choir and then another four years when we started to do water projects in the Philippines and Africa. Naturally, with such a big mission, I had many plans and fixed ideas of how things should happen. Many came to fruition, but most did not – and there was a point where I was overwhelmed with exhaustion and doubt. My expectations were not being met, and I could hear my mom's voice in my head, saying, 'For God sakes go home and get a job." That's when I kind of gave up and decided to pack it in.

PL: *Wow, hit by the universal "mom" voice. What changed your mind that you decided to stay?*

GB: A few days later, a friend called to tell me my song was playing at the U.N. and that they were calling it "the new human world anthem." I realized then that this song had a life of its own with its own agenda and I was just the keeper who needed to protect it as it went on it'sjourney. I fancied myself Frodo and the song was the ring!

PL: *You went back on the road with no agenda and no idea about what to do next, just following your intuition? Wasn't it difficult, living like that?*

GB: This was the point where I transitioned from hope to faith. The difference between hope and faith is that hope has an element of doubt, but faith in its purest sense, is unwavering. I trusted that everywhere I went was exactly where I was supposed to be. Living in the state of pure faith opens up so many possibilities. I'd been traveling for two years when I got invited to sing at the Water for Life Conference hosted by Satish Kumar, a Jain monk in the 60s. When Satish heard about my mission to build the Million Voice Choir, he sat me down and told me about how he had walked around the world in silent non-violent protest for two and a half years to all the cities with nuclear arms. He gave me the same message his guru gave him when he took the first steps on his journey. He told me I would be looked after. That's when the magic really started to happen. There's metaphor that I use in "We Rise": "it takes a single drop of water to start a wave." That was my invitation to people – to see themselves as powerful drops of water, that when you unite with others, you can create big waves of change. Because of this notion, I became known as the water lady and I was invited to sing the song at the UN Water For Life Conference just a month later. It was there that I learned about the water crisis and that 1.2 billion people in the world had no access to fresh water and between three to five million die each year of water related diseases. Learning these astounding statistics, my mission evolved again. Water went from being my inspirational metaphor to my cause. It was an intriguing concept, water as a source of peace, unity and equality. I learned everything I could about the water crisis, researching the specific issues people were suffering from and the different solutions people were integrating to resolve it.

I opened A Single Drop (ASD) in the United States with the mission to build the Million Voice Choir as a vehicle to raise awareness of the global water crisis and bring people together through song. The magic continued. People started handing me plane tickets, bus fares, driving me places, giving me money to make sure I got where I needed to be. Random strangers in foreign countries would recognize me as the woman singing for water and would take care of me. "We Rise" had its own life and it was spreading. I met so many amazing people. My journey started out as a mission to get a global choir singing the same song around the world in support of peace and shifted into something completely different. I realized that "We Rise" was the catalyst or the 'single drop' that rippled into what eventually became my actual purpose: water projects.

PL: *How many years did it take to complete the mission of the Million Voice Choir?*

GB: After nearly three years of non-stop moneyless traveling, the Million Voice Choir culminated on September 21, 2004 with people from all over the globe — over 100 cities in 60 countries — singing, "We Rise," while I was singing in New York City. Here we were - seven minutes of united song - and you'd think I would be ecstatic. Instead, I was incredibly inspired, but it was bittersweet. Rather than experience that moment of euphoria, I mean, this was the culmination of years of work for me, instead of basking in that moment, I was thinking, what next? What does peace look like on the ground?

PL: *Is this when you started A Single Drop for Safe Water?*

GB: Yes, but yet again, another step in my accidental journey. In 2005, I won the CG Vibes award from Queen Latifah and Cover Girl for Women Changing the World Through Music. I took the $10,000 award money, learned how to build some really simple water filters that could be built out of local materials and went to the Philippines to share the technology. While I had been born in the States, my parents were Filipino, and one of the benefits of being a Filipina American was that I had relatively easy access to various government and NGO officials in the Philippines. I literally could cold call UNICEF or the Department of Health so I did. I didn't know any better. I had only planned on being there for three to six months to teach humanitarian organizations to build the filters. Somehow I got introduced to the Canadian Ambassador who loved our project, teaching local Muslim women-led organizations to build the filters and make money. The Canadian Ambassador offered us $50,000 from their discretionary fund to launch our project, but we had to be a Filipino registered organization in order to receive the grant. So we opened A Single Drop for Safe Water (ASDSW) in September 2006 just to receive the grant and implement the project and next thing you know, we had an organization.

A Single Drop for Safe Water started out as a non-profit charitable organization and since has evolved into a full-service water service consulting firm. My partner and I didn't like the current charity model of "give a person a fish." We believed not only in teaching them how to fish, but also how to turn their fishing activities into a business. Eventually, our program expanded from creating women-led water projects to community-led water service organizations to forming emergency first response teams for disasters. The Philippines is one of the most disaster-prone regions in the world. In less than a year, we received our first of many awards for innovation – the Echoing Green Fellowship as one of the Best Emerging Social Entrepreneurs in the world.

As ASDSW started to grow and become self-reliant, I was able to divert some of my energy to building a women's water training program in Africa through a program called the Global Women's Water Initiative (GWWI). By 2010 ASDSW was up and running. We had a stellar staff who basically worked me out of a job. ASD in the USA closed down and I was able to put all my energy into spearheading GWWI full time, which was being financially supported by our founding partners Crabgrass [a human rights organization with strong ties to women and water issues], and Women's Earth Alliance (WEA) [supporting women's rights through and for the environment].

To date, the work I've done with both ASDSW and GWWI has provided over 210,000 people with clean water and sanitation in Asia and Africa. And it all started with one song.

PL: *You should be proud of the work you did with ASDSW as a concept and a testament to social change through entrepreneurship.*

GB: ASDSW challenged the charity model by encouraging donors, corporations and humanitarian aid agencies to pay us for our professional services as trainers and consultants. We felt fully confident charging professional fees for our services because ASDSW got a reputation for being professional and sustainable so by year 4 we were no longer dependent on charity to sustain ourselves. We became a hybrid by accident. Some NGOs are just gap fillers. We didn't want to be dependent and we didn't want to just be a gap filler, but a force. If we wanted to charge for the services, we knew we had to be worth it. So we went from receiving charity to receiving professional services fees. I didn't even know what social entrepreneurship was until I started ASDSW and started getting awards.

With all the recognition we got for our work, it's hard to believe I didn't have any background in water. Year after year we were getting incredible accolades and meanwhile I was wondering when

Toto was going to pull the curtain open and reveal the Wizard [of Oz] behind it. That was probably why I devoured information, learning everything I could from the people most affected. They were not only our clients, but our teachers. Even with all the recognition, it took a while for me to acknowledge that I had any expertise in water or doing anything innovative in social entrepreneurship. To this day, being selected as a Social Entrepreneur Fellow at Stanford, yet never having graduated from college, I sometimes still feel a tinge of being a fraud!

PL: *A feeling that passes when you reflect on your accomplishments, I would guess. Was it hard, leaving ASDSW, like you were leaving your family, or was there a sense of "mission accomplished; what's next"?*

GB: By the time I left ASDSW in the Philippines in 2010, we had two offices and 29 staff. Our professional fees from our training programs were covering all our operating costs and we were free from financial dependence on charitable donations to run our offices. That same year, we had a snag in our ASD USA office and had to shut down. Because ASDSW was pretty much running on its own and I had already been putting more energy into our GWWI partnership, I resigned from ASDSW to focus on women's issues and work with GWWI in Africa. The timing was actually perfect. When I left, ASDSW had three main programs running, including designing disaster response programs, creating community driven water cooperatives, and mobilizing municipal-wide government WASH[1] task forces.

Both the disaster response and government task forces were programs that ASDSW was hired to develop based on our community mobilization model. The Philippines could get one typhoon on one side of the country and then another a few weeks later in another part of the country -- upwards of 20 typhoons a year -- so it was difficult to do a coordinated disaster response because you'd be in one place and then as you were starting to move into disaster relief mode, you'd have to go to another part of the country with a new disaster, having to split your energies and your manpower. Add to that all the aid agencies having different agendas and response priorities, it made the response efforts even more chaotic. ASDSW spearheaded the training and mobilization of a dedicated and trained team of local organizations that could coordinate the relief efforts making the response flexible and quick.

PL: *What do you think about climate change. Is the weather getting worse?*

GB: Typhoons are definitely getting worse. There may not be significantly more happening per year but they are causing much more damage. Recently, the Philippines had a big earthquake on one side of the country followed shortly thereafter by Typhoon Haiyan which was one of the the worst in recorded history. Climate change is resulting in huge consequences for the island nations and the Philippines will likely have some of the first climate change refugees.

One of our challenges as a culture is recognizing that we are incredibly powerful – like a drop of water. Whatever we do will ripple out and have consequences, whether good or bad. We don't see ourselves connected to the bigger whole. The water we use upstream will affect everything downstream. It's amazing to work with people in developing countries who know what climate change is because the first place they see it is in their access to water. Seasons are changing. It's getting harder to predict when the rains will come and how much it will rain, affecting food, security, water access and health. Meanwhile, here in the US, there are still those denying that climate change actually exists.

PL: *I believe it's our propensity to label things. Speaking of which, would you call yourself a feminist?*

[1] WASH stands for water, sanitation and hygiene

GB: Another misconception people have is that because I'm running a woman's water program, I have to be a feminist. I am, but that's not my main motivation nor does it inform why our program is designed this way. The main goal is to make sure everyone has access to clean water and an education. The people who are disproportionately affected by lack of water and sanitation and do nearly all the water-related chores are women and girls. It just makes sense to train those who are deeply affected by the crisis because they will likely be the most invested in the solutions. Our strategy is to train women to build simple technologies and to become local water experts, and to support them in monetizing their services and generating income. Ultimately, as they build their reputation, bringing something that is in great demand into their communities, we witness them stepping into leadership positions, and being invited onto local water boards that influence local policy, for example.

In the Philippines, we developed our program around women, but found that there wasn't a huge gender gap in the country (we had two women presidents within the last two decades). We didn't have to put much effort into getting women involved because the Philippines was a matriarchal society even before they were colonized by the Spanish. We found as we were establishing these community-based water programs from scratch, that women were being elected as their officers with no influence or encouragement from our end.

PL: *How is GWWI different from your experience in the Philippines?*

GB: Our strategy in the Philippines could not be cookie-cut into an African water program. Their challenges were so different – climate, culture, tradition, education, etc. Ultimately, we needed to find the best way to institutionalize knowledge about WASH so that good hygiene practices, sanitation, water protection and treatment could be transferred from generation to generation. As women are the caretakers of their families and do all the water chores, they would most likely be the ones to share this information with their families. So we took some of the sustainable strategies we learned in the Philippines, modified them to fit grassroots women, and the training morphed into a program that fit their level of knowledge, experience, and specific needs. This meant we had to find technologies and products that could be produced without an engineering, construction or manufacturing background, and made with local materials to keep the costs down and infuse the local economy. So we train women to be WASH technicians, trainers and social entrepreneurs.

After graduating from our program, grassrootswomen can construct multiple technologies (tanks, filters, toilets), make water related products, and make money doing it. Women get hired to construct, offer WASH workshops, train others, and make and sell products like soap, shampoo, and reusable menstrual pads. We also ensure that the organizations they work for can diversify their income and not be dependent solely on charitable donations. We help them strengthen their proposal writing skills and connect them to international funders to access water grants; qualify for government contracts; professionalize their construction services; start a micro-business making and selling WASH products; and with a few of our teams in partnership with Kiva[2], establish them as a micro-financing institution to self-finance their own micro-loans to community members.

Our selection process is very rigorous. We select women-led or women-focused organizations that have a proven track record implementing social programs in their communities. They have little or no background in WASH or construction but have recognized the importance of WASH in the success of their overall programs. So we help them create an income-generating WASH program to supplement their existing programs. Some focus on maternal health, sustainable farming, or vocational training for

2 Kiva is a 501(c) corporation that provides micro-loans to underserved entrepreneurs in 70 countries.

vulnerable women, but all of them know that in order to reach their organizational goals their communities need clean water and sanitation.

This is an intensive three-year training program working with ten different women's groups in Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania. We have a staff of three African women who are supporting all ten of the women's teams. It's a three-phase program, basically three years of knowledge transfer sessions, dealing first with water access [Phase 1], then sanitation [Phase 2], and finally, water quality [Phase 3]. These women have been meeting and learning from each other over the past three years, they have built an incredible trust and have shared many successes and failures that have helped the other teams

PL: *According to an article you wrote for the WH2O journal [Vol. 2, No. 2, March 2013], worldwide women spend 200 million collective hours fetching water; one in ten girls drops out of school when they start menstruating because of a lack of toilets; and two western toilet flushes, which equals about 8 gallons, may be as much water as an entire family has for use in a day. Given those statistics, do you think it's more important to build WASH systems or to work with women, and can the two issues even be separated?*

GB: There is a great deal of evidence demonstrating how women are disproportionately affected by WASH issues. The focus at GWWI is to train women to create local WASH solutions while generating income, and get them into leadership positions where they are influencing policy. With this intensive training, we've witnessed women evolve from serving lunch or stumbling around a construction site to building a toilet in two days, a roof water catchment and 15,000 liter water tank in four days, and who then train other women to do the same.

One woman, Grace, has helped her organization raise enough money to build 12 tanks and she says her husband brags about her to other masons. We were a bit worried about her when she first came. We conducted the training in English because of the many local languages spoken, and she only spoke Swahili with a minimal understanding of English. When we went back to conduct interviews and check in on their projects, we found that Grace had become the local water hero! Everywhere we went, people had learned about good hygiene practices, how to treat their water, the importance of toilets, etc., and nearly all of them said they had learned it from Grace. Even when she was building tanks, husbands were coming up to her asking her to teach their wives to do what she does. Since going through the training and earning more money, she signed herself up for English classes so she can have an impact on a greater scale.

PL: *Is that an isolated incident or do you see all the women you're training rising to the challenge?*

GB: Definitely not an isolated incident! I'll refer you to our website for more stories of some really awesome women[3]. We treat the program like a scholarship. When the women are selected they are expected to attend our three-phase training over three years and implement deliverables. Failure to accomplish the deliverables at each phase will jeopardize their participation in the program. In short, they come and attend a training in one location, learning side by side, then they go home and write a funding proposal to us. We offer recommendations and advice to help them strengthen their grant writing skills and then we provide them with a seed grant. In addition to financial support through the seed grant, we also provide onsite technical and organizational support by sending our GWWI staff to their respective villages to offer a training for the trainees who will also share their knowledge with other colleagues and villagers. After they have built their first technology with our financial and technical support, but before they can come to the next training, the trainees have to replicate what they learned without our help. Which means that they have to raise their own money and build the technology on their own.

3 http://womenwater.strikingly.com

For example, one of the technologies they learn to build is a water storage tank and rainwater harvesting system. In order to replicate it they have to raise upwards of $1,200 and build another one. The women have become very resourceful because many of the technologies we teach require local materials like sand, gravel, and earthen clay which are things the community can donate with a minimal outlay of cash. Some community members donate supplies, others lunch for the laborers, whatever they have. These women are really demonstrating how water unites people to work together towards a common and achievable goal.

PL: *The $1,200 in that example is for a water storage tank. What does a $1,200 water tank look like?*

GB: These technologies are not the big community water facilities you see in the States. We focus on household level technologies.The largest storage tanks that the women build hold about 15,000 liters. It's basically an above ground giant rain barrel. This particular tank is made out of interlocking stabilized soil bricks or blocks that the women make out of African clay, sand, cement and water. Because the bricks are interlocking and fit like puzzle pieces, the structure is durable, more stable and uses less mortar. And because you use local materials it's less expensive and you can replace broken parts very easily.

PL: *Tell me about your teaching gig at Stanford.*

GB: In 2013, I was selected as one of three social entrepreneur Fellows for Stanford's Center for Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law. Of all the awards and recognition I was getting, this was the most shocking. Getting accepted by academia was a HUGE thing for me. My Fellowship required that I co-teach a Social Entrepreneurship class called "Challenging the Status Quo: Social Entrepreneurship and the Advancement of Democracy, Development and Justice." As a practitioner, I respond to the lecturer and their theories of social entrepreneurship, demystifying and providing experiential insights about applied social entrepreneurship which translates to: "On paper, this sounds great, but here's what it actually looks like on the ground." Before that happened, in my mind, I was still the Wizard of Oz. Then I was put in a position to contextualize our work, and I finally began to realize that what we were doing was worthy of sharing and had teachable elements. Some of my students claimed they changed their course of study because this class changed how they viewed the world. When the class was offered again the next quarter, it doubled in size.

PL: *I have a friend who says your name is your destiny. Your name, Gemma, means precious stone. What does your name say about you as it relates to your work?*

GB: In Arabic, Gemma means "come together"! In one of the Philippines dialects, Bulos means "flow" or "pour water". It's no surprise that I would end up uniting people through song and be working on water and sanitation!

PL: *So you leave me to draw my own conclusions. To go back to your original point about water having plans for you, there is a man by the name of Dr. Masaru Emoto who developed a way to take pictures of frozen water crystals. He's taken photos of water from the most holy rivers and from the most polluted ones. He's photographed water that has been subject to love and hate and everything in between and he found that the most beautiful water crystals are those that are exposed to positive thoughts and vibrations, especially those of love and gratitude. Each of those 200,000 water systems that you've helped install in villages throughout Asia and Africa was an incredible gift to those residents. Gifts they themselves worked for, but still gifts. I think how I would feel if I lived there, no longer having to walk five miles a day with a jerrycan on my head, maybe getting a chance to stay in school because of it. I think a sense of love and gratitude would completely overwhelm me, and I'm just an outside observer,*

so imagine what the recipients are feeling. If Dr. Emoto were around to take pictures of your water crystals, I'm sure even he would be amazed by their beauty. So thank you for all you do.

GB: It's the end of the world as we know it, and the beginning of the era of nature and connectedness of everything. As Arundhati Roy says: "Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing."

Pam Lazos' passions run deep and wide, however for brevity's sake, let's just say her family, writing, and the environment. She is the author of "Six Sisters", a collection of novellas (released January 9, 2015); a blogger (www.greenlifebluewater.wordpress.com); on the Board of Advisors for the wH2O Journal, the Journal of Gender and Water (U of Penn); an active and enthusiastic member of the Jr. League of Lancaster; a former correspondent for her local newspaper (Lancaster Intelligencer Journal); a literary magazine contributor (Rapportage); a former Editor-in-Chief for the Environmental Law and Technology Journal (Temple Law School); a ghostwriter (Abracadabra); the author of a children's book (Into the Land of the Loud); and of the novel "Oil and Water", an environmental murder mystery about oil spills and green technology (due December of 2015); an environmental lawyer for the U.S. EPA in Philadelphia (the opinions of which she does not represent here); and, because it's cool, a beekeeper's apprentice. She practices laughter daily.

Source: World Bank, 2015