She wears a niqab—a full veil—which, for the uninitiated, seems to say, “Keep your distance.”

But her eyes reach out from the space between her veil and head covering and say, “Bring me the world.”

She often covers her hands with gloves, an odd, almost old-fashioned touch for Western eyes.

Yet, she proudly displays her new Reeboks, gleaming white under her gown.

Her father named her April, but her sisters in Islam call her Hafeesah.

She rises in mid-afternoon to go to the old storage room we have set aside for her prayers.

If I chance upon her in the hall after prayer, she often takes these moments to kid my solemnity or single-mindedness.

As a teacher I have always been committed to preserving my students with the full spectrum of options before them, urging them to seek the most from the world, to see education as a means for pursuing their individual rainbows and challenging the status quo. But equally, I have also always been committed to respecting the beliefs of my students, to allowing them to understand their own needs, to giving them the room to bring who they are into the classroom.

April, my veiled student, is torn between her faith and her curiosity. She thrives on learning like few I have taught, yet that very learning is a threat to the orthodoxy she wishes to maintain. As her teacher, I am torn between my wanting her to consume the banquet of literature before her in great gulps of enthusiasm and my deep-seated belief that her faith is an integral key to her identity.

She is an African American adolescent woman robed in the Islamic religion. I am an Eastern European middle-aged male loosely sweated in a belief that humans could survive without God if that were to be our fate. She reaches out for her education with her eyes and her voice, both clear despite the veil. I can only reach back with the same.

I thought I knew all the rules, all the moves, all the approaches for reaching students. She has changed the rules.

She wants her education as much as she wants to observe her faith which frowns on too much secular interaction for women.
I want her to experience the world as much as I want her to find a niche in that world which allows her to keep the essence of who she is. So we talk. When we can, we talk. Sometimes we write. But it's always conversation in whatever form. Sometimes in my room. Sometimes in long strides down the hall. We talk. We listen to each other. We know that the answers are in the engagement. We know that the engagement is the answer. We talk.

We have learned to accommodate each other. She lives by the letter of the Qur'an. She feels she cannot appear provocative before men. Presentations in front of the class would put her into a sticky situation. We talk. What does it mean to be provocative? In her eyes, seeking the center of attention would be unwise. Plus we cannot photograph her. Yet, I teach English, and learning to speak before groups is part of English.

So, we make room for difference and find ways for her to present so we both feel satisfied. Once I had her discuss her work during lunch to a female audience and a female colleague. Another time, I left all the women students in class with my student teacher and I escorted the young men to another room. No one squawked. Now, when April's turn to present comes round, the young men in class head for the door without my prompting.

When I asked April to take part in some professional development with the school district and student teachers, we developed discussion groups dependent on interaction of all group members. In this manner, she could contribute as she does in class discussion without feeling that all eyes were on her. She found ways to have her say without dominating.

She has never used her faith to avoid work.

She has only ever tried to find ways for her education and her religion to coexist.

And she accommodates me. In my zeal to expose her to the wonders of the world, I sometimes forget that I cannot—must not—expose her.

Plus, I cannot deny my Western ways. In a recent context vocabulary exercise, I equated polygamy to aberrant thought. She said, "Hmmmm." A "hmmm" loaded with portent. So later I pursued and later she revealed. "Do you really think that way?" she asked.

I admitted that monogamy seemed so ingrained in Western culture that I hadn't thought twice about the extreme negative connection I was making. Her eyes saddened and were downcast. My only barometer. She sighed. We went on.

April is class salutatorian, but she did not go to graduation. Her own choice. It would violate her principles. The ceremony is video taped. Sitting up front with the Honor Society would have put her in a provocative way before men. Delivering her salutatorian speech was out of the question.

I am divided about this decision. But so is she. Yet she remains resolute.

I told her that, either way, I would be sad. "If you miss graduation, I'll be upset that you denied yourself the celebration you deserve," I said. "But if you go to graduation, I'll be upset knowing you compromised your principles." She nodded, and her eyes listened behind the veil.

She made the choice she can live with. She did not attend.

She leaves soon for Bryn Mawr. She wishes to be a gynecologist. As usual, she opens herself to learning within the frame of her gender and her religion. Robert Frost would call it "running loose in harness." I call it learning with April.