

EMBRACING ISLAM
THE JOURNEY BEGINS

DR. WAQAS AHMED

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DEDICATION

Dedicated to my parents
Dr. and Mrs. Munawar Ahmed, my wife
Dr. Ayesha Abbasi and my sons Haris
and Adil for being an integral part
of this journey.

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FOREWORD

“It seems to me that, today, with the exception of simple peasants and the few Bedouins who still roam freely in the desert, all Muslims live ‘in the West’.” These words, spoken by Hasan Abd al-Hakim in Lahore some fifteen years before the publication of Waqas Ahmed’s *Embracing Islam: The Journey Begins*, articulate the subject matter of this book in a profound manner; the basic dilemma faced by Muslims today is none other than the reality that they have been uprooted from the spiritual and intellectual soil of Islam. This transformation, which began in the nineteenth century, is now taking place at such a rapid rate and in such a sweeping manner that even the remotest areas are no more protected sanctuaries: vast regions of the Persian Gulf desert are now dotted with villas, resort hotels, and luxury spas more presumptuous than those found in Arizona; dish antennas mark the skyline of the blessed city where the friend of Allah ﷺ and his son built the Sanctified House some four thousand years ago; Ramadan nights in Egypt are celebrated by all-night TV sitcoms, and the Western regions of the Muslim world, al-Maghrib, are rapidly turning into a caricature of French culture.

This spiritual dislocation has also produced a cultural schizophrenia which is now at a very advanced stage: not only have the clothing and other external expressions of various cultures of Islam been transmuted but even taste buds have been affected. One only has to look at the long queues in front of western fastfood outlets in Lahore or Makkah to realize the nature of the malaise that has gripped the Muslim mind.

What Hasan Abd al-Hakim meant by “living in the West” is the dual transformation of Islamic space: externally,

the traditional lands of Islam, and internally, the spiritual, intellectual, and emotional space wherein reside the deep reservoirs of human volition and desires, providing impetus to one's actions. This dual transformation has not only changed the political and economic structure of the Muslim lands but also the ways of living, the daily routines, the modes of production and consumption of consumable goods—indeed, the entire framework of social, political, and cultural life.

This change has been accompanied by the westernization of the Muslim mind. Most Muslims now think within a framework of thought that is shaped by philosophies which originated in the post-Renaissance West. These philosophies are the product of a worldview shaped by the Renaissance, nurtured by the Scientific Revolution and the age of Enlightenment, and made fully operative by the Industrial Revolution. What is so different about this worldview is a radical shift of focus from God to Man—a shift which removes all things related to the Divine from the center and placed, instead, Man in domains where Man had no right to be. The resultant shift in focus in an individual life—from the things of the other world to the things of this world—was but an inevitable consequence of the removal of God from the center of man's existence to the periphery of existence, giving liberty to any two-penny philosopher to pronounce Him dead with impunity.

This worldview, subtly refined over the last three centuries by a succession of Western thinkers, has been thoroughly absorbed by the Muslim world through a highly complex process in which education has played a vital role. In this realm it operates like violent wind, uprooting young learners from their rightful spiritual and intellectual world. It is like an iron mold which begins to shape the Muslim mind at that tender age and continues to affect its growth. Until his or her eventual departure from the academy, the student receives a daily dose of this worldview which undermines the very foundations of faith.

At a very practical level, “living in the West” means that

even those Muslims who practice their religion often do so without a real understanding of its inner dimensions. This lack of understanding of the true meaning of Islam manifests in many ways. For instance, when the inner meaning of establishing salah is lost, these transforming rites transmute into rituals without spirit—an exercise in futility that yields nothing but fatigue. “How many fast, but get nothing out of their fasts except hunger and thirst,” the Prophet of Islam ﷺ had once said with his characteristic eloquence.

This is the dilemma faced by all Muslims today, especially by the “educated”. This should not be surprising as the “education” Muslims receive today comes with minute and imperceptible doses of the poison which slowly but surely destroys those regions of one’s being where spirit flourishes in the sanctified realms. Those who receive professional education, as Waqas did, are more susceptible to these imperceptible influences which eventually destroy the profound aspects of Islam.

When this malady becomes severe, it erodes the entire foundation of faith and its practice, but even in its less intense manifestations it destroys the spiritual aspects of Iman, leaving the believer like a dried stalk instead of a green and fragrant plant. The irony of this situation is that most who suffer from this do not even recognize it; they keep living their lives as if all is well until one day the entire building of faith crumbles. Those who realize it often go through several stages before fully recognizing and facing the gnawing horror; such is the depth of this disease that has now spread to all corners of the world.

Embracing Islam: The Journey Begins is the story of one such believer who recognizes the depth of this erosion of the foundation of faith, attempts to re-orient himself, and comes to an understanding of Islam which is becoming increasingly rare in the contemporary world. It is not surprising that, for a man born into a Muslim family and raised in Pakistan, this journey toward a real understanding of Islam actually begins in America. Like certain physical diseases, which require the

antidote to be extracted from the germs of the same disease, one often recognizes one's spiritual dislocation when physically placed in the heart of the civilization that has produced this malady in the Muslim mind. This realization is akin to the recognition of Islam by people like Hasan Abd al-Hakim, who grow up in the West and at some stage in their life realize the spiritual vacuity of that civilization and embrace Islam.

Embracing Islam is not only the story of Waqas Ahmed's rediscovery of Islam but is an inside account of a deep malady of our times, and, as such, it is a mirror in which one can see the travail of countless Muslims. Bereft of real Islamic education and pulled into the rat-race of modern times through a professional training which renders them automatons, countless Muslims are now struggling to remain in the spiritual soil of Islam. Embracing Islam can provide insights into the nature of this struggle. It can lead many back to a process of discovery, for it boldly pierces through the glitter and the glitz to take the reader to the heart of the malady.

Embracing Islam is not a cold and professional diagnosis but an involved and heart-felt account of the process through which one who suffered from the dislocation discovers the disease, stares at it with courage, and recounts the steps which took him to a new understanding of Islam. As such, the book speaks a language which hearts yearning to rediscover the sanctity and tranquility of the Merciful will understand. At places it reads like a travel account, but within this outer journey of the body is an inner journey of faith. One thus travels to America and Arabia with the author, but the focus of the book remains on the inner journey.

The rediscovery of the beauty and meanings of Islam is, however, not a one-shot process; it is a life-long journey, and what Embracing Islam does for the reader is similar to opening a window from which fresh air enters a smoke-filled room. The occupant of the room suddenly realizes the suffocating nature of his existence. This whiff of fresh air produces the initial realization, but the true journey of faith requires deep

commitment and a total reorientation of one's life—from this world to the Lord of the Worlds Who in His Mercy has left for us two ever-lasting founts: His Noble Book and the example of His Messenger ﷺ.

It is the constant rediscovery of these two founts of faith that makes Embracing Islam a true quest and the real value of the book lies in the possibility that it will serve as a shocking wake-up call to those who may realize that they are not even prepared to approach these two founts. This lack of preparedness is a direct result of the “education” Muslims receive today. The remedy, as the book points out, is to learn to drink from these two ever-lasting springs in order to live a life leading to the greatest success—*al-fawz Al-kabir*.

Dr. Muzaffar Iqbal
Wuddistan
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Muharram 27, 1428/February 15, 2007

ABOUT THE BOOK

Those who have a capability to express themselves and a reflective mind write about their experiences in life. Autobiographies, travel-stories and strange encounters form a kind of literature, which is interesting to read. The writers always focus on the aspect that attracts the mind of the readers. Autobiography is a type of literature that encompasses many aspects of human experience, but there is always a basic theme which permeates through the whole story. This is essential because it not only creates an interest in the reader but also leads him to a particular goal.

The writers always focus on the aspect that attracts the mind of the readers. You might have read autobiographies or stories of the new Muslims who embraced Islam and found solace in the new faith. The experience of crossing the cultural and religious spheres and entering a new spiritual domain is surely a fascinating one, and one is always impressed by the positive reaction of a new Muslim. The courage, sincerity of purpose and commitment of the individual are often impressive and fascinating.

The book I am going to introduce is a compilation of all the types that I have mentioned above. It is the story of a young doctor who traveled to U.S.A. for higher education in medicine. He lived there for many years and made a remarkable achievement in the professional field. His stay in an un-Islamic society, with tolerance, strong spirit and keeping his faith intact is a wonderful achievement, but to develop God consciousness and zeal of a da'i is a miracle. A born Muslim has a baggage which usually becomes a hindrance to him in the understanding of the reality of faith. Dr. Waqas Ahmed

transformed his Madhhab to Din and tried to live according to its requirements. It is a biographical narration, a travelers' story that reflects the experience of a convert from Madhhab to Din.

Written in a simple and lucid style, it is an interpretative autobiography of a professional par excellence. Each and every event is compared to Islamic value based on the holy Qur'an and Sunnah and interpreted in the light of divine guidance. Before embarking on the journey to America, whatever knowledge of the holy Qur'an, the Sunnah of the Prophet ﷺ and tarbiya he attained at his Muslim family environment provided him the basis on which he could face the challenge, but it was Allah's ﷻ "Tawfiq" that bestowed upon him a strength and wisdom to stand firm in faith and compare Islamic and un-Islamic way of thinking and behavior. There is not even a single event, experience or observation without reference to either the holy Qur'an or the Sunnah of the Prophet ﷺ. In fact it is a manual of Da'wah, a guide book to the young Muslim living in and facing the dominant non Islamic Western culture in the West or in their own so called Islamic societies.

The book throws light on the author's experience, in U.S.A., Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. It contains answers to multifarious relevant questions that occur to the minds of the younger generation of the Muslims studying in the educational institutions, organized on the Western model and secular system. Those who study in the West, after initial shock, look back to their tradition and faith-based value system and find the right path; the problem is with the Muslim societies where secular ruling elite is misguiding the youth and depriving them of the Islamic values. It is my conviction that the book will be instrumental in creating God consciousness among the Western educated class of our society. Story telling is an art which is reflected here and there in the natural style of Dr. Waqas. The relevance of Din to our individual and collective thinking and behaviors is the message of the book. The author has succeeded in conveying this message. The various aspects

of Din are interwoven in such a way that every thing becomes crystal clear.

Dr. Waqas looks at Islam as a complete way of life. Thus, according to him, inner and apparent life should reflect the same. This holistic view of Din is explicitly clear in every line of his writing. May Allah bless him with the highest degree of Iman and Taqwa (Ameen)

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February 10, 2006

INTRODUCTION

What follows, is in no way a novel interpretation of Islam. A great number of far better men have fulfilled this sacred duty with perfection. Mine is, but a simple story of a simple man, who was fortunate to recognize his faith and his *Rabb*, the Creator of Heavens and Earth,

I was born in a Muslim family in Pakistan where everything about faith was taken for granted, as is the case with most “*Muslim families*”. Far too many years later, I was to realize that I was a Muslim only by birth and not by choice, as choice comes with understanding and conviction.

The fact that I was born in a Muslim family created the biggest misconception afflicting thousands like me; that whatever existing Islam was around me was all there was to it. The Islamic rituals like prayer, fasting, reciting (without understanding) the *Qur’an* etc. were taught well but the spirit of these eluded me. All energies and resources were focused on achieving the best academic and financial status in this world. Faith was replaced by religion and even that took a back stage - something to indulge-in, during spare time, if there was any at all.

This distinction between “*faith*” and “*religion*” is a critical one and a frequent source of misunderstanding for many people. “Religion” might be considered synonymous with the Arabic term of “*madhhab*,” which primarily relates to acts of worship and “*faith*” is an all-encompassing philosophy of life, not limited to just acts of worship.

After the advent of Islam, this unequivocal embodiment

of Islamic Faith in the lives of the companions of the Prophet ﷺ was what uplifted Islam as a complete code of life. And unfortunately, turning away from that same element has now become the sole reason for our downfall, both as individuals and collectively as an *Ummah* because we have forgotten the Divine Ordainment,

O Believers! Enter into Islam completely and do not follow the foot steps of shaitan.

Al-Baqarah, 208

Forsaking and or using the *Deen* of Allah ﷻ according to our convenience and not as an undivided obligation to Allah ﷻ, has pushed us into abysmal depths of failure, despair and sorrow from which we find no way out.

In 1994 I moved to the United States to pursue higher medical education. In the preceding two years, I had begun an in-depth study of the *Qur'an* and the life of the noble Prophet ﷺ. I felt I was ready to face one of the biggest challenges that anyone ever faced: the impact of a radically different and dominant culture, but nothing could have prepared me for what was to come in the months and years ahead.

Within months, I was overtaken by this explosive culture just like a tidal wave overruns a coastal town. And when I had hit rock bottom, Allah ﷻ Mercy embraced me - the same society that had scarred my character as a *momin*, now provided the solid foundation on which the indestructible building of true Islamic faith rests. Ironic as it may sound - I found my faith in the land of the “*non-believers*.”

I remember once asking myself whether I would have left my family, friends and country; as I did to pursue higher medical education, to learn and understand my faith (Islam). And the answer to my dismay was: no. For that was how my life had been shaped as a result of years of practicing only religion.

The tragedy that afflicts thousands like me is that centuries of colonial influences and spiritual self-neglect have completely eroded the magnificent structure of an Islamic society. With

no visible living role model of the true Islamic character, a catastrophic mono-vision philosophy of life in this world has become the order of the day.

There is a saying in medicine: Eyes cannot see what the mind doesn't know. Perceptions of an event can vary dramatically based on the difference in understanding of the wisdom behind that event. Same event, perceived by one person as a simple coincidence, not worthy of attention, may become the turning point in the life of the other. This is a narration of such events, which served both as enlightenment as well as a warning and over the course of years, steadily strengthening my faith to the degree where it has now become the focal point of my life.

It is a journey through which only those fortunate ones, who have the Mercy of Allah ﷻ, come out successful. What follows, is an ongoing quest, by choice, for this Divine Ordainment. A quest: for the *ma'rifah* of Islam and Allah ﷻ, spanning over the last 12 years. From what I consider to be the period of *jahiliya* (ignorance) to the period of enlightenment, where every single breath reminds one of the Supreme Creator ﷻ.

Why would you want to read it? Perhaps you are like me, waiting, to take that first step in the right direction, one that will ensure success in this world and in the Hereafter, before it's too late to make amends,

Surely the only Deen (true religion and the right
way of life) in the sight of Allah is Al-Islam.

Al-i'Imran, 19

I hope and pray that these pages will provide that impetus (Ameen).

Waqas Ahmed, MBBS, MD, FACC
Islamabad.

Muharram 1, 1428/January 21, 2007

THE ANGEL

*M*y departure time was 4 pm. It was going to be a long journey from Islamabad to Karachi and onwards to Amsterdam and finally to New York City. I had this empty feeling in my stomach since the previous night. It's a strange feeling, a weird mixture of excitement, uncertainty and anxiety. It had put me in a strange disconnect from everything around me.

Since I was five years old, we had traveled to different countries as a family, but this was the first time I was on my own, heading to a country, which seemed to be on another planet. The anxious look on my mother's face was growing by the hour. All morning, subconsciously, I had tried to keep myself isolated from the emotional surroundings. Somehow, tears just didn't seem like the right thing.

Despite my desire to leave alone from my home, the entire family insisted on accompanying me to the airport. I abhor good byes. It was as if all eyes were on me at the airport and my cover had been blown off. My innermost feelings were there for all to see. It was the vulnerability that bothered me.

We finally got over the good byes and I walked into the departures lounge. The customs officer looked at me,

'Where are you going sir?'

'To America,' I replied. He looked at my passport,

'You are a doctor?' 'Yes, I am going for specialization' I said. I didn't know if it was that or something else, he decided against searching my luggage.

'Do you have any fruits or perishables in your bags?' 'The Americans don't allow that,' he said.

I suddenly remembered the two tin boxes of "multani

sohn halwa” my mother had put in my bag.

‘Your friends in America would like it,’ she had said. I wasn’t too sure of that.

I opened my bag and pulled out the two boxes and showed them to him. He seemed unsure.

‘Probably best if you don’t take them with you,’ he said.

‘Well, then take them as a gift from me,’ I replied.

‘Thank you and have a safe trip,’ he shook my hand and I walked ahead.

Well that turned out ok.

The PA system announced the boarding of our flight. That empty feeling had started rising up again. One last-check, pat the pockets, passport, ticket, boarding card, all there. After a few hours layover in Karachi, the KLM flight to Amsterdam took off at 10 pm. It was almost 6 am when we arrived at Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam. The next flight to New York would leave after 10 hrs. It was going to be a long wait. I walked around the airport, browsing the numerous shops till hunger caught up with me.

And then it hit me. What do I eat? I was out of my element there. All I knew and had heard was that pork meat and pork fat was included in most food items in Europe and the United States.

Few things are as clear in Islam as the prohibition of pork and alcohol,

O Believers! Intoxicants and gambling, dedication to stones and division by arrows (lottery) are the filthy works of shaitan. Get away from them so that you may prosper.

Al-Maidah, 90

Forbidden to you is carrion and blood and the flesh of swine (pork).

Al-Maidah, 3

Even to those who barely know Islam, this prohibition has traditionally been paramount. Although, there is obvious logic

to all the Commandments of Allah ﷻ and His Messenger ﷺ but sometimes we are unable to comprehend these because of the inherent limitations of our knowledge,

O men, since you have been granted very little of
real knowledge.

Al-Israa, 85

and it is here that the concept of surrender of will (precisely what the word Islam means) comes into play:

Understand the logic, well enough - don't understand it - absolute obedience takes precedence over logic.

I walked over to a food and drink stand. A middle-aged woman was standing at the counter. Behind her, the wall flaunted colorful pictures of combinations of eatables with informative text right next to each item. But it was impossible for me to decide what I could and couldn't eat. There were unheard terminologies and unfamiliar images. She had probably seen this confused look in plenty before, as she approached me with a funny smile.

'What can I get you?' 'Aa,' was all I could say as I struggled through the maze of colorful information on the food chart on the wall.

'I think you'll like the fish sandwich,' she said.

My problem was solved, 'Yeah, that sounds good.'

I walked around one more time, hoping that time would pass by sooner this way. As I passed by the immigration counter, I heard someone asking in English,

'Is there anyone here from Pakistan?'

I paused for a second and then walked over to the immigration counter.

'I am from Pakistan,' I said to the female Dutch officer.

'O great! May be you can help us.'

Sitting on a chair next to her was a young man, a Pakistani. You can tell your own people regardless of what they wear or look like. The officer told me that the man has a valid visa

to enter Holland but speaks poor English and cannot answer any of our questions. She asked me to help him with the negotiations.

I turned to him and asked him why he wanted to enter Holland.

‘Sight seeing and visiting a friend,’ he told me and I passed it along to the officer. Several more routine questions went along and I kept on translating both ways. He told me that he was a sports businessman from Sialkot.

The Dutch officer wanted to know more about his financial background.

‘You know, the footballs used in this year’s world cup were made in his city, may be even from his factory,’ I said to her.

Perhaps those were the magic words she wanted to hear. The interview ended and she thanked me. As I walked away, I turned around to see my compatriot passing through the exit gate and into the city of Amsterdam.

No big deal, but it is in such simple events that the true color of Islamic character shines through - help others, particularly your Muslim brethren,

Cooperate with one another on righteousness
and piety and do not cooperate in sin and
transgression.

Al-Maidah, 2

As trivial as your act may appear, Allah ﷻ will come to your help when you need it the most. The Prophet ﷺ has been reported to have said in a sound hadith that:

Any one who fulfils the need of a Muslim will have
his need fulfilled by Allah ﷻ .

(Bukhari and Muslim)

The flight to New York City had started boarding. I walked towards the jet way, wondering whom I would be sitting next to. The scenario had changed dramatically. The flight from Karachi had plenty of Pakistani’s but now I was one of the only few non-Caucasians. I walked down to my seat by the aisle. A

young man was sitting in the middle seat and a young woman right next to him. What a relief! We exchanged gentle nods and settled in. They both seemed to have more in common between them than me and started talking to each other. I closed my eyes and the mere fatigue put me to sleep.

I was awakened by the stewardess.

‘We are serving dinner sir,’ she said. Here we go again.

‘Do you have any seafood item?’ I asked her and she nodded in positive. The girl in the window seat was also still asleep. The young man next to me turned to me and asked me where I was from. We started talking. His name was Sasha and he was from Berlin, Germany. He told me he was going to Las Vegas to study hotel management.

‘Where are you headed?’ He asked me.

I didn’t want to bore him and summarized my story; that I was a medical school graduate and was heading to the United States to start an internal medicine residency.

‘You know where you will be in the States?’ he asked me.

‘No, not yet, I have to fly to Alabama tomorrow and will stay with an old friend till I pass my USMLE (medical licensing examination) and then apply to different programs for a position.’

‘Where will you stay in New York tonight?’ he asked.

‘An acquaintance will pick me up and I’ll stay with him at his place,’ I said.

‘Ok,’ he said and turned- the girl had woken up.

It was almost midnight when I got through immigration and customs at JFK international airport. I walked to a public phone and pulled out the phone number I was supposed to call and realized the challenge ahead. The phone was like none I had ever seen. Countless lines of tiny print all around it: the user manual. I was used to just walking into a public call office back home and give the salesman the number to dial.

This was going to be tougher than ordering food. My wit at its end, I just stood there and in the corner of my sight, I spotted a young woman who was observing me with some

interest. She stood up and walked over to me.

‘Do you need any help?’ she asked politely.

‘Yes, I need to make a phone call but I don’t know how to use this phone.’

‘Well do you have any change?’ she asked.

‘No, I just have paper bills.’

‘Well, you can call collect,’ she suggested.

What ever that meant, if it was going to get me in touch with the intended person, I was all for it. She explained to me how to make a collect call and once I heard the voice on the other side, she stepped back. I hope she heard my thank you as she walked back to her seat.

The call made the matters more complicated, as it wasn’t the person I was looking for, but his roommate. He told me that his friend had to go out of State due to an emergency and that he had no car and that I was welcome to spend the night with him but that I would have to come to his apartment. As he started to give me the detailed directions, I knew this wasn’t going to work,

‘take the shuttle to grand central station and then take the number 6 train to so and so place and then you’ll have to take number 22 bus to so and so street and then it’s a five minute walk from there’, all this, at midnight, in New York city, and me, hauling three bags. No way.

I stood at the curbside just outside the arrivals terminal. One by one passenger kept coming out and then onwards, picked up by friends, family or waiting taxis and shuttles.

Stranded there I suddenly realized why travelers are granted a certain unique status in Islam. It’s the uncertainty in a foreign land, even with technology and money at ones disposal. And so the wayfarer is frequently mentioned in the Qur’an,

You shall give to your relatives their due and to the
needy and to the wayfarer.

And in a sound hadith, the Prophet ﷺ has been reported to mention the traveler as one whose invocation is answered by Allah ﷻ (Tirmidhi). No surprise that in most Muslim societies it is a common request to travelers to make du'a for others.

It was more at a subconscious level as I called upon Allah ﷻ - the only deity to all Muslims, no matter how different and strange the surroundings get. The du'a must have come from the bottom of my heart for it was answered instantly. A pat on my back and the voice, 'what are you still doing here?' it was Sasha.

'Well, my pick up didn't work out,' I said.

'What are you going to do?' He asked.

'I am not sure,' I replied.

The pause was imperceptible, and then he said,

'well, you are welcome to stay with me for tonight.'

In that split second, a dozen thoughts, some ridiculous, crossed my mind. May be I should just say no. I don't know how obvious these thoughts were, but he immediately said, 'my father's girlfriend lives in Manhattan and she is out of town, so we can stay in her apartment.'

But what's in it for him? What possible interest would someone have in helping a citizen of the "third world" and that too a Muslim?

I was running out of time and had no choice but to say

'Yes, that sounds good.'

Sasha had been to the US before and so he briskly walked to one of the shuttle stops. 'We will take the shuttle to Manhattan and then it's a short walk to the apartment.'

It was almost midnight when we got off the bus in midtown Manhattan. The streets were rather deserted. Amongst tall buildings in a strange surrounding, the only recognizable thing was Sasha's silhouette.

'I have to get the apartment key from a guy here and then we'll walk to it,' he said.

We stopped in front of an apartment building and Sasha

rang the bell. No response. He rang again and again but no one answered. I was too tired and too hungry to think of what the next step ought to be.

Suddenly, one of the apartment windows lit up. A man stuck his head out;

‘who is it?’

Sasha told him who he was and the next moment the keys came flying down. We started walking down the road, Sasha with his one new roll-on bag and me with three old ones hanging by my shoulders. Instantly, he realized it and before I had a chance to say anything, he pulled one of the bags from me and slung it on his shoulder. In movies, I had seen Manhattan at night with muggers and gangsters roaming about. The sooner we got to our destination, the better.

Finally, we were at the sought after apartment building. They all looked alike to me i.e. five or six steps at the entrance with a bunch of doorbells with individual names. Sasha turned the key and opened the main door. We took the elevator to the 2nd floor and entered the apartment. It was nicely furnished. Wooden floors with neatly spaced rugs. Decorative items hanging by the walls and corner shelves.

I felt as if I had just run a cross-country marathon. Every muscle ached. The fatigue was so overwhelming that I had forgotten the hunger.

‘Why don’t you take a shower and I’ll set up your bed,’ he said.

When I walked out of the shower, he was sitting on the sofa looking into his bag. Two Pepsi cans were on the coffee table.

‘You must be hungry,’ he said.

Had he been reading my mind all along?

He pulled out a pack of chocolates from his bag and handed them to me.

‘What time is your flight tomorrow?’ he asked.

10:30 am,’ I said. ‘Well, then, you better get some sleep.

‘I’ll wake you up at 8 am,’ I didn’t even have the energy to

discuss it. I don't recall ever falling asleep so quickly.

'Waqas, its time,' Sasha's gentle voice seemed to come out of distant space. It was 8 am. I quickly got ready. He accompanied me down to the street and hailed a taxi for me. 'Remember, it's only about 15 miles to the airport, so it shouldn't take you more than 30 minutes,' he explained. 'Take care of yourself and have a safe journey.'

I didn't have words to thank him. We embraced each other and I stepped into the waiting taxi. How I wish I could return this favor, for that is what Allah ﷻ adores,

Could the reward of goodness be anything but
goodness?.

Ar-Rahman, 60

All good I could do for him right then was to pray and although, he may not know it but for us Muslims, traveler's prayers are fairly sought after.

As the taxi raced towards the airport, I couldn't but think that there was more in this than just a wonderful coincidence. Neither of us had imagined this but as far as I was concerned, unexpected avenues do open up for those who sincerely put their trust in Allah ﷻ ,

For those who fear Allah, He (always) prepares a
way out. For Allah is all sufficient for the person who
puts his trust in Him.

At-Talaq, 2-3

How He ﷻ instantly moulds hearts is beyond the best human capacity. What compelled him to do this incredible act of kindness to a complete stranger was ample evidence. And that is how Allah ﷻ shows His Signs for those who have the wisdom and the insight to see and learn.

ISLAM & IMAN

Nadeem was waiting at the exit of the jet way. Seeing his face was like seeing an oasis after a long desert trek. Nadeem and I go a long way back, to the first day in medical school. Something just clicked between us. The friendship matured over years and transformed into brotherhood. He had several family members in the United States and was already enrolled in the internal medicine residency program at the University of South Alabama Hospitals.

We sat in his car and drove off towards his apartment.

‘Put your seat-belt on partner, this is not Pakistan,’ Nadeem told me.

The city reminded me of Islamabad. Warm weather with plenty of woodland but there were obvious differences. The roads were neater and cleaner. The cars on the roads seemed to be following some divine directives. No honking, no sudden lane changes, courteous nods here and there. No one was breaking any road discipline.

‘We’ll stop by to pick up some groceries’, he said.

We walked into “Winn-Dixie”, a large grocery store chain. The isles were full of all kinds of items, most of which I didn’t even recognize. As I stood in one isle, staring at the items, I heard a gentle, ‘Excuse me,’ as a middle-aged man walked by.

I turned around to see if I was blocking the way - no, plenty of space to go by. Just a coincidence, I told my self. But then a woman walked by and I heard the same words. It happened multiple times;

‘excuse me - pardon me.’

‘What’s going on?’ I asked Nadeem.

‘They are just respecting your privacy,’ he explained.
‘It’s routine here.’

What an wonderful etiquette! What makes it ironic is the fact that it was we, the Muslims who were expected to carry such high attributes of social interactions. The Qur’an is the only divine book which gave humanity the concept of privacy and its etiquettes, in both realms of life i.e. family and social interactions,

O Believers! Do not enter houses other than your own until you have sought permission.

An-Nur, 27

The Qur’an also emphatically ordered the children to ask permission to enter the parents rooms at designated times,

before morning salah, at noon when you put off your clothes and after the isha salah. These are your three times of privacy

An-Nur, 58

What a misfortune for Muslims that some of these fundamental Islamic attributes are now primarily seen only in the United States and Western societies.

The refrigerator in Nadeem’s apartment was full of ready made frozen meals. That’s what you get in a bachelors home. The packing was very attractive; rich colors and pictures. You almost felt drawn into the figure on the front. The plate seemed so real you wanted to touch it. But the taste inside was an entirely different story.

There is something about a home cooked meal, no matter how simple it is, that just can’t be beaten. Perhaps it’s the touch of the mother or the wife or the sister, their love and sincerity embedded in it. If there was one clear disadvantage to bachelorship, it was the food - nothing tasted good.

Every weekend we went over to Nadeem’s sister’s home for a shot at real home cooked meal. I remembered the countless times back home when I told my mother that I didn’t like what was for dinner. How I wish I could take all that back now.

Time was flying faster than I could count. In a few weeks, I'll have to go to the city of New Orleans to take my exam and then start applying to residency programs all across the country and then it's a waiting game to see where I end up. For now, I must get a social security card and a driver's license without which you really cannot become functional in America.

Nadeem dropped me at the social security office. I walked in, took a token and waited for my number to be called. A warm and gentle smile greeted me when I got to the window at my turn. That one smile takes away all your anxiety.

Few human gestures have such profound impact as that of a warm and friendly smile. No wonder that the Prophet ﷺ has been reported to have said in a sound hadith that:

to smile at your Muslim brother is an act of charity.

(Bukhari)

A simple form to be filled and that's all.

'You'll get your social security card in 2-3 weeks,' the lady told me.

I am all done. Next stop: driver's license office. It will be the first time I actually take the test. No acquaintances here, no one you can oblige and get your license without ever leaving your home; nothing like back in our country, But all goes well here and I get my temporary license.

The interviews started in January, 1995 and I was offered an early position in New Jersey and so that was where I ended up for my internal medicine residency. The first year was overwhelming, both professionally and personally. As weeks and months went by, slowly and imperceptibly, something in me had begun to change. Thinking back today, I cannot point out one particular factor. It was a combination of many; The long working hours and the far and few mosques in the city, which made a constant bond with these central beacons of guidance almost impossible; the isolation from the Muslim community; the glamour and the glitter all round, all the time; the fancy cars, the shopping malls, the expensive clothes and

shoes; the talk of beach side condominiums; the sailing boats, the expensive restaurants; the ‘hanging out’ with friends; the uninhibited social mix of genders - it was all of these and more.

It was something I was to later recall as the phenomenon of “America growing over you”, like an ivy vine that grows over a building, concealing its true shape and color and in the process, itself assuming its external appearance. Hanging on to my identity, culture and even religion became harder by the day and then it dawned on me: The difference between Islam and Iman.

These are two of the most fascinating terminologies of the Qur’an and are frequently used in the Holy text. Both belong to a category of words that are similar and yet can carry very different meanings. To understand this, we must rely on the traditional Arabic language principle which dictates that “When they come together in a sentence, they depict different meanings and when they are used independently, each may represent either or both meanings.” And one of these locations in the Qur’an is where Allah ﷻ has clearly distinguished them and it is here that an extraordinary relevance is obvious to what I and so many others experience: The incredible dynamic nature of Iman, which unfortunately is a major source of misunderstanding for most of us,

The Bedouin Arabs say: “We have believed (attained Iman).” Tell them: “You have not believed; rather say ‘we have become Muslims’ (have accepted Islam); for faith has not yet found its way into your hearts.

Al-Hujurat, 14

Think of Iman as a fire, which needs constant fuel for sustenance and that fuel is the remembrance (dhikr) of Allah ﷻ, good deeds, the firm belief in absolute accountability in front of the Almighty and the perpetual company of righteous and pious people. As these essential ingredients dwindle, so does the strength of Iman. Just merely performing perceived

“good deeds” does not quite cut it.

The prophet ﷺ said:

The parable of one who remembers his Rabb compared to the one that does not, is that of a living and a dead person.

(Bukhari)

and the Qur’an clearly explained this disconnect between certain deeds and perceived results,

O Muhammad tell them: “should we tell you the worst kind of losers relating to their deeds? Those whose all efforts in this worldly life had gone astray from the Right Way, but all along they were under the delusion that they were doing good deeds.

Al-Kahf, 103-104

The rapid pace of this spiritual deterioration upon neglecting the remembrance of Allah ﷻ is truly phenomenal. It’s almost like climbing a steep mountain after hours of exhaustive effort and then taking a dive down.

Years later, I realized the wisdom of the Qur’anic term, “*Ijtināb*” (avoidance). Islam has a superbly simple cure for many of our social and moral ills. Instead of saying do not commit certain acts, it prefers - do not put yourself in a situation where there is a possibility of faltering. It’s because Islam recognizes that all people do not have the same level of Iman and while for some, simple warning is enough, others require more persuasive efforts.

Neglecting this essential element had begun to take its toll on me. I found myself helpless against this cultural onslaught. I had no one to turn to. I even felt ashamed talking to my family members on the telephone. If only I could find a protection as potent as this deceitful force all around me. My life course had become the Prophetic prediction of the unfortunate outcome of the one who forsakes his *jama’ah* (community). And then, Guy Delarosa entered the stage.

Guy was from Panama and was an intern in the same

program. One day, at lunch, he asked me where I was living. When I told him that the apartment I was in was too far and too expensive, he asked me if I wouldn't mind sharing an apartment with him, close to the hospital. I had to be candid with him, if we were going to be roommates.

'There are some things you need to know before we make this move,' I told him.

'Like what?' he asked.

'Well, I am a Muslim and so I don't drink alcohol or eat pork.'

'That's not a problem, neither do I,' he said, adding, 'Even though I am a Christian.'

Ok, that took care of that and brought us to a trickier situation. I didn't know how to say this but I had to try,

'Also, I pray five times a day and you cannot urinate standing in the bathroom because that will ruin my clothes.'

With a strange calmness, he looked at me and said,

'Anything else?'

'No, that about does it.'

And so we became roommates. Days went by and one night as I opened my Qur'an to read, he sat on the table and said,

'Can I read this too?'

'Well yes, but this is in Urdu and I am not very good at translating it into English,' 'Where do we get one in English?' he asked.

I made a phone call and a few days later we had an English translation of the Qur'an arrive by mail, courtesy of ICNA (Islamic Circle of North America).

Every other night or so, we would sit at the dining table and I would read and explain the Qur'an to him, what little of it I knew. I told him about the rituals of salat, fasting, obligatory charity and hajj. With no ready reference at hand, I tried to remember every little detail I could from my studies, years earlier. I remember distinctly, that fasting for a month was the only one he seemed a little worried about.

Time went by and then as we were about to enter the second year of residency, Nadeem called from Alabama and said,

‘Enough is enough, why don’t you move to the south, the weather and the people are much warmer here.’

And so I decided to move closer to my old compatriot. Guy wasn’t too excited about staying in New Jersey and made plans to move to Boston, where he had some friends.

Sometime in our last months in New Jersey, one day, Guy sat in front of me and said,

‘I would like to become a Muslim.’

First, I didn’t know what to say. The emotion was overwhelming but somehow reality got the better of me.

‘Are you sure this is what you want? I mean, what about your family?’ I asked.

‘I am sure and my family will respect my choice,’ he said.

The next day, I went to the largest and the only mosque I knew of and talked to the imam. A few days latter, after zuhur salat, the imam announced that there would be a new brother joining the community.

In front of the packed mosque, Guy pronounced the shahadah and that was all it took to enter the world of Islam. I still remember, people lining up to embrace him with tearful eyes, something he said he could never forget.

‘It was as if they were happier than me,’ he later said.

So, may be that was why Allah ﷻ brought us together. For him to find the true path to salvation and for me to realize again what it meant to embrace Islam.

Time was running out fast. In a few days, we would be heading our different ways. I didn’t know anyone in Boston who could provide him further guidance. All I could think of was to record audiocassettes with all the basic information I knew about Islam, and so that is what I did. I hoped he would find it useful. The Internet would also be a valuable source for continuous Islamic learning.

But he must stay close to the Muslim community. For embracing Islam was just the beginning - the beginning of a long and arduous journey towards attaining Iman and with it, the glad tidings of the ultimate success.

THE FOUR-WAY STOP SIGN

Coming to Alabama was like a home coming for me. Unlike New Jersey, the city of Mobile was small and cozy with a tightly knit Muslim community. There was one central masjid with a school till eighth grade. The masjid was the center of all social interactions and gatherings and was primarily run by several Arab and Pakistani families. The University also had several students from Pakistan, India and Bangladesh, who kept the masjid alive.

Residencies run on a tough schedule. Frequent in-hospital calls, long hours - elements that push one towards looking for avenues of relaxation and entertainment whenever there is a chance. Being single, one does not fit well into family circles and so wrong company always remains a serious threat.

Its a strange concept - this current understanding of “entertainment” which has been ingrained in our thoughts as an integral part of life. We have become so alienated to the Qur’anic concept of tranquility (*Iṭminān*) and as a result we must fill our lives with these empty rituals which not only bring us no relaxation but rather drive the anxiety more,

Verily, in the remembrance of Allah do hearts find
solace.

Ar-Ra’d, 28

Within the first few days at the new hospital, I realized that they loved pork bacon in the South and would put it in all dishes, even the vegetables. Eating food in the University Medical Center was a challenge every single day. Stand in line for 20 minutes and then getting to the counter to find out there isn’t anything you can eat. Even if they weren’t adding pork meat in an item, the thought bothered me that they were

probably cooking all of it in the same oil and pans.

The gravity of this came to light several years later as I stood at the breakfast buffet of the Westin hotel in downtown Atlanta, while appearing for my cardiology boards. As the chef prepared to make an omelet for me, I noticed that the oil bucket contained plenty of pieces of pork bacon, which he had used for the previous customer.

‘I think I’ll take a bagel instead,’ I said before he could crack my egg.

You might not know it, but an innocuous appearing fried egg is almost always cooked in pork-laden oil in restaurants across the United States.

Ramadhan came and with it came the shower of questions from the nurses. ‘You mean you can’t eat all day?’

‘Not even water?’

‘How about eating candy?’

Patiently, I would tell them that Islam was not the only faith that prescribed fasting to its followers and that all earlier Divine faiths i.e. Judaism, Christianity had some form of fasting. The staff at the hospital deserves all the credit for the respect and the courtesies they showed towards the Muslim residents and fellows.

I still remember, as I would walk into the lounge in the cardiac catheterization laboratory at the hospital during Ramadhan, and the nurses sitting, eating their lunch, would cover their mouths in respect.

And then one day, one of the nurses asked me,

‘Dr. Ahmed is there a religious reason for your beard?’ (I had a thin beard since final year of medical school, which I had kept).

‘Well, that’s because it’s a beloved act of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ,’ I explained to her. A rather confused expression appeared on her face.

‘But Dr. Husain (Nadeem’s last name) doesn’t have one, does that mean he is not a good Muslim?’

For a moment, I was speechless.

‘Well, that’s not necessarily true’ I managed to say.

‘Alright then,’ she said and went about her work.

As I lay in bed that night, the thought kept coming back to me; does assuming a certain appearance make you a better or worse Muslim?

For me, the answer to this conundrum evolved over several years, to the view that I will express in detail in one of the following chapters.

But it’s important to recognize that how social, ethnic and religious groups prioritize their attributes is the most crucial factor that determines their acceptance by other societies. It is our own religious uncertainties that have allowed the West to categorize us as “modern”, “orthodox”, “fundamentalist” etc. and the onus is also on us to rectify it before this divide amongst the followers of one faith becomes unbridgeable.

Consider the example of the Sikh community in Canada. Apart from a small minority, they, as a community share the same fundamental social attributes of their religion. You can spot one from a mile away. This unified stance has allowed them to attain unimaginable rights in a foreign land. The Sikhs in Canadian police force are the only religious community allowed to wear their turbans as part of their uniform. In 2006, the Canadian Supreme Court allowed a 12 year old Sikh student to carry a “kirpan” (knife carried as a religious insignia) to school in Montreal - and about the same time the courts in France and UK were banning “hijab” for Muslim women!

As my third year of internal medicine residency started, I realized that the computer chair I had bought more than six months earlier at a local Wal-Mart was not very comfortable. ‘Take it back to the store,’ said a colleague.

‘But I don’t even have the receipt,’ I told him.

‘They will still take it back,’ he assured me.

I loaded the chair in my car and drove to the store. I could never have even dreamed of doing this back in Pakistan. With an embarrassed face, I walked to the customer service desk.

‘How can I help you sir?’ came the same old recognizable

courteous query.

‘Well, I bought this chair more than six months ago from here but its not very comfortable, I haven’t used it much and I’ll like to exchange it, but I don’t have the receipt,’ - the statement seemed so unrealistic that I had a real hard time uttering those words.

‘Do you know which one you want now?’ she asked.

‘Yes I do,’ I told her.

‘Do you know how much you bought this one for? Since we don’t carry it anymore,’ she asked.

‘I think it was 40 dollars,’ was my best guess. And then the unimaginable happened; ‘Well, this new one you want is for 80 dollars,’ she explained,

‘and so, you just have to pay 40 dollars more and that will take care of it.’

A few minutes later, I walked out with the new chair.

I have never been able to forget this experience. Call it what you may; a large store like Wal-Mart can afford to write off a simple chair, that’s part of their business strategy etc. But, for me, that was such an incredible lesson in truth and trust, which was unsurpassable. For her and the store she represented, my word was enough. I had never experienced such extraordinary level of trust in interpersonal dealings. This event reflected a glimpse of a truly virtuous society that Islam envisioned and ultimately created more than 1400 years ago, where words and trust stood taller than buildings and more valuable than the treasures of the world, but now its practical example only exists in the West.

In contrast, consider the other scenario, which I witnessed years later, in Islamabad, Pakistan as I walked through a shopping market. Every shop brandished signs like “*MashaAllah*” (as Allah wills), “*Hadha min Fadle Rabbi*” (this is the blessing of my Rabb) and yet you were almost sure to be lied to, cheated in most of these establishments, and that actually held true, most of the time.

As time went by, I realized slowly but surely that the true

strength of the American society lay in the core values which have cemented their social element and have allowed them to dominate the world and these values are nothing but the fundamental attributes that Islam had introduced to the world. Ironically, we, the Muslims have abandoned these values and have decayed while they have embraced them and in this, lay their real strength.

Someone once said, “In America there is Islam but no Muslims and in Pakistan (and for that matter, most Muslim countries) there are Muslims but no Islam.” I couldn’t agree with this more.

In an ironic twist, for many including me, living in America allowed us a unique perspective of the real social fabric of Islam, unmarred by personal, political and nationalistic agenda’s, albeit, without the name.

For Islam is like a flower that requires a particular environment to blossom and show its true color and beauty, otherwise it will just exist in books and minds.

I can recall countless events over the course of years in the United States, each one, reminding me of the true aspects of humanism and probity which is so much a part and parcel of Islam and all divine faiths before it - Extraordinary professional humility in my mentors and teachers in the department of medicine. These were people with global repute (which in Pakistan would usually lead to outrageous individual arrogance). The more humility they nourished, the more their professional prestige flourished. No surprise that this personal humility has been such an integral part of Islamic history. The lives of the companions of the Prophet ﷺ and those after them exemplified this to the utmost degree.

Neighbors watching your home, watering your plants and picking up your mail when you were out of town, reminding you of the real status of a neighbor, so fondly mentioned in the Qur’an and hadith. The prophet ﷺ testified that:

a person whose neighbor is not safe from his mischief, is not a Muslim.

But one event that had the most impact on me was the four-way stop sign:

Every morning, as I drove towards the University Medical Center, I reached the four-way stop sign at the intersection of Bit & Spur road and general Bullard Avenue. It was a side road with lighter traffic except during school time when it got busy. There was no traffic light but rather a “stop four-way” sign on each road forming the intersection. Everybody arriving at the intersection would come to a complete stop and then drive on in the sequence of arrival at the intersection. It just seemed so ephemeral and yet deep down, it represented a singular philosophy, the true strength of any society.

Here’s what I mean: Often two cars reached the intersection almost simultaneously. I found my self in this situation numerous times and what usually transpired subsequently, was truly extraordinary; Every driver would try to give the benefit of the doubt to the other and allow the other to pass on, rather than insisting on his own right.

Often I found my self being encouraged to go first even though in my calculation I had reached the intersection a few seconds later than the other driver.

I can’t think of any other display of the true character of a nation than the four-way stop sign. In an impalpable way, it represented the true spirit of sacrificing ones own right, for others. Simply translate this attitude to all other aspects of life and you have the making of an incredible society. It represented a unique self-judging and policing opportunity.

In a strange way, the fundamental social structure of Islam i.e. Mutual love and respect, sacrifice, interpersonal dealings etc. seems to manifest itself in its brightest colors in America. They have realized during decades of society building that sacrificing a little on individual level will benefit the entire group. In other words, when “me” is replaced by “we” or “I” by “us”, things work out for the benefit of all.

And so in this infinitesimal roadside act, is hidden, in

reality, the pinnacle of an Islamic social structure. This is the true enlightenment of Islam. Even trivial roadside acts become acts of worship when enveloped in the right philosophy. I firmly believe that the day we Muslims (Pakistani's in particular) are able to negotiate the "four-way stop" sign philosophy, our fate will change for the best.

However, for obvious reasons, this current Western system is not without a significant downside. While they have executed the practical strategy very well, the true spiritual aspect, which dictates the ultimate results of this model, has been drowned in the luxury and comfort of today's world.

For us Muslims, however, there is a tremendous lesson here - to see the wonderful results of implementing the simplest of Islamic social etiquettes. It would be extremely imprudent not to be able to combine the spiritual aspect (which we have been granted) with the practical one and see the social revolution in our societies.

As time went by, it also dawned on me that we Muslims were not meant to live long term, for material reasons, in the lands of the non-Muslims (with the exception of Da'wah and education. There are too many disparities in routine life. Yes, we all share the fundamental human qualities of decency, honesty, sincerity etc. but for us Muslims the guiding philosophy behind these acts is entirely different. Even during the most joyous and festive days of the year i.e. the two Eids, the focus remains on glorifying the monotheism of Allah ﷻ and not unrestrained jubilations. This doesn't need any elaboration. After all, that was the entire premise for asking for a separate homeland i.e. Pakistan.

THE BEGINNING

Jn May of 1999 I got married. Though my wife was a physician, she was smart not to run the gauntlet of residencies. The noble Prophet ﷺ has been reported to have said in a sound hadith that:

a pious spouse is amongst the best treasures of this world.

(Muslim)

I was fortunate to have been granted this Blessing of Allah ﷻ. In the years to come, it became very obvious that perseverance in the righteous path is not possible without the steadfast support of one's spouse.

It was sometime in late 1999 when one night I arrived at the emergency room at the University Medical Center to start my night call. The ER was usually staffed by two physicians. As I entered, I looked at the duty roster on the wall to see who would be working with me that night.

The name said "Dr. Siddiqui."

That's odd - I don't recall any Dr. Siddiqui on staff.

'Who's the new physician with me?' I asked Kelly, the ER nurse.

'Oh, he's new, actually he's from Pakistan as well, I think he came from Birmingham, Alabama,' she said.

Before I had a chance to meet him and exchange pleasantries, the patients started rolling in and I was swamped for the next few hours, without getting a chance to see him.

As I sat in the physician's office taking advantage of a lull in the ER reception, a short stocky man walked in.

'Dr. Waqas?' He said,

‘Assalam-u-Alaykum, I am Dr. Siddiqui.’

We exchanged greetings and started chatting as we sat down for a cup of coffee. He told me that it was his first time in that ER and he was “moon-lighting” from Birmingham.

‘I was happy to see a Muslim name on the roster when I got here,’ he said.

‘So was I,’ I replied.

As we started talking, he said to me,

‘Tell me Waqas, what you think about Islam?’ He saw the expression on my face and before I had a chance to respond, he added,

‘let me put it another way, if you were to get full authority overnight, what would be the ten most critical things you would do to implement the real Islam in Pakistan?’

With Guy, I had plenty of time to think and react in an entirely different situation. Also, that was a few years ago and the ever-demanding residency and fellowship schedule had taken its toll on me. I really wasn’t prepared to give an appropriate answer.

‘You see,’ he said, in an affectionate tone,

‘You are hovering close to the highest achievement in your professional education, but when it comes to faith, you are not sure what is wrong and how it can be put right.’

‘It’s very easy to blame politicians for all our ills,’ he said with a laugh.

I probably didn’t realize the gravity of his statement at that very moment but if there was one instance in my life, which I could classify as a defining moment, this would be it.

The conversation and patient care went along till 6 am, the time for the ER shift to change.

‘Well, it was a pleasure meeting you,’ I said as we shook hands and exchanged salams.

‘Pleasure was mine,’ he said,

‘Before I go Waqas, I want you to promise me that you will take time out to learn more about your faith and this will lead

you to find yourself as well.’

With a rather embarrassed smile, I said, “Insha-Allah.”

We both walked out and drove off in different directions.

My life changed directions the very next day. Imperceptibly at first but gradually strengthening in this rekindled endeavor. Half to one hour study of the Qur’an and life of the Prophet ﷺ in the beginning, slowly building up to be the predominant activity when ever I was not involved in patient care. I started a weekly e-mail journal of Qur’an and hadith for several friends. A few days after I had first met Dr. Siddiqui, he came to visit me. As we sat in my study and talked about how things were progressing in the faith arena, he seemed pleased. I thanked him and asked him to keep in touch. That was the last I ever saw or heard of him again. He never came back for moonlighting. The telephone number, he had given me, never responded.

Ali-Bin-Abi-Talib علي بن أبي طالب reported that the Prophet ﷺ once told him that:

“if one man was to find the right guidance through his efforts, that was more valuable for him than the most valuable of worldly treasures”

All I could do was to pray that Allah ﷻ include Dr. Siddiqui in that blessed category.

This is human nature. We become oblivious to certain things, which should have been very clear and then with the Blessing of Allah ﷻ, a chance meeting, a trivial comment, an act of someone, shakes up the conscience and life changes its course.

As days went by, the masjid became the central point in my life. After a drawn day at the hospital, Nadeem and I would drive the two miles each day to the masjid and Islamic center for *Isha* salat. The masjid was a place for learning, advice and consultation. All social activities of the Muslim community revolved around it. Families would come for Dars-e-Qur’an after the isha salat. After fajar salat, there would be tajweed (recitation) class before getting started for daily activities.

In Ramadan, the atmosphere was truly remarkable. University students would flock towards the masjid after *‘asr* time. Families would bring dishes from home for a combined iftar every day, which would in essence become a spiritual socializing event. The masjid became a second home. The maintenance of the masjid was voluntary, but it was a sought after voluntary work. I have never felt more pleasure in mowing the yards and vacuuming the carpets. For the first time in my life, I saw a glimpse of the concept called masjid in Islam, the ‘establishment’ of salat and the progress in Iman.

It’s an extraordinary thing - this Iman and the resultant “*Taqwa*” that it generates. It has the capacity to instantly transform some and for others, it strengthens gradually, and as it matures, the outlook to entire life changes.

The Qur’an testifies to this maturity of Iman and Taqwa leading to the ultimate faith status of “*Ihsan*” (Al-Maidah, 93) which has been defined by the Prophet ﷺ as a state where one becomes conscious of actually standing in front of Allah ﷻ not only in worship but in every act of life.

However in Islam, there is no such thing as a weekend Muslim. Some people struggle and wait their entire lives for these invaluable attributes. But one thing is for sure, for those who truly have a desire to attain *Taqwa* and make a conscious and sincere attempt at it, Allah ﷻ will grant it to them. How they protect and cherish it, it is up to them.

In July of 2002, after spending eight years in the United States and at the completion of my advanced studies, I returned to Pakistan with my wife and one year old son, Haris. I still remember vividly, friends and colleagues asking me why I was going back. To my American colleagues my answer was very simple; you go out to have fun during the day but as night falls, you return home. It’s as simple as that. My nightfall has arrived and so I must head home and shattered, dirty and devastated as it may be, its still home. Not surprisingly, most of them understood.

To my Pakistani friends, my response was different; why so much fear and uncertainty in going back? Back to where we all came from. I would ask them,

‘Did you have this horrible feeling when you were coming to the United States? Who did you put your trust in on the way here? And if your intentions are for paying back to your country and helping your brothers and sisters in faith, here in Pakistan, then put your trust in Allah ﷻ and He will not disappoint you.’

Nothing is easy in life. It’s easier said than done. But then that’s what life is all about. It was a far bigger challenge to move back to Pakistan than I had imagined. And it wasn’t the major issues; it was the small things that can have a huge impact on ones life. Had it not been for Allah ﷻ Mercy and Guidance, I would have faltered in my determination.

Thinking back, the easiest thing to do, while in the United States, was to criticize Pakistan. But if you believe that you can do it better, then its time to step up to the plate. Time to show others how it’s done right. Those of us who have been endowed with knowledge and skill owe it to the people of Pakistan.

Sitting in my office at Shifa International Hospital, Islamabad listening to the zuhur and ‘*asr* adhan on the PA system and walking to the hospital masjid to attend salat in congregation; nothing in the United States could beat that. For some, staying in America allows them to fulfill the responsibilities that an individual Muslim owes to the Ummah, but for others, their vision, energy and dedication is needed right here in the home land.

Here is where I found a conducive environment and the company of some excellent Islamic scholars and fulfilled my long desire to learn Arabic. An endeavor that eventually led me to start teaching the language of the Qur’an to a group of physicians at the hospital.

In early 2006 I got a call from a friend at the King Abdul-Aziz National Guard Hospital in Al-Hasa, Saudi Arabia

to come for a locum consultancy month there. It gave me a unique opportunity to see the life of the Arabs of Hijaz up-close, something I had wanted to do for a while, as Hijaz sets the tone for Muslims all over the globe. So in August of 2006 I headed to Saudi Arabia.

THE CHOICE

If anyone is looking for a deen (way of life) other than Islam, then let it be known that it will never be accepted from him; and in the Hereafter he will be among the losers.

Al-i 'Imran, 85

It is late at night, 10:00 pm when the plane touches down at Dammam International Airport, Saudi Arabia. The passengers are all Pakistani's, mostly labor, a few educated, "modern" families as well.

For most of us, "modern" means, "pertaining to the present and recent time; not ancient or remote." But in today's Muslim societies, it has taken on an entirely different meaning. It has become the symbol for everything, which is in sharp contradiction to the traditional teachings of Islam; manifesting itself in attire, life style, and a limited worldly view of this life, a sad but true reality. Just as the term jihad has become, in the West, a symbol of something vile and ominous; both views could not be farther from the truth.

The followers of this "modern" philosophy of life perceive faith as an antiquated entity, something best kept in places of worship, merely as a set of devotional acts. The reality has eluded them that Islam is the most "modern" faith there is; it is and always has been far ahead of time. It had to be, as the Final and Eternal Message of Allah ﷻ.

It is we, who have failed to keep up with the "visionary modern" philosophy of Islam. The Qur'an is not a book of scientific explorations but modern science as we know it, so far has, and will continue, to follow the Qur'an. As the technology around us refines every day, it confirms ideas, observations,

facts, which the Qur'an presented over 1400 years ago.

I am always amazed at how this current concept of “modernity” gets attached to acquisition of higher education. Perhaps it's the type of education that makes the difference. Universities, higher education institutes, traditional maddaris (religious seminaries), they all claim to impart comprehensive knowledge. But how that education transforms us and prepares us for the real challenges ahead is surprisingly not part of their package. They have failed to harmonize the spiritual and material aspects of knowledge, something Islam considers as *Al-`Ilm*. Though, admittedly, had it not been for the maddaris, any remaining remnant of the “religion” of Islam would have withered away as well. For masajids (mosques) are kept alive by graduates of these seminaries, not by those of medical colleges and engineering universities.

It is interesting to note that the very first thing that Allah ﷻ blessed Adam with, after his creation, was *`Ilm* or knowledge,

He taught Adam the names of all things.

Al-Baqarah, 31

That and an element of the essence of Allah infused into him, were the two things that granted him a superior rank over the angels and hence, worthy of prostration. The noble Prophet ﷺ said:

the best amongst you are the ones who learn the
Ilm (knowledge and memorisation) of the Qur'an
and teach it.

(Bukhari)

The Qur'an uses two truly enlightening terminologies to represent the two dominant spheres of life; “*Nūr*” (light) and “*Zulumat*” (darkness). Knowledge that has the capacity to transform an individual and guide one towards understanding the Supreme Creator is the Light. Without this, all encompassing knowledge, guiding the “technical expertise” of each one of us, we are simply acquiring skills for earning livelihood, something

the Qur'an considers Darkness,

Allah is the Wali (guardian) of the believers. He brings them out from darkness into light. But as for those who disbelieve, their Auliya (supporters and helpers) are Taghut (false deities and false leaders), they bring them out from the light into darkness.

Al-Baqarah, 25

This verse has always captivated me. At the dawn of Islam in Makkah, was there no culture? no civic society? no architecture? no science? Why then is the Qur'an calling this period and its content, darkness? Because it was missing its most fundamental ingredient: *Tawheed* or uncorrupted faith in Allah ﷻ and the resultant miraculous metamorphosis in human life and attitudes.

Islam does not consider both these aspects of knowledge as separate entities but rather synergistic to each other. It is the beautiful balance of both, the faith-based or religious knowledge and material or technical knowledge that is desirable for fulfilling our ultimate goal of establishing the "Deen" (way of life and system of governance) of Allah ﷻ.

The other side of this equation is the belief that just acquiring faith based or religious education is the sole purpose of Islam. Both approaches, individually, are bound to be ineffective in the grand scheme of Allah ﷻ.

The Qur'an confers an extraordinary endorsement of physical sciences,

Verily, in the creation of the heavens and the earth, and in the alternation of night and day, there are indeed signs for men of understanding.

Al-i 'Imran, 190

It is clear that the core purpose of all physical sciences is to bring one closer to the "*ma'rifah*" (recognition) of The One Supreme Creator and our role as "Ibād-Allah" (servants of Allah).

One cannot but wonder what the noble Prophet ﷺ used to do in the Cave of Hira prior to the revelation of the Qur'an?

Precisely what the verse above has highlighted; Contemplation on the creation of mankind and the universe, with inevitable results of bringing one closer to the “*ma’rifah*” of Allah ﷻ.

The Prophet ﷺ also endorsed the acquisition of material skills. Imam Muslim has recorded a hadith where,

“Allah’s Messenger ﷺ happened to pass by the people who had been busy in grafting the trees. Thereupon he said: if you were not to do it, it might be good for you. (so they abandoned this practice) and there was a decline in the yield. He (the Prophet) happened to pass by them (and said): what has gone wrong with your trees? They said: you said so and so. Thereupon he said: you have better knowledge (of a technical skill) in the affairs of the world”

The noble Prophet ﷺ made it quite clear in the above hadith that there are worldly skills that have significant impact on the day to day affairs and acquiring these skills in no way conflicts with and can rather complement the role of a mo’min (true believer) in the society.

The parable of the real Islam to me is that of white light: a perfect confluence of seven colors, one slightly more or less and the whiteness is blemished.

Pondering on this, I walk towards the immigration counters with the other passengers and we all form into several lines, a phenomenon almost unheard of in my homeland. But then it’s no surprise that certain environments make people do things in a certain way. Even more surprising is this; this wayward behavior coming from a nation, who was taught such extraordinary discipline as that of forming the “*suffūf*” (lines) during the five obligatory salah, by none other than the noble Prophet ﷺ himself who said:

Keep your lines straight (before salat) because
straitening of the lines is an etiquette of the salat.

(Bukhari & Muslim)

I scout the lines from a distance, trying to make out which line looks lighter. Its late, I am tired and don’t want to

waste time at the airport. I read the Arabic signs with English translation underneath, with great interest and try to make quick mental notes of them - I am not very successful.

I practice the Arabic phrases I have learned so far, to answer the expected questions by the immigration officer.

Finally, it is my turn.

I walk to the desk, '*Assalam o-alaykum,*' I say.

'*Walykum assalam,*' the young Saudi officer says.

I hand him my passport and he flips the pages to get to the visa. '*Anta tabib?*' (you are a doctor) He asks.

'*Naam,*' (yes) I answer.

'*Istashari al-qalb,*' (consultant cardiologist) I add.

'*Masha-Allah,*' he says, obviously surprised at my youngish appearance. We talk for a few more seconds as he does the customary paper work. He says to me with a pleasant smile,

'*Anta takalum al-arabi jai-ad*' (you speak very good Arabic).

'*Hadha min Fadlle rabbi,*' (this is the blessing from my Rabb)

I say.

'How long will you be here?' he asks, 'I will come to see you in the hospital as I have diabetes.'

'I will be only here for a month,' I reply.

'But why go back so soon?' He says with a rather disappointing tone.

'My family and my work are in Islamabad,' I tell him.

'I am here just to visit the Haram, some friends and the hospital.'

'May Allah ﷻ be with you,' he says and we part.

I walk towards the baggage claim area and collect my bags. Before I decide to carry my weight myself, a porter appears, quickly lifts my bags and puts them in the cart and with me close at his heels, he starts walking briskly towards the customs counter; undoubtedly in a bid to quickly return for another passenger.

He puts my luggage through the screening machine and we both look at the face of the customs officer for his nod so we can be on our way, but he is too busy fiddling with his mobile

phone and without lifting his head, he gestures us to move out.

We walked out towards the arrival counter. I thanked the porter and gave him 10 riyals and he disappeared into the crowd. I glanced around to see if I could spot somebody brandishing a sign with my name on it, but no luck. I moved to the side, 10 more minutes went by, still no one. What ever happened to the meet and greet person? But just as the wave of anxiety begins to approach, instantly, I was reminded of the attitude of a true believer in states of anxiety and sorrow,

And certainly, We shall test you with something of fear, hunger, loss of wealth, lives and fruit, but give glad tidings to As-Sabirin (the patient). Who, when afflicted with calamity, say: Truly, to Allah we belong and truly, to Him shall we return.

Al-Baqarah, 155-156

But from as far as I can remember, I have heard part of this verse recited only at funerals. Not when one misses ones flight or looses ones wallet with all the credit cards and the precious driving license.

Is this the state of our spiritual ignorance about such simple matters of life ?

Unfortunately, it is - That is precisely what the Qur'an tells us to do; turn to the dhikr (remembrance) of Allah ﷻ in time of distress, regardless of its nature and degree, for that was the practice of the noble Prophet ﷺ as well.

Yet our initial response to any unexpected event is anger, despair, and anxiety. And not surprisingly, every so often, new antidepressant drugs are introduced into the market with tall claims of tremendous mood benefits, with scientific evidence quite contrary to that. People, rushing to doctors' offices to find solace for their psychosocial ailments, but its nowhere to be found. It is a frequent phrase heard in my office back in Pakistan, 'Doctor, I am very stressed, can you give me something to relax, 'Can you write something for me to help sleep?'

This in a cardiologist's office! And all these, from patients

who seem to have all of the bounties of this world! And yet their hearts are perturbed because they are knocking at the wrong door,

Those who believe (in the Oneness of Allah- Islamic Monotheism), and whose hearts find rest in the remembrance of Allah: verily, in the remembrance of Allah do hearts find rest.

Ar-Ra'd, 28

But just as the benefits of a medicine for an ailment are incumbent upon its proper use, the benefits of the blessed words of the Qur'an are only for those who sincerely believe in it, for the Qur'an itself testifies to this fact

We have revealed the Qur'an which is a healing and a mercy to the believers.

Al-Israa, 82

My heart finding solace in the remembrance of Allah ﷻ, I looked around another time and spotted a young Saudi in his traditional white garb and red head-cover, walking leisurely towards the arrivals lounge. In his left hand, barely visible, was a white paper. It was probably my traditional Pakistani dress that gave it away.

He walked straight to me and held out the paper to me.

It read, "National Guard."

'Doctor Ahmed?' He asked.

'Yes,' I said with a big sigh of relief.

'Assalam-o-alaykum, I am glad to see you,' I said in Arabic.

He looked up with a surprised expression and returned my greeting. 'You speak good Arabic,' he said. 'Alhamdulillah,' I replied (dejavu?). 'Sorry,' he said, I fell asleep.'

Well, at least he was honest.

We walked towards the National Guard's office and he asked me to sit down while he arranges for the driver, who would be driving me to the king Abdul-Aziz medical city in Al-Hasa.

‘What is your specialty?’ he asks.

‘Cardiology,’ I replied.

‘Tell me Doctor,’ he says, ‘Can one get heart disease because of love?’

I look up at his face, but see a rather serious expression. I pause for a second,

‘I am not sure,’ I say.

‘May be human love, but not for the love of Allah ﷻ.’

He lets out a little laugh and turns around,

‘The driver should be here shortly,’ he says and walks out of the room.

SALAM

J sat in the office, waiting for 15 minutes. Finally, a tall heavy built young Saudi walked in; my driver. We greet each other with “salam” and walk outside towards the car. It’s hot and humid. But then what would you expect from a coastal desert town in July.

Seems pretty trivial, this “salam”, we exchange so frequently. All cultures and societies have their own greetings but none with as profound a meaning as the one taught to the Muslims by the Prophet ﷺ. But has one ever pondered for a second on the gravity of the words:

*“Asalam-o-alaykum
warahmat-ullahe-wabarakatuhu”*

You are giving your word to the listener, that his or her life, honor, wealth, family, all of it, is safe from you, and invoking Allah’s Mercy and Blessings upon him. There can be no more potent method of advertising peace and love in the society than this. The noble Prophet ﷺ has been reported to have said in a sound hadith that:

You cannot be believers until you love each other and shall I not tell you something which if you adopt, will become a source of love amongst yourselves? Spread salam amongst yourselves.

(Muslim)

Not only that, salam has its roots in the Heavens. It is the chosen greeting for the dwellers of the Heavens,

and Salam will be their greetings therein (paradise).

Yunus, 10

But as one walks around most Muslim societies, it becomes obvious that this fundamental Islamic tradition is fast dwindling. Salam is only offered to the ones who are acquaintances, devoid of its etiquettes and even this sketchy Salam is loosing its appeal for the young generation. Hi, Hello seems so much more en-vogue.

Disappearing increasingly is this Heavenly greeting from our societies and with it, all its Blessings.

I recall 1996, Alabama, USA. Standing in the elevator of University of South Alabama Medical Center, going up to the 10th floor. The elevator stops at every floor and patients, attendants and staff walk in and out. But every time someone walks in, I hear, “good morning” or “How are you all doing?”

Sounds very much like what we are supposed to be doing.

And as if this monumental loss was not enough, we even turned away from the best “thank you” taught to us. The Prophet ﷺ said:

if a good deed is offered to someone and he returns it by saying jazaak Allah hu khairan, then he has returned the best praise.

(Tirmidhi)

Well, you are getting worked up for a trivial matter, most people will say. Trivial, in our calculations, but these things are the foundation of a Muslim spirit. Nothing is trivial in the sight of Allah ﷻ.

All of our possible attention is reserved for details in worldly affairs. Tying a proper tie-knot takes precedence on so many beloved acts of the Sunnah of the noble Prophet ﷺ. A cigar hanging from the corner of the lips is a status symbol, but using a miswaq is something to shy away from.

Isn't it interesting that as we embrace modernization, it is Hollywood that sets the social code, not Allah ﷻ and His Messenger ﷺ. And so, men's pants keep on hanging lower and lower while those of women rise higher and higher. What

an irony! As the former were commanded to show the ankles and the latter to hide. The Prophet ﷺ said:

what ever (of the dress) falls below the ankles, will
be in The Fire.

(Bukhari)

Wait! Before you decide that this is being taken in the wrong context, allow me to explain;

Firstly, isn't it true that "doubt" can become the deciding factor in so many of our choices. Imagine three dishes being cooked on the stove simultaneously and the cook comes in and tells you that he inadvertently dropped a toxic medicine in one of them but he can't remember which one. Would any one take the chance of eating from either one of the three? Most of us will destroy all three. But in matters of faith, our complacency is extreme. We become oblivious to the issue of doubt and are ready to take advantage, almost always for our own perceived benefits. The Prophet ﷺ said in a sound hadith to:

Leave that which makes you doubt for that which
does not make you doubt.

(Tirmidhi)

Secondly, there are certain acts, which, in themselves, represent a specific philosophy and cannot be construed in any other way. For example, there is nothing simple or austere about an expensive top of the line BMW automobile. And if someone says that he is sitting in it with "austerity" it can only be considered a joke. Similarly there is nothing simple or austere about a luxurious expensive Persian rug.

This issue of dress covering the ankles for men, trivial as it may appear, has to be taken in this context (not to forget the cleanliness aspect of it). For this act in itself was a symbol of pride. And to underestimate symbols would be a great folly. History is testament to the fundamental value of symbols for cultures and religions.

For those who find it hard to follow some of the beloved acts of the Prophet ﷺ, let me remind them that it is simply a

matter of “the prevalent practice” in the society. Now, when we are so far away from the basic attributes of Islam, tucking up the shalwar or pants seems an impossible thing to do, but if Hollywood was to endorse this appearance, overnight all of us would go along with it without feeling any shame.

People wore pants with tight, high hems in the sixties only to be replaced later on by wide low-hanging ones. No one objected to how ridiculous an individual might look in either of those appearances; that’s simple human Psychology.

Matters as simple as eating with one’s right hand and drinking in three pauses (according to the Sunnah of the noble Prophet ﷺ) have become things of a forgotten past. There is a narration that says that when the Companions ﷺ were being educated in fundamental Islamic etiquettes, the Jews ridiculed them and so they (Companions) reported it to the noble Prophet ﷺ, who said,

“Yes, say to them (Jews) that our Prophet even teaches us on how to cleanse ourselves after the call of nature.”

They were those to whom even the walk and the manner of speech of the Messenger of Allah ﷺ was paramount and then here we are; reserving derision for Islamic culture and values and following the West with a blind passion. No error could be graver than this.

Don’t get me wrong. Allow me to verbalize your upcoming thoughts. Yes, Islam is primarily acts, not appearances. If it was tucking up your pants and treading on the honor and rights of others vs. Letting your pants hang down your ankles but being honest, courteous and respectful to them, I would gladly accept the latter.

THE DESERT AND THE OIL

Seat belts click and we are on our way. We soon leave the bright lights of the airport and the city behind. In front of us is vast desert land. I don't recall seeing a speed limit sign but whatever it was, we were speeding away at 90m/h. The gentle warning tone, built in by the car manufacturer, gradually fading away. We started talking. His interest grew the moment he realized I spoke reasonable Arabic.

He began to tell me about his family. Suddenly, he decides to add a visual input to his story as well, flips out his mobile phone and starts showing me the pictures of his children, father, uncles etc. all this while we are driving at Warf speed.

Deep down, I am reciting all the safety prayers that I can remember.

'Here, look at my uncle,' he says,

'He is a "*muttawā*" (a term used to denote a religious man), just like you (my white dress, white head cap and long beard leading him to this conclusion).'

Al-hamdulillah! What a complement. And why not,

Our Sibghah is the Sibghah of Allah (Islam) and which Sibghah can be better than Allah's? And we are His worshippers.

Al-Baqarah, 138

It is interesting to note that the term "*Sibghah*" literally means color or dye. In other words, when one has firm Iman (faith) in Allah ﷻ, it manifests its color (the unique Muslim character) on the exterior as well.

Unfortunately this concept is the hardest for most

educated Muslims to understand, but at the same time, is the most logical outcome of true Iman or faith.

I ask him, 'how are things in Saudi Arabia?'

'They are ok,' he shrugs his shoulders.

'What do people think of the Israeli bombardment of Lebanon?' I ask (the events of July-august, 2006).

'It's very bad,' he replies, 'May Allah ﷻ help our brothers and sisters there.'

It's basic human instinct to feel pain for a fellow human being in distress. But for us Muslims, it takes on a different meaning. For we are bonded not just by blood or humanity but by faith, the later one being far stronger and desirable in the sight of Allah ﷻ,

The believers are nothing else than brothers (in Islamic faith).

Al-Hujurat, 10

There is no event more profound and ever lasting when it comes to this concept of brotherhood than the Battle of Badr on Ramadan 17th 2nd year of the Hijrah to Medinah. A conflict, the similitude of which the world has never and will never see again. It defies logic and the "pseudo intellect" so popular now-a days. A conflict in which son stood against father, brother against brother, uncle against nephew, all based solely on faith! And the results decided also solely based on faith.

And difficult as it may be to accept, the Qur'an has made it clear as to what validates and fosters relationships,

O you who believe! Take not as Auliya (supporters and helpers) your fathers and your brothers if they prefer kufur (disbelief) to Iman (Belief). And whoever of you does so, then he is one of the Zalimun (wrongdoers).

At-Taubah, 23

But to feel the pain of our Muslim brothers and sisters is only the first step. To come to their assistance is what is truly desirable to The Almighty ﷻ.

The extent of this assistance can be seen in the extraordinary example of those Muslims who had embraced Islam in Makkah but refused to migrate to Medina despite the directives of the noble Prophet ﷺ. Their complacency was severely chastised by the Qur'an, yet Allah ﷻ made it clear that if they should ask for help in the matters of faith, the Muslims in Medina are bound to come to their assistance,

And as to those who believed but did not emigrate, you owe no duty of protection to them (and no sharing of inheritance) until they emigrate. But if they seek your help in Deen, it is your duty to help them except against a people with whom you have a treaty of mutual alliance.

Al-Anfal, 71

We are racing through the desert night. The darkness around us is harrowing. A pair of headlights appears in front of us and then whiz by at lightening speed. The driver, just like us, also probably missing the speed limit signs, if there were any.

Every 15 minutes or so, the surrounding ocean of darkness is interrupted by a halo of bright orange lights in the distance.

'Oil fields,' he tells me, with a big smile,
'This area has the most Oil in the world.'

Later, I was to find out that the Eastern Province is indeed blessed with some of the world's largest oil reserves. It all began in 1933 when the royal family of modern day Saudi Arabia granted oil concession to California Arabian Standard Oil Company (Casoc) leading to oil exploration on the Kingdom's Eastern Province. The successful journey, primarily lead by US based oil firms has not stopped since, with the discovery of "Safaniya" oil field, the world's largest offshore oil field in 1951. By 1988, the Saudi government had acquired 100% assets of the original Saudi-American collaboration and renamed the company Saudi-Aramco.

The combination of this arid land and one of the wealthiest economies of the world is intriguing. But that should come as

no surprise.

One has to go back in time approximately 1419 years, the eighth year of the Hijrah and the conquest of Makkah (frequently misspelled as Mecca).

The Makkan economy depended on trade caravans and the annual pilgrimage with polytheists coming from all over Arabia to pay homage to their gods nestled in the Ka'bah (the Sacred House).

And suddenly, after the conquest of Makkah, Allah ﷻ ordained that no non-Muslim is to be allowed in Makkah after that year. One can imagine that the bleak economic future that appeared inevitable with this Ordainment would have been paramount on the minds of the Companions ﷺ of the noble Prophet ﷺ.

But with this seemingly devastating prohibition, came the glad tidings,

O you who believe! Verily, the Mushrikun (polytheists, idolaters, disbelievers in the Oneness of Allah and in the message of Muhammad) are najas (impure). So let them not come near Al-Masjid Al-Haram (Makkah) after this year; and if you fear poverty, Allah will enrich you if He Wills, out of His Bounty. Surely Allah is All-Knowing, All-Wise.

At-Taubah, 28

The promise of Allah ﷻ holds true to this day. The series of conquests that started soon after the demise of the noble Prophet ﷺ, particularly during the reign of the second rightly guided caliph Umar-bin-Khattab ﷺ brought in riches of unsurpassed proportions.

This went on until the downfall of the Ottoman Empire. But just as it appeared that this spell of plenty was about to end, came the gush of Oil. And so here we are, driving through the desert night of modern day Saudi Arabia, with riches that defy logic,

Allah is the Greatest Benevolent.

Al-Hadid, 29

THE ARABS AND ARABIC

Jt's almost past midnight when we pull up in front of the Hufuf Hotel named for the city in the Al-Hasa region (also spelled as Al-Ahsa), the largest date-producing oasis in the world. The most well known species of dates here is called "Khalas" and is exported all over the world.

The locals say that when the people of this region heard about the noble Prophet's ﷺ call to Islam, they sent a delegation to him with the best dates of this region as a gift and he accepted those and sent one of the sahaba ﷺ back with them to teach them the Qur'an. The saying goes that the second jum'a prayer in Islam was held by that sahabi in a masjid in this area as well, the ruins of which are still partly preserved.

'Doctor there will be a coach in front of the hotel at 7:30 am to take you to the hospital,' the driver informs me as I enter the hotel lobby.

Salams exchange and he drives off.

I am exhausted and just manage to say my *'isha* salat before I fall asleep.

The coach is on time and we head towards the King Abdul-Aziz Hospital, which lies at the outskirts of the city. It's a sprawling compound composed of the main hospital building and the residential compound for the staff. The automatic door opens and I step out. Instantly, the ferocity of the heat wave forces my eyes shut - It's a 48 degrees centigrade-carrying wind. I had heard of, and experienced first hand, the "wind chill factor" in the winter of 1994 in Chicago, USA but had no idea what a "heat wave factor" would do to you.

With head bowed down and eyes barely open, I quickly walk towards the main entrance. A cold chill greets me as soon as I enter the building. I turn around and look out, this time from the cool comfort of the air-conditioned building. The bright sun light is blinding, flat barren land with barely visible horizon due to the dust and sand in the air. And then suddenly I realized why Allah ﷻ chose the Arabs of Hijaz as the flag bearers of the Final and True Message (Islam):

No one else, simply no one else could have done this but the Arabs with their bedouin culture and their ability to survive in such hostile environment, which still frightens one, despite all of our modern technological comforts.

It was their peculiar life style, the essence of which was traveling, with only one crop (date-palms) requiring once a year harvest, which made them the most suited for this daunting task of spreading the Final Message of Allah ﷻ. I remember some one once asked me why Allah ﷻ chose the Arabs and Arabic as the people and language for The Final Revelation.

One can imagine what the scenario would have been had the agricultural land toilers of any other part of the world been chosen for this mission. In the words of the extraordinary scientific scholar of Islam Dr. Muhammad Hamidullah (رحمته الله), “peasants are far too attached to the soil to possess any spirit of adventure and those who lead an industrial life, too are compelled to stay in a fixed place. Only merchants and caravan leaders are attracted to long journeys to which they are in fact obliged and accustomed.”¹

For centuries, the Quraysh of Makkah had trade relations with countries near and far. They were well accustomed to the paths and the cultures of these foreign lands. This unique ability made them the ideal bearers of This Final Message. In addition, unlike the Jewish people at that time, the Arabs were illiterate and as a result, had developed an extraordinary ability to memorize, an attribute which was later to become

1. The life and work of the Prophet of Islam

the foundation for preservation of the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the noble Prophet ﷺ. This point is well illustrated by the Qur'an,

He it is Who sent among the unlettered ones a Messenger (Muhammad ﷺ) from among themselves, reciting to them His Verses, purifying them (from the filth of disbelief and polytheism), and teaching them the Book (this Qur'an, Islamic Laws and Islamic Jurisprudence) and Al-Hikmah (As-Sunnah; legal ways, orders, acts of worship of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ) and verily, they had been before in manifest error.

Al-Jumua, 2

Which brings us back to the opening argument-Purification of the souls and the treasure of *Al-Hikmah* (wisdom) is not to be found in modern medical, engineering, business or law schools. The only sources of it being the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the noble Prophet ﷺ, who is reported to have said in a sound hadith that:

If Allah wills to do good to a person, He gives him the knowledge of Deen.

(Bukhari)

The Arabic word “Deen” has multiple meanings; judgment, religion, law and obedience and hence signifies a way of life. No surprise that it is the preferred terminology of the Qur'an when it comes to matters of faith. In contrast, religion or madhab, as we use it now a days, primarily relates to a set of rituals and jurisprudence.

Illiteracy or Jahiliya, in essence, is very relative. Plenty of very well educated illiterates are all around us. It is their self conceived notions about their misguided knowledge that eventually leads them and their loved ones astray,

Who hears the Verses of Allah (being) recited to him, yet persists with pride as if he heard them not. So announce to him a painful torment!

Al-Jathiya, 8

For these literal illiterates, success in this world means everything and hence all their resources are directed towards achieving this goal. On the same token, failure in worldly affairs results in total disillusionment and despair from the Mercy of Allah ﷻ. And therefore, if I was to pick one absolutely crucial element on which rests the magnificent building of Islam, it would be the concept of the ultimate accountability; Judgment Day in front of The Just One.

It is the single most distinctive feature between Islam and the other religions. The Qur'an testifies to its importance,

Verily, those who hope not for their Meeting with Us, but are pleased and satisfied with the life of the present world, and those who are heedless of Our Ayat (proofs, verses, signs etc). Those, their abode will be the Fire, because of what they used to earn.

Yunus, 7-8

Finally, the language; All languages have and do undergo evolution, but Arabic has remained essentially unchanged for thousands of years.

So rightly pointed out by Dr. Muhammad Hamidullah ﷻ. To quote him,

“no other language is comparable to Arabic in its rhythm, its rules of conjugation, its phonetics. It is also a condensed language without loosing, thereby, the least precision. The incredible wealth of its vocabulary renders it capable of expressing all ideas and shades of meaning with an admirable elegance.”¹

All features which would be expected from a language that was to carry The Word of Allah ﷻ. Yes, dialects have emerged in modern day Arabia, but for any student of the Qur'an and the Sunnah, who understands Arabic, the sayings of the noble Prophet ﷺ are as clear today as they were to the Companions over 1400 yrs ago.

The first day is spent on orientation of the hospital and

1. The life and work of the Prophet of Islam

the residential compound. I am here to provide consultancy services for a few weeks. The furnished apartment buildings are designed in a shape of a large square and in the center is an oasis of date-palm trees, lush green grass, shopping center and a beautiful masjid.

A coincidence or well thought out, this represented the true position of the masjid or in reality the true position of Allah ﷻ in the life of all Muslims. That's how we really ought to be. Everything we do revolves around the *ma'rifah* of Allah ﷻ.

The hospital building is approximately 200 yards from the residential compound. It seems so close that you almost want to walk to it, but that would be a mistake for most of us, foreigners in this desert land. the heat is unbearable even at 7:30 am. Every 10 minutes, an air-conditioned coach picks up staff from the colony and drops them at the hospital, picking up off-duty returning staff.

As I sit in the cool, tinted environment of the coach, the Words of Allah ﷻ flash to my mind. They are regarding one of the most defining moments in the history of Islam; the expedition of Tabuk against the Byzantine empire in rajab, in the year 9 hijrah. An event that truly separated the believers from the munafiqun (the hypocrites). The distance, the drought and the hot weather made it an exceptionally difficult journey and so only those, with the exception of a few believers, chose to stay behind who were hypocrites in their hearts. The Qur'anic reference to the heat is really spectacular,

Those who stayed away (from Tabuk expedition) rejoiced in their staying behind the Messenger of Allah; they hated to strive and fight with their properties and their lives in the Cause of Allah, and they said: "March not forth in the heat." Say: "The Fire of Hell is more intense in heat"; if only they could understand!.

At-Taubah, 81

Tabuk is approximately 450 miles from Medina; 450 miles

in blistering heat and here I am, walking only 200 yards seems impossible! What extraordinary tests our *aslaf* (those before us) had to go through! How can we even begin to thank Allah ﷻ for not putting us into tribulations and trial that He put those who were far better than us.

And because He ﷻ is our Khaliq (creator) and knows us better than ourselves, He so rightly told us to ask His Mercy in such elegant words,

Our Lord! Lay not us a burden like that which you did lay on those before us; our Lord! Put not on us a burden greater than we have strength to bear. Pardon us and grant us Forgiveness. Have mercy on us.

Al-Baqarah, 286

Tribulations are an integral part of human history. For Muslims, these take on an entirely different meaning. For those of us who have ever had, any calamity, sorrow or pain afflict them, have been given fantastic glad tidings by the noble Prophet ﷺ, provided, the *Taqwa* of Allah ﷻ is paramount in the minds:

No fatigue, no disease, nor sorrow, nor sadness, nor hurt, nor distress befalls a Muslim, even if it were the prick he receives from a thorn, but that Allah expiates some of his sins for that.

(Bukhari)

Changes the whole perspective of calamities, once one understands the wisdom behind them.

It is 1:30 pm and the Philipino nurse shows the first patient into the office. A middle aged Saudi male closely followed by the patient, his wife, covered in a black hijab, only her eyes visible.

‘*Tafaḍul ya ukhti,*’ (have a seat my sister) I say.

Saleh, the tall Sudanese hospital interpreter sits right next to me. I start asking the patient simple questions to figure out what her problem is. Slowly, we progress. Every so often she utters words that I can’t make out. Saleh sits with a funny smile on his

face. Finally, we agree on a diagnosis and treatment and they both thank me, Salams exchange and they walk out.

I look at saleh, expecting him to break out in laughter on my rather primitive Arabic.

‘You don’t need me, doctor,’ He says, ‘you speak very good Arabic; you speak lughat ul-fusha (non-vernacular).’

And herein lies, what I believe to be, one of the biggest dilemmas of this and previous generations: it is the transformation of English as the inevitable, unavoidable, all around standard language and waning away of Arabic as a foundation language for all Muslims, in no small part due to our colonization by the English. We seem to have forgotten the Divine choice in language,

Verily, We have sent it down as an Arabic Qur’an in order that you may understand.

Yusuf, 2

The best private or public schools in Pakistan may offer optional French or Spanish but not Arabic. Qur’an is read in Arabic just for reward without ever being able to understand its meaning or wisdom - A loss of monumental proportions.

Not only that, an additional handicap is relying on translations of the enormous classic traditional Arabic literature in the science of Hadith, Fiqh or jurisprudence etc.

This tragic gap in communication has led to an inability to benefit from traditional scholars of Islam, who, to compound the matters, are inept at English. The disconnect has had devastating consequences; creating two worlds, one in the original text and the other dependant on the translation, which comes with the inherent limitation of being bound by the personality of the translator.

What is needed is to start learning the language of the Qur’an, as a language and not merely a translation. But what is needed even more is the transformation of those words into actions because in the end, that’s what really matters.

DAJJAL AND KAHF

They are eleven in total; the girls sitting on one side of the room and the boys on the other. They are all Saudi's, 4th and final year medical school students and they have asked me to give them a lecture on valvular heart disease.

The girls are indistinguishable from each other. Only their exposed eyes might give a clue to their individual identity. I introduce my self and ask them individually to explain to me their concept of a good physician, and am instantly aware of their significant handicap in English.

'But your books are all in English, right?' I ask them. nods and muffled responses in affirmative. We go on with our lecture. The girls certainly seem to have a better grasp of English. The class ends with a fair bit of understanding of the topic, or so I hope.

What a strange and sad disconnect this language barrier has created between us. For them, English is just a way to pass their exams and for us, Arabic is just the language of the Arabs. But when the Prophet ﷺ said in a sound hadith that:

A strong believer is better and more lovable to Allah than a weak believer.

(Muslim)

he meant strength in all aspects of life. A believer (mo'min) is one who does everything to the best of his abilities and that includes a quest for perfection in foreign languages as well, particularly if that language is the medium of education for all modern sciences.

'Well, let's talk about something else for a few min,' I say.

‘Since its Friday, why don’t you tell me what acts are amongst the Sunnah of the noble Prophet ﷺ, on Friday?’

‘Recite durūd, give sadaqa,’ and then silence falls in the room.

‘What about reciting surah Al-Kahf?’ I ask.

A few, rather unsure nods.

To understand the importance of sura Al-Kahf, we must recognize the biggest tribulation of our time: Dajjal.

Dajjal comes from the Arabic root word Dajl, which literally means deception and so Dajjal is “the big deceiver”. He comes in all shapes, sizes and colors.

The ahadith about Dajjal are numerous, describing his appearance and his actions. But, while one set of description is a literal one, the other is a metaphor and that’s what we are surrounded by now - This mono-vision ideology and philosophy of this world. That is the biggest deception afflicting mankind, which attempts at setting us free from the Dominion of Allah ﷻ, where by humans set their own standards of virtue and vice. The Prophet ﷺ left guidance for protection against this ultimate deception:

If anyone learns by heart the first ten verses of sura Al-Kahf, he will be protected from the Dajjal.

(Muslim)

‘Well, tell me what the sources of *MashaAllah* and *InshaAllah* (the two most common terms used in any Muslim conversations) are?’ I ask them,

shallow smiles in the room, but no answer.

‘Just something you picked up from your grand parents?’ I ask.

‘No, it’s somewhere from Islam,’ one manages to say.

Well of course it is - all good things come from Islam.

‘If you all had read Al-Kahf with its meanings, you would have known that both terms come from it,’ I explain to them and decide to take it up a notch;

‘Do you know who Dr. Muhammad Hamidullah was?’ I

ask them.

The response is no different from the previous one.

‘Well let’s go on to Hollywood then, How about Brad Pitt?’ I said, nods in affirmative all across the room. ‘Madonna also,’ one of the male students adds, with a sheepish smile. Tragically, I have achieved my purpose.

‘You see, where our real disease lies,’ I explained to them,

‘You all recognize Hollywood stars, the symbols of Western civilization, culture, values, but are ignorant to our own treasures - to who Dr. Hamidullah was.’ I went on to explain to them that he (1909-2002) was one of the most extraordinary scientific scholars of Islam. That he had written over 100 books and over 1000 articles on Islam, that he had translated the Qur’an in French, English and German languages, a feat unsurpassed even today and that his magnum opus book “The life and work of the Prophet of Islam” is an absolute masterpiece for all students of the Seerah (life) of the noble Prophet of Islam. And finally, in 2002, when the life of the Companion seemed only to exist on paper, he represented a practical example which was the reminiscent of that of the Companions and those who followed them in letter and spirit.

And so our priorities dictate our vision and our ultimate fate. We are at the bottom of Allah ﷻ priority list, since His chosen Deen and all its aspects are at the bottom of our priority list. What will it take for us to realize this calamity of calamities? The state of the Muslim Ummah at this time should come as no surprise to any and rather an affirmation of the above philosophy.

There is a fairly simple but essentially critical solution to this problem, but once again we must turn to The Manual of life,

The fact is that Allah never changes the condition of a people until they intend to change it themselves.

Ar-Ra’d, 11

This is a two sided coin; those in the abysmal depths

of misguidance, will remain in that state until they rise up themselves and then, they will find the Divine Assistance by their sides and those who are in the Bounties of Allah ﷻ will not have it taken away from them if they remain thankful and obedient,

That is because Allah has never changed the blessings which He has bestowed on a people until they themselves changed the condition of their souls; Verily Allah hear all and knows all.

Al-Anfal, 53

Do not be surprised. This promise of the Al-Mighty has been eternal, to those before us and for those to follow us,

Remember that your Rabb had forewarned, “If you are grateful, I will bestow abundance upon you, but if you are ungrateful (then you should know that) My punishment will be terrible indeed.

Ibrahim, 7

UMM-UL-QURA

The Quran has given two additional names to the holy city of Makkah; *Umm-ul-Qura* (the mother of cities) and *Bakkah* (based on a biblical term denoting “a dry valley”). Geographically, Makkah lies in the centre of the earth, no coincidence, and in an authentic hadith the noble Prophet ﷺ is reported to have said that:

the Earthly Ka’bah is the antipode of the mosque of the angels (Bait-al-Ma’mur) underneath the Throne of Allah ﷻ. So much so, that if a stone was dropped from there, it would fall on the top of the Ka’bah in Makkah.

(*Bukhari*)

Our flight to Jeddah leaves at 6 pm, me and Dr. Ali Zuberi, a pulmonologist from Karachi. For 2 weeks now, we have shared the two bedroom furnished apartment in the hospital compound. Dr Siddiqui, the orthopedic surgeon, living up to his name, has insisted that he would drop us at the Dammam airport.

‘Please don’t deny me the sawab of being a part of this august journey,’ he said.

We are going for Umrah, the ziarah of the House of Allah ﷻ. I plan to go on to Taif and spend a day or two with a dear old friend, a pulmonologist as well.

Clad in ihram, I check in at the Saudi airline counter. Down the jet way and into the waiting aircraft, I walk down the aisle looking up at the numbers till I get to 24-b, my seat. A young lady is sitting in 24-a, the window seat. And then, before

I had any time to think, the steward suddenly appears,
 ‘what’s your seat number Sir?’

I show him my boarding card and our eyes meet for a split second and then he looked at the young hijab-less “modern” lady. I said nothing; it didn’t need saying. I took a step back and waited. Walking behind me was a young Saudi boy, probably 18 or so years old. The steward went over to him and after checking that his seat was a few rows ahead, next to a male passenger, he gently whispered something into his ear,

‘he is a *muttawā*, he will not sit with a lone woman,’

I like to think, is what he said to the young boy, who obliging quietly, sat in my seat and I walked over to his.

Who says appearances are not important! But isn’t this seemingly “uncivilized” behavior, so contrary to my education and profession? An American trained and board certified cardiologist? Being close to patients, irrespective of gender, is part of my profession. I would be listening to this lady’s heart with a stethoscope if she was a patient in my office, without a second thought, but here, she is simply a *non-mahram*. The boundaries of Allah ﷻ must take precedence. This is precisely where the beauty of Islam is to be appreciated the most.

It’s a constant adaptation to your surrounding. An instantaneous metamorphosis occurs as the circumstances dictate. The Prophet ﷺ has been reported to have said:

It is not permissible for a man to be alone with a
 (non-mahram) woman.

(Bukhari)

Muslim men tend to forget that hijab is a unisex terminology and applies to them as much as it does to women. Not to belittle the recommended dress requirements for men but the best hijab is lowering of the gaze,

Tell the believing men to lower their gaze and
 protect their private parts. That is purer for them.

An-Nūr, 30

Like it or not, uninhibited “social mixing”, between opposite genders is a uniquely Western phenomenon, which has unfortunately slithered silently into our daily lives. We seem to have very conveniently forgotten the concept of Divine Limits and the consequences of trespassing them,

These are the Limits set by Allah; Do not transgress them, and those who transgress the Limits of Allah are the wrong doers.

Al-Baqarah, 229

But how does one decide about the fine distinction that exists in these matters? There can be no step-by-step manual for this. As would be expected, an answer of utter simplistic beauty has been given by the Qur’an:

O you who Believe! If you have the Taqwa of Allah (in your hearts), He will grant you the Furqan (the ability to distinguish right from wrong.

Al-Anfal, 29

What remains to be decided is what *Taqwa* means. The Arabic root word is *wqy* meaning, “to save.” It is the most sought after quality of the believers, in the Qur’an and the closest one can get to its meaning is a state in which one is conscious of the displeasure of Allah ﷻ in every single aspect of ones life; a constant entwined state of fear and hope.

We land at Jeddah airport at 8 pm and quickly walk towards the exit. A sense of urgency has suddenly appeared now that we are so close to what the eyes long to see. A long line of taxi cabs is ready to take the faithful to their beloved destination

We are suddenly surrounded by several drivers shrieking ‘Makkah, Makkah.’ My friend Ali Zuberi looks at me - my primitive Arabic will have to do here.

‘How much?’ I ask.

‘Forty Riyals per person,’ the middle aged one in the front says.

‘And how many people in one taxi?’ I ask.

‘Four,’ he replies.

‘Hundred fifty Riyals for the entire taxi if you want to,’ he adds.

‘What is he saying?’ asks Ali, impatiently.

I tell him the deal - we both look at each other for a second and decide to take the shared taxi.

The driver quickly ushers us to the big American-made car in the front of the line. Before we had a chance to sit in, he was gone, back to the arrivals gate, searching for the other members-to-be of our party. With necks turned around, we both look at the arriving passengers with the same hopeful passion, as our driver.

We could hear him shouting at the top of his voice and finally, success. A middle aged man is convinced that it’s a good deal and comes over. As we exchange salams, the driver slips back again.

But this time no luck for almost five minutes. All three of us are getting impatient now. Our companion, an Arab, pulls the window down and shouts at the driver to let it go and let’s be on our way. He has no desire to do that but then the traffic police officer comes to our rescue. May be he was impressed by our genuine anxiety, and tells the driver to head out. Heated words exchange between them for a few seconds and we are on our way.

Every now and then, giant billboards appear by the road side, “Malaysia, Truly Asia” they pronounce, in the backdrop of the Petronas Towers (The worlds tallest buildings) and pristine beaches in the foreground. Well, for the desert dwellers, it certainly must carry tremendous appeal. But being the worlds tallest; what impact does that have on a nation’s character, integrity, discipline, is something far too alien for me to comprehend.

All I know is that the world’s tallest hotel (Burj-al-Arab), which is incidentally the world’s only 7-star hotel as well, is in UAE, another Islamic country, which plans to build the tallest

building in the world to be called, “Burj-Dubai”. Last time I was in Dubai in Dec 2005, the foundation work had already started. And then in 2006 came the news of a new “man-made” miracle to be, no doubt, in UAE. It is called “Palm Island”, a luxurious living heaven build on reclaimed land from the ocean.

I can't help but think, is this what we the Muslims in particular and the humans in general, were supposed to be doing? How many tall and grandiose buildings were there in Medina-Al-Munawara? About the time when Allah ﷻ had granted its dwellers, the Kingdom of Arabia and eventually that of Persia, Egypt and Rome.

If it were the “tallest buildings” deciding the fate of a nation, we the Muslims should be, right about now, the leaders of the world, as we were, in our glorious past, and lead them to the ultimate reward; The Mercy of Allah ﷻ.

Something is wrong with this picture.

The Qur'an testifies to this,

Our creation of the heavens and the earth and all that lies between them is not a game. Had We meant to make it a play ground, We would have done it by Our self (without giving you discretion to do right and wrong) had We ever done so.

Al-Anbiya, 16-17

History often repeats itself, to serve as a lesson from The Creator and man often makes the same mistake again,

Have you not seen how your Rabb dealt with Ad?
The residents of Iram, the city of lofty pillars. The
like of which had never been built in other cities

Al-Fajr, 8-9

It is a grave misconception that Allah ﷻ tests people only by subjecting them to trials and tribulations, which bring pain and sorrow. How conveniently do we forget that an equally fundamental test is through periods of plenty and how we indulge ourselves in those bountiful days,

We are putting all of you to a test by passing you

through bad and good conditions, and finally you shall return to us.

Al-Anbiya, 35

For those fortunate ones granted *baseerah* (wisdom) by the All-Mighty, there is a much more meaningful sign in this quest for the tallest building as the Prophet ﷺ said:

The Hour will not be established till: ‘Shepherds with torn shoes will compete with one another in constructing high buildings.

(Bukhari. part of a long Hadith)

So if anything at all in this “the tallest building”, it is the proximity to the end of time and with it, our granted time.

The taxi drops us close to “Bab-al-Fahd” (one of the entrances to Masjid-Al-Haram) and we both scurry out. There is an Arabic saying;

awal tuam ba’ad kalam (first food and then conversation),

We are both starving and walk towards a food stall to quell the hunger.

Masjid Al-Haram nestles in between the lofty hotel buildings all around it. The view is breath taking, as being in the center of a valley; it suddenly appears as a full bloom flower appears in the midst of thick foliage.

I pull out my cell phone and call my old friend Dr. Aftab Akhtar in Taif.

‘Where are you?, He asks. ‘Just about to enter The Masjid,’ I reply.

‘Give me a couple of rings just when you are about to start the sa’y, it will take me about the same time to make it to Makkah from Taif.’ He said.

We drop off our hand luggage at a Pakistani barbershop. The proprietor had spotted us from a distance and offered to store the bags in his shop for 5 riyals each, thereby assuring that we would get our hair cut at his shop as well - Nothing wrong with this business strategy.

We walk briskly to the entrance of the holy Masjid. It’s approximately 150 yards from the gate to the center courtyard,

which houses the Ka'bah. A series of stairs, line the descending pathway. As I walk down, imperceptibly, the roof in the horizon lifts up, just as a theater curtain, revealing the Sacred Black House.

I paused, with hands lifted up in invocation. An authentic narration of the noble Prophet ﷺ says that the invocation at the first sight of the Ka'bah is answered by Allah ﷻ.

Ka'bah; the House of Allah ﷻ. A simple black, cube shaped (from the Arabic word *muka'ab* meaning cube) stone studded structure, made of granite from the hills near Makkah; the house of The Owner of the Heavens and the Earth and all the treasures that lie within. Is there a hidden message in this or is it too obvious?

Allow me to construct a comparison; this House of Allah and the mind-boggling luxury houses we, who own nothing in reality, construct for our short span here in this world The Ka'bah makes a glaring statement of majesty, modesty and austerity, if only the eyes of the soul would see it. The simple structure is now shrouded in exquisite silk cloth with gold embroidered Qur'anic calligraphy, though Allah ﷻ was in no need of this,

Allah is self-sufficient; it is you who are the needy.
Muhammad, 38

This structure has fallen to the forces of nature and rebuild or repaired many times over the last several centuries.

Bear with me; The Ka'bah represents the Oneness of Allah ﷻ and it is this association that makes it what it is in our eyes; for we worship the Esteemed Owner of this House, not the stone structure it self. No surprise that it's the same house which at one point in time contained hundreds of idols, the same house in which Abu-Lahab and Abu-Jahl used to stand. It is this disconnect of the visible and the spirit within which afflicts so many of us,

Verily! It is not their eyes that have become blind-
but blind have become the hearts that are in their

breasts.

Al-Hajj, 46

Moments later, I become part of the swarm of people rotating around the Sacred House. People are clinging to all the walls of the Ka'bah while the Saudi religious guides gently tell them that we are only supposed to touch the Yemeni corner and the Hajar-e-Aswad (the sacred black stone).

For all we do, in all aspects of our lives is what the noble Prophet ﷺ told us to do. Even eyes rise and bow according to the likes and dislikes of Allah ﷻ and His Messenger ﷺ. It's all about absolute obedience, without question. Nothing more and nothing less will do,

You have indeed, in the life of Rasool-Allah, the 'Best Model' for him whose hope is in Allah and the day of the Hereafter.

Al-Ahzab, 21

Individual thoughts and ideas are welcome as long as they are in the realm of this circle of obedience to Allah ﷻ and His Messenger ﷺ.

Everyone is aware of the fact, that man is closest to his Creator during prostration; why then, shall one not do three or four prostrations during each rak'at of the salat? For that is not in accordance with the Sunnah of the noble Prophet ﷺ and such an act, instead of reaping in rewards, will lead to misguidance. The Prophet ﷺ said in a sound hadith:

If anyone innovates something in this religion of ours, that thing is rejected"

(Bukhari)

I flip out my cell-phone as I head towards Mount Safa to start the sa'y and in that brief moment, all which is good about this technology, became obvious. I dialed Aftab's number and hung up after 3 bells. Somehow, talking about anything except asking for Allah ﷻ Mercy, in that courtyard, didn't seem right. But sadly, our Masajid all over are riddled, during the salat

with all sorts of movie tunes blasting from the mobile phones. Even Masjid-Al-Haram and Masjid-Al-Nabawi are not immune to this phenomenon.

I finish the Umrah and walk out towards the barbershop for the final ritual of hair cutting before undoing my ihram.

Umrah - Thousand of Muslims perform this act of obedience every day and yet individually, as well as an Ummah, we remain in this state of moral and social decay. That is because there are only a few fortunate ones who walk out of this experience, transformed. Their lives take one a different path from that point on and then there are the countless unfortunate ones who despite indulging in this enlightening experience over and over again, walk out in the same state, just as they had walked into it. Nothing changes for them. All they have acquired is fatigue.

In essence, what we have forgotten is that despite our best efforts, it is only the Mercy of Allah ﷻ which is the main ingredient required for this transformation. The Qur'an explained the indispensable nature of this ingredient in response to the dearly held wish of the Prophet ﷺ for the Quraysh to accept Islam,

O Prophet! You are not responsible for their guidance; it is Allah Who guides whom He pleases.

Al-Baqarah, 272

Consider a scenario that embodies this concept; Two Makkan men in the early period of Islam; both with extraordinary courage and a ferocious animosity towards this emerging faith and its Messenger ﷺ; Umar-bin-khattab and Amr-bin-Hisham (better known as Abu-Jahl). Both had an ample opportunity to spend time with and listen to the Messenger of Allah ﷺ and yet, even this audacious company could not break through their shells of ignorance.

The noble Prophet ﷺ has been reported, in an authentic hadith, to invoke Allah ﷻ to turn the heart of one of them towards Islam. And Allah ﷻ chose Umar-bin-Khattab to be

the fortunate one. The Prophet ﷺ has also been reported to have said, in a sound hadith that:

the best ones in jahiliya (ignorance) will be the best ones in Islam, once they have been granted the guidance.

(Bukhari)

The defining factor being the Guidance from Allah ﷻ which inevitably accompanies those who have the sincerest desire in their hearts to find this guidance.

And the biggest hurdle in this transformation is the human ego. It was Abu-jahl's ego, which denied him the Divine Guidance and Umar's ﷺ surrender, which uplifted him.

The conversation between Iblees (from Arabic root word Ablasa which means to despair) and Allah ﷻ at the time of Adam's creation is the epitome of this ego ,

Accordingly all the angels prostrated themselves except Iblees; he acted arrogantly and became one of the disbelievers. Allah said: "O Iblees! What prevented you from prostrating yourself to the one whom I have created with my Own Hands? Are you too arrogant or do you think that you are one of the exalted ones?" Iblees said.

"I am better than him"

Sad, 76

That's all it takes; surrender your will and the doors of eternal success will swing wide open, stick to your misguided ego and eternal despair is your abode.

TAIF

Our rendezvous is le-Meridian hotel, a few hundred yards from Masjid-Al-Haram. Roller carry-on in one hand and a five gallon bottle of Zam-Zam in the other, which I bought outside the barber shop, I walk towards the meeting point. In a few minutes my arm fatigues out. This was not a great idea, but then I had to get the sacred water. After all, that is the best gift for all back home - that and the dates of Hijaz.

Finally I make it to the hotel, panting and drenched in sweat. On the way, I stop to buy a stack of fresh miswak sticks from a street vendor. The Prophet ﷺ loved it more than anything else. Even on his death bed, as he lay, burning in high grade fever, sinking in and out of consciousness, he asked his beloved wife, Aisha ﷺ to put miswak in his mouth.

As I stand in front of the hotel entrance, I spot a beaten-up truck parked in the front, full to the brink with five gallon bottles of Zam-Zam - Only if I had known, I wouldn't have logged the additional weight all the way.

But its precisely this thought, which when applied to any aspect of life, can lead to perpetual feeling of guilt and despair and so the Prophet ﷺ has been reported to have said in an authentic hadith that if things don't go according to your expectations, don't say, 'if I had done so and so' but say, 'Allah willed it this way and He does what He pleases.' Which brings us to the fundamental but delicate matter of Qadr (fate). Suffice to say that the Prophet ﷺ forbade us to discuss fate, for the right reasons.

But as human nature would have it, fate is something that is palpable at all times and so the Qur'an puts forth a majestic solution,

O Prophet, tell them: “Nothing will happen to us except what Allah has written for us; He is our protector;” And in Allah let the believers put their trust.

At-Taubah, 51

Admittedly, this is a tough pill to swallow for most people but there is an extraordinary philosophy endorsed by the Qur’an, as summarized below, which if embraced in its entirety, can cure so many of the ills of our societies now a days,

No affliction can happen on earth nor to your souls, which is not recorded in a book, before We brings it into existence; surely that is easy for Allah. This is done so that you may not grieve for the things that you may miss, or be overjoyed at what you gain.

Al-Hadid, 23

The phone rings. It’s Aftab.

‘Where are you?’ I ask.

‘I am parking inside the hotel parking lot,’ he tells me,

‘Since I am here, I have to say two rak’at prayers in the Haram.’

I can’t argue with that. So moments later, we both walk back to Masjid-al-Haram for prayers.

‘You sound sick,’ I say on the walk back to the car.

‘Yes, I have had a bad cold since yesterday,’ he tells me.

We reminisce about old times as we sit in the car, in the exit lane of the parking lot. The young Saudi attendant hurriedly comes over and tells Aftab the charges. Aftab pulls out a 50 riyal note and hands it to him, which he graciously accepts and we roll out.

‘Didn’t the sign say 25 riyals for one hr?’ I asked.

‘Yes,’ he said.

‘Why did you give him 50?’

‘I didn’t understand him, I thought he asked for 50, plus my Arabic is limited to one word, *‘alatūl* (go straight),’ replied Aftab.

Well, for Makkah, that’s not a big loss.

We drive out of Makkah and head towards Taif. I hope I’ll

get a chance to see Masjid-al-Haram again, I hope.

Taif sits at an elevation of 1700 meters in the Al-Sarawat mountains. It was the home of Banu-Thaqif tribe in pre-Islamic era and housed the goddess Al-lat. A sharp contrast exists - the encircling mountains represent a completely barren terrain, but the city is quite different.

The cooler climate allowed the growth of lush gardens of various fruits earning the city the title of “the Garden of the Hijaz.”

The road is magnificent. Dual lane all the way. Interestingly it has been constructed at such wide angles that one hardly recognizes the accent. The barrenness of the surrounding is even perceptible at night. It must have been tough, cutting these rock mountains for such a wide road.

I cannot help being pushed back in time to the year 620 AD. In Rajab, the 10th year of the Prophet Hood, Abu-Talib, the Prophet’s uncle passed away, and so also melted away the only protection for the Prophet ﷺ in Makkah. The Quraysh now had a free hand to mount their torture and oppression of the Muslims. Two months latter, Khadija the beloved wife of the Prophet ﷺ also passed away. The Prophet ﷺ has been reported to remember the year as “*‘Aam-ul-Huzn* (Year of Sorrow).

And so he headed to Taif with his freed slave Zaid-bin-Haritha, hoping to get a more receptive audience from the Thaqif elders. What a journey it must have been! Two men on foot, through these inhospitable mountains and then here we are - two men, sitting in a Crown Victoria, drinking coffee and cruising at 60 km/hr.

Subhan-Allah!

What followed was described by the Prophet ﷺ himself, as the worst day of his life. The town elders incited the local youngsters against him and they threw stones at him, tearing his flesh, to the point where his shoes filled with his blood. Finally, he found refuge at an orchard of Utbah and Shaibah, the sons of Rabi’a (the Makkan Chief). Their Christian slave, Addas brought him some grapes and upon hearing the Prophetic

call, embraced Islam.

And it was here that a glimpse of why he was called “mercy to mankind” can be seen. After this painful torment at the hands of the people of Taif, Gabriel approached the Prophet ﷺ and said to him:

Allah has heard yours people’s discourse with you and their answer. Now Allah sends the angel of the mountain to you so that you may order him what you will regarding the unbelievers.” But the Messenger of Allah said, “No, I rather hope that Allah will produce a progeny from these unbelievers who will worship Him alone and will not setup partners with Him.

Bukhari

And just as he had wished, the people of Taif embraced Islam following the Tabuk expedition and it was a young man from Taif named Muhammad bin Qasim who subsequently was credited with bringing Islam to the Subcontinent.

The cars coming at us from the opposite direction are all whizzing by. Is it just me or are there very few speed limit signs in the Kingdom? But behold!

The darkness in front of us is breached by a pair of headlights, and then another pair and then another! All three side by side.

‘What in Allah’s name is going on?’ I ask Aftab.

With a strange calmness he says, ‘Its routine, they come at you two or three at a time.’

‘What do you do?’ is all I can come up with.

‘You just pull up to the shoulder as much as you can and let them go by,’ he tells me.

I guess, they must have somewhere more important to be, than us.

Why do we do this? Why are we Muslims in particular so ready to break all kinds of rules, regulations and disciplines? You’ll get a hundred responses from people; Lack of education, poor implementation of law etc.

Well, I can’t argue with the importance of implementation of law, but there is a deeper and more ominous pathology

here.

For us Muslims, all that is good in any shape or form is associated with the ma'rifah of Allah ﷻ, which becomes the lone self-policing ideology manifesting itself in the smallest of acts. The Prophet ﷺ reportedly said,

Religion is sincerity to Allah and His Book, and His Messenger, and to the leaders of the Muslims and their common folk.

(Muslim)

The sequence of priority in this hadith is the key to the puzzle of life and must be kept paramount at all times. Those who are not sincere to Allah ﷻ and His Messenger can never attain sincerity to the ordinary Muslims. It just doesn't work. This is precisely where we as Muslims in general and particularly in Pakistan have faltered for a long time. Government after government, the entire official thrust has always been economic prosperity alone, which has so far, not surprisingly, failed to materialize despite the heavy "assistance" of IMF, World Bank and a host of other international financial institutions, because the priorities of all of these statesmen were incorrect,

These are the people, who if We give them power in the land, will establish salah, pay zakah, enjoin justice and forbid evil; the final decision of all affairs is in the Hands of Allah.

Al-Hajj, 41

The reality seems to have completely eluded them, that out of all the four fundamental Commandments of Allah ﷻ, for people in power, they have failed to implement even one.

They also seem to have forgotten the eternal truth, that when this sequence of regulations is implemented, economic prosperity accompanies as a default phenomenon, just as spring rolls in when it is supposed to, if a little late sometimes. But why do they keep making the same mistakes over and over again?

Plenty of reasonable responses will arise to this as well, but none as critical as this one, repeated over and over again in the Qur'an:

By Allah! We sent Rasools before you (O Muhammad) to other nations; but shaitan made their deeds seem fair to them so they did not believe”

Al-Nahl, 63

Shaitan has made their deeds fair-seeming to them and thus turned them away from the Right Way.

Al-Naml, 24

This concept is without a doubt the most difficult for most people to comprehend, because those surrounded in this layer of misconception truly believe that they are doing incredible service for others - such is the deception of Iblees. And so, allow me to show you the frightful but inevitable results of their misguided efforts,

Allah gives you an example of a town which was enjoying security and peace, receiving its provisions in abundance from every quarter, but it became ungrateful to the favors of Allah. As a result, Allah made its residents taste the consequences of their doings, through inflicting upon them misfortunes of hunger and fear.

Al-Nahl, 112

Insecurity and economic woes (hunger and fear) are the tale of the day in most Muslim countries, all dating back to the fateful days in their individual histories when they decided to do away with their covenant with the Al-Mighty ﷻ. There can be no bigger mistake than underestimating the impact of forming this perpetual, solid bond with the Book of Allah ﷻ.

Imagine this; two people, reading the same book simultaneously, reaching exact opposite conclusions and in turn, based on those, meeting exact opposite ends.

Here is what I mean;

We have revealed the Qur'an which is a healing and a mercy to the believers; while to the wrongdoers it adds nothing but loss.

Al-Israa, 82

Do you appreciate the intricate contrast here?
Same words - accept them and the reward is beyond

comprehension - turn away from them - and the path to perdition awaits you. What most of us don't realize is that when we are asking Allah ﷻ for the *Hasanat* (goods) in this world, we are not asking for wealth and power, as is the common erroneous assumption, but the true good in this world, is the ability to lead a life which assures the ultimate success on the Day of Judgment. That is the real "*Hasanat*."

It's almost 2 am when we arrive at the housing compound of the Military hospital. I step out of the car and am greeted by a cold, gentle wind. The rustling sound of the trees all around us transports me back to Islamabad in winter. What a welcome sight! Particularly after that 48 degree centigrade greeting in Al-Hasa.

The fajar adhan wakes me up before my alarm goes off. The small, neat, nicely tucked away masjid is right next-door and I walk to it, which brings us to an act, the enormity of which still continues to elude most Muslims; the obligatory salat.

You want to know the Qur'anic and hadith references to salat, and its benefits, you'll find countless superb books.

I want to draw your attention to only one aspect of it: its establishment!

Yes, each year the number of masjid in our societies increases. In Ramadhan, they are full of the faithful, bowing, prostrating to Allah Al-Mighty. Yet the fruitful results, as promised by the Qur'an, of this activity are nowhere to be seen,

Recite from this Book (Qur'an) which has been revealed to you and establish Salah. Surely, Salah keeps one away from shameful and evil deeds.

Al-Ankabut, 45

Why is that?

The answer is simple and lies within the original command; establish!

We "pray or say" salat. We have failed to establish it. And to make matters even worse, those who "say" their salat hardly understand the offerings they make to the Creator of the Heavens and Earth.

Try it yourself. I have, for years, in “educated” gatherings and the results have been remarkably similar. Ask any one, particularly the young generation, about the meaning of the opening dialogue of the daily salat. Odds are, that less than 20% will know it.

How can you establish something you don’t even understand!

We say “Allah-hu-Akbar” (Allah is the greatest), but He is not Akbar in our lives. We say “You alone we worship and You alone we call on for help” but we worship plenty of other Gods and look for help from those who are themselves helpless.

Just pay a visit to anyone of the top 5-star hotels in Pakistan or the latest shopping mall. The least conspicuous item, if any at all, will be the so-called “mosque.” All possible space must be utilized to bring in revenue. We have made our choice.

And then there were those before us who made their choice. Have we forgotten that the first task of the Prophet ﷺ after migration to Medina was to build Masjid-e-Quba.

Both actions, in their there own realms represent the priority of establishing salah for both groups.

If there is any remnant of this establishment to be seen, it’s in Saudi Arabia, particularly in the blessed cities of Makkkah-al-Mukarrama and Medina-al-Munawara. Those who have been to these cities can relate to this phenomenon. The adhan sounds and the shop shutters slide down. Everyone heads to the masjid.

That is an integral part of “establishment.” An instantaneous disconnect with the worldly affairs, businesses, meetings, dealings etc., when the call to the Real Salvation strikes the ears. Only when this degree of spiritual-connect is established, will the limitless bounties of this *Ra’s-ul-’Ibadāt* (peak of worship) manifest themselves.

Later that day, we head out to the city of Taif. It was nothing I had imagined it to be. A sprawling metropolis with luxury auto showrooms, multistory shopping malls, BMW’s , Range Rovers and all sorts of fancy cars filling up the streets. They say that the people of Taif are still, to this day, quite

harsh and ill tempered. I experienced nothing to support this anecdotal observation, albeit only for 2 days.

However, the history of the city certainly tells a different tale. After the peaceful conquest of Makkah in the 8th year of the Hijrah, the Prophet ﷺ headed to Taif, where the defeated troops of the tribes of Hawazin and Thaqif had fortified themselves.

An advanced battalion of one thousand men led by Khalid-bin-Walid was later joined by the Prophet ﷺ and the rest of the Muslim army. They laid siege to the city, but it proved to be a tough opponent. Despite numerous strategies including the shelling of the walled city with catapults, the city denied the Muslim army any victory. Finally on the suggestion of Nawfal-bin-Mu'awiyah, the Prophet ﷺ lifted the siege and departed.

Later on, in the 9th year of the Hijrah, the successful expedition of Tabuk took place. The people of Taif were left isolated as the entire Arabian Peninsula was scooped up in the embrace of Islam. Allah ﷻ turned their hearts and so they came to the Prophet ﷺ and embraced Islam. The Prophet ﷺ sent a group of men under Khalid-bin-Walid to destroy the idol of Al-lat and all other remnants of idolatry.

This is how Allah ﷻ conducts His Affairs. Hearts turn around at His Command,

Allah has full power over His affairs; though most
people do not know.

Yousuf 21

And so, despite the best human efforts, we must recognize that it is the Divine Will which ultimately shapes events in our lives. That is where our real strength lies.

As we drive along the main streets of Taif, we come up to a McDonalds. In the parking lot, several Arab teenagers are standing by their brightly colored, modified cars, supporting turned around baseball caps, sleeveless T-shirts and baggy jeans low down to the ground, just barely hanging from their hip bones. The custom made heavy speaker's blast out rap music, shaking the entire car with the vibrations.

Wait a minute! Am I in Taif, Saudi Arabia, approximately 54 miles from Makkah, or Mobile, Alabama; Hackensack, New Jersey or Atlanta, Georgia?

This seemingly innocuous observation belies a fundamental surrender of history, culture and values.

That's narrow mindedness, the skeptic will argue. But societies have certain symbolic attributes that represent their pride in their individual character. A historic human attitude, endorsed by the Qur'an itself,

And We made you into nations and tribes that you might get to know one another. Surely the noblest of you in the Sight of Allah is he who is the most righteous.

Al-Hujurat 13

These youngsters represent a growing segment of our societies who find nothing of pride and value in their history and faith-based culture. This, in no small part, due to the fact that militarily and economically dominant societies (i.e. America and Europe) tend to dominate culturally as well. Only a strong bond with ones faith and its traditional values can resist this onslaught.

Those who believe that imitating western dress and attitudes is of no consequence couldn't be any more wrong. Dress, as superficial as it might appear, is a reflection of the spirit within. And as Sheikh Muhammad Asad (رحمته الله) so poignantly expressed in his extraordinary book "a civilization is not an empty form, but a living energy and as one assumes the appearance of that civilization, one imperceptibly embraces the ideology and intellect of it as well."¹ This coming from an Austrian Jew (who converted to Islam and became one of its most celebrated scholars), who was in a unique position to have lived both sides of this equation.

Of course, a "modern" faith like Islam wouldn't put unnecessary restrictions on attire and attitudes. Any dress or appearance can conform to Islamic values as long as it does not

1. Islam at the crossroads

conflict with the teachings of the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet ﷺ and maintains an individual Islamic identity. For in Islam's view, moral and spiritual progress supersedes utilitarian ideology and because the majority of human attributes in today's Western societies purposefully defy religious orientation. Not surprisingly, the Prophet ﷺ has been reported to have said:

Whoso imitates other people, becomes one of them.

(Ahmad, Abu-Daoud)

There is a fundamental philosophy of incredible depth put forth by the Qur'an:

Allah has not put two hearts in a person's body.

Al-Ahzab 4

It is such an incredible, multidimensional statement, which does not leave much behind to imagination.

Islam is one package; what you see outside, is what you get inside: Attire, acts, and attitudes, all of it.

As the spirit transforms, so does its external appearance. A flower blooms only when its critical inner components have matured.

On the same token, assuming a particular appearance is a rather small part of this philosophy. It carries no weight, if not accompanied by an inner comprehensive spiritual sense of righteousness, and has been remembered in the Qur'an as *Riya* (showing off) with a truly wonderful example:

O believers! Do not be like those who spend their wealth to be seen by people and believe neither in Allah nor in the Last Day. Their parable is like a hard barren rock covered with thin layer of soil; a heavy rain falls, leaving it just a bare stone. Such people will not gain any reward that they thought they had earned.

Al-Baqarah 264

On our drive back home, Aftab points to a sprawling white, walled off building in the hills across town, 'The Kings Palace,' he tells me, 'But he doesn't come here any more.'

I am instantly reminded of a similar scenario, a few weeks earlier in the city of Hufuf in Al-Hasa where I and the hospital pharmacist Imran Josup drove by an equally “majestic” building and he said, “The Kings Palace.”

A sign in arabic read; Qasr-al-Hajr (the rock palace). The massive walled off compound consisted of the main royal quarters and several residential buildings for the staff. Two masjids, one for the royalty and other for the staff, I suppose, were easily visible.

‘How often does the King come here,’ I asked Imran.

‘I think once in the last four or five years,’ he replied. And so we come to an aspect of our individual and collective lives, the importance of which can never be underestimated: Wealth and its utility.

The Prophet ﷺ said:

For every nation, there is a fitna (something used to test that nation) and the fitna (test) for my nation is wealth.

(Tirmidhi).

Not surprisingly, it is one of the most critical issues facing the entire Muslim Ummah. It has glaringly brought out the concepts of “social injustice” and “disenfranchisement” of the masses.

Do individuals and communities have full rights to spend the money, they earn, per their desires? Are their Divine Guidelines for this? Without a doubt. The answer to this question will span page after page. So I must attempt to focus on the bare essentials.

The most important misconception that needs remedy is the concept of total ownership,

What is the matter with you that you do not spend in the Way of Allah, whereas to Allah belongs the inheritance of the heavens and the earth.

Al-Hadid 10

The Qur’an makes it clear that contrary to our dearly held wish, we are not the owners of the wealth which we “seemingly”

acquire with our talents,

Spend on others out of that of which He has made
you trustees.

Al-Hadid 7

That is what we are - trustees, and the meaning of a
“trustee” need no explanation.

And there can be no grosser violation of this Divine
responsibility than the life styles of the elite and the ruling
class of the Muslim Ummah. Not surprisingly, the Prophet ﷺ
has been reported to have said,

After my departure, what I fear most regarding you
is that the doors of the bounties and glamour of this
world will be opened to you.

(Bukhari & Muslim)

The hundreds of years of so called “Islamic” Mughal rule
in the sub-continent was, for the most part, a prime example
of depredation of public funds and the construction of opulent
palaces and tombs at the cost of ordinary citizens. The wealth,
meant to be spend on uplifting the masses, squandered by a
few (which unfortunately holds true even today). Not a single
reputable higher education and scientific center of excellence
built, at a time when the West, in no small part deriving from
the traditional Islamic practice of encouraging comprehensive
knowledge, set about establishing institutes that would latter
shape the entire world’s affairs.

Consider an example which relives this practice, even to
this day.

In 1962 the United States Library of Congress established
overseas field offices to collect and catalogue all scholarly
work of “cultural and educational” significance from around
the globe. What transpired subsequently became the largest
and most comprehensive collection of global ideas, which in
turn have heavily influenced American foreign policy decision-
making, the sole purpose of which is to maintain America’s
global superiority, very successfully, so far.

But this bundling of financial affairs of Muslim countries

cannot be solely blamed on the offices of the states. Individuals are as guilty of this as the rulers. For they have also turned a blind eye to the Commands of Allah ﷻ by allowing their needs to out-grow them.

They ask you (O Muhammad) what they should spend; say: "What is beyond your needs.

Al-Baqarah 219

And so the ultimate objective of mankind in this world,

I have not created jinns and mankind except to worship Me.

Az-Zariat 56

can only be fulfilled when all possible resources are spend to set up a society where this objective can be accomplished.

The pinnacle of this paradox of wealth acquisition and expenditure that exists in our societies now a days could not have been better depicted than this:

O Prophet, tell them: if your fathers, your sons, your brothers, your spouses, your relatives, the wealth that you have acquired, the businesses in which you fear a loss, and the homes which you like are dearer to you than Allah, His Rasool, and making Jihad (struggle) in His Way (to establish Allah's Deen), then wait until Allah brings about His decision. And know that Allah does not guide the transgressors.

At-Taubah 24

For those who believe that economic prosperity alone can bring about peace and harmony in Muslim societies, they would be best advised to ponder carefully on the following scenario:

The two tribes of Ansar at Medina; Aus and Khazraj had been engaged in a bloody conflict for centuries and after the arrival of the Prophet ﷺ and the Muhajiroon from Makkah, a bond of brotherhood miraculously replaced this animosity. The Qur'an comments on what transpired this remarkable event:

Verily Allah is self sufficient for you (O Muhammad). He is the One Who has strengthened you and the believers with His help, through putting affection in

their hearts. If you had spent all that is in the earth, you could not have so united their hearts; but Allah has united them. He is Mighty, Wise.

Al-Anfal 62-63

It's almost 8 pm when we drive back home to the Al-Hada mountain compound. On the way, I witnessed an aspect of Saudi life which is to be seen nowhere else except, I suppose Abha (the other mountain resort).

Just after sunset, both sides of the main road all across Taif become littered with cars and jeeps. Families, friends, just sitting together on rugs spread out on the sidewalks and the adjacent barren land. Smoke arises from the primitive barbeque grills and hookahs. One gets a sense of a primitive city within the modern city. A chain of humans, enjoying the cooler weather in the simplest imaginable form.

Aftab tells me that every day they see a few scorpion bite cases at the hospital. I am not surprised.

At least, I was able to see something, which reflected the true ancient Arab culture. The real simplicity, which once had attracted people from all across the globe. A simplicity and solitude, which in Sheikh Muhammad Asad's (رحمته الله) words "has vanished under the gush of oil and the gold that the oil brought."¹

I go to sleep with a heavy heart. Tomorrow, I must take the taxi ride to Jeddah to fly back to Dammam for the final journey back home to Islamabad, Pakistan.

I need to put it all together now. Formulate an answer to what Dr. Siddiqui asked me six years ago in Alabama, USA – what is wrong with us and how do we remedy it?

1. Islam at the crossroads

THE DILEMMA AND THE WAY OUT

And here we are today – Islamabad, Pakistan December 2006. Where do we stand and where are we headed to? It is beyond me why so many are wondering about the reasons for our current state of affairs, both nationally and globally. I would be more surprised if it was all well - For you reap what you sow.

I often present a scenario to final year medical students: imagine that a man has just been told that he has a rare and fatal disease for which modern medicine offers no cure. He has only 6 months to live. As he loses all hope for life, suddenly, he learns that there is an ancient book, which offers a complete cure to this ailment. The only problem is that this book is in a foreign language and he must learn this language if he is to live. What do you think he will do? The answer is always unanimous: he will spend every ounce of his energy, day and night, to learn this language and find life again.

The only thing that is different about this story is that for the first time in his life, he has recognized how real and close death is. Something that existed in religious Sermons and on paper is now right in front of him. In an ironic twist, while we see people depart in front of us, somehow subconsciously, we reject the idea of our own eventual inevitable departure and accountability and continue to live in a fugacious misguided life.

Well, the fate that this man was about to meet is in reality what the Qur'an has predicted to all humanity;

By the time through the ages. Surely mankind is in
loss except those who believe and do good deeds;

exhort one another to the truth and exhort one another to patience.

Al-Asr

The question each one of us must answer is this: do we recognize the gravity of our perilous milieu and are we ready to go after the cure with the same tenacity as we do for worldly profits? The cure, sits in the bookshelves in all homes, tucked away safely, not to be touched except in Ramadan and ceremonies of happiness and tragedy.

For the All-Knower, this was all clear,

Man is such that when he is in trouble he appeals to Us; but when We bestow Our favor upon him, he says: "This has been given to me because of certain knowledge I possess. "Nay! It is but a test, yet most of them do not know.

Az-Zumar, 49

What we perceive as success and failure in this world is in reality, anything but that and this concept must be strongly embedded in the soul if we are to understand the purpose of humanity's presence on this earth. This remarkable philosophy of success being a bigger test than tribulations has been mentioned so vividly in this sense only in one place, in the Qur'an,

As for man, when his Rabb tries him through giving him honor and blessings, he says: "My Rabb is bountiful to me." But when He tries him through restricting his subsistence, he says: "My Rabb has humiliated me.

Al-Fajr, 15-16

And that is how it all needs to be viewed; a test both ways.

As an Ummah, we have lost all concept of prioritization. We are bogged down with trivial issues and have missed the big picture altogether. Yes, it is imperative to follow all the acts of the Sunnah of the Prophet ﷺ but we focus all energies on the smaller ones and have forgotten the most crucial of them all -

the establishment of the Supremacy of the law of Allah and His Messenger ﷺ. That is the real Sunnah to be followed, for

Those who do not judge by the Law which Allah has revealed, they are the wrong doers.

Al-Maidah, 45

If we are sincere in salvaging our future, we must start feeling pride in our faith and its attributes. Stop offering excuses to others for our fundamental values.

Yes, it's true that,

There is no compulsion in religion.

Al-Baqarah, 256

but this is only for those who have so far not chosen to enter into the embrace of Islam. For those who have proclaimed the shahadah, there is no choice. After all, you can't enlist in the army and then say you won't wear the uniform because you don't like it!

Isn't it true that institutions like schools, banks and multinational corporate's etc. have man made rules and regulations, which they initiate and enforce as they see them fit? The community of Canyon lakes, California decides in principle to impose a fine for domestic noise. Salt-lake city Utah makes it a law not to sell liquor after 8 pm. The State of New York decides (too little, too late) that smoking is detrimental to your health and imposes a total ban in all public places including bars - all these because people considered the benefits of population at large, in their limited views, and overcame all resistance to make it a reality.

Why then is there so much resistance to the injunctions, divine ones, mind you, of Islam? Why should an Islamic state not have the right, in the light of Divine guidance to impose laws and regulations it deems appropriate for the benefit of its citizens?

Since when did humans become more conscious of human rights than the Creator Himself?

These are some of the fundamentally flawed thoughts of

today's world. We must conform to Islam and stop conforming Islam to our desires. Its time for a deep sincere introspection. What most people fail to understand is that Islam is more sincere about their ultimate fate than they themselves are.

One of the most potent factors for the reversion of Muslims from traditional Islamic injunctions is, "but I know better, or I don't see anything wrong in this." The Qur'an has depicted our fallacious perception very well ,

It may be that you dislike a thing which is good for you and that you like a thing which is bad for you. Allah knows but you do not know.

Al-Baqarah, 216

In real life this is analogous to taking your 5 yr old to a park with plenty of rides and he gets overwhelmed and wants to get on all of them. But your priority is his safety and so you pick and choose for him. But he cannot understand that and throws tantrums. 'It's not safe for you because I know better,' you try to explain to him. Well that's what Allah ﷻ is telling us; this is not good for you and that is good for you, because He ﷻ knows better.

We have freedom within a set boundary,

It is not fitting for a believing man or a believing woman to have an option in their affairs when a matter has been decided by Allah and His Rasool.

Al-Ahzab, 36

but this freedom must be exercised prudently and wisely.

The compromises must stop. A renewed vigor in the search of our faith is long overdue and we must generate this dearly needed energy from within and not from borrowed assistance which comes with strings attached,

Do not yield to the desires of ignorant people; for they can in no way protect you against Allah. Infact, the wrong doers are protectors of one another, while the protector of the righteous is Allah Himself.

Al-Jathiyah, 18-19

What is needed is a revolutionary turn around of thoughts and as outdated as it may sound, return to the absolute basics of our faith. We need to extricate ourselves from this indispensable web of grandiloquent homes, mega shopping malls, mobile phones and expensive restaurants. Our so called progress and technological revolution has come at the price of complete spiritual stagnation. We must renew and strengthen our bond with the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the noble Prophet ﷺ. That is where the real solution lies, not in the books of *fadail*. We must look back to move forward. Those who have been granted knowledge and wisdom must rise up to this enormous challenge. Those who are highly educated in worldly affairs must become the mullahs of today and take charge of their faith. They must generate fresh ideals for the young Muslims of this generation and for those to come, for in the sight of Allah ﷻ, they will be held accountable for it.

The pulpit also needs a complete face-lift. It's time to teach the teachers.

The true color of Islam must show in all realms of personal and collective life – family, friends, neighbors, businesses, roads, offices etc. we can and must do it, better than the West. After all, they learned it from us a long time ago.

And just as charity begins at home, this all must start at an individual level. As my teacher in Alabama USA, sheikh Ghassan al-Barqawi used to say, 'Before you blame others, how much Islam is in your government (within your home)?'

There is still time before its too late. A true repentance and a fresh zeal for the righteous path is the first step. To despair from the Mercy of Allah ﷻ is not part of our faith. After all,

Indeed virtues remove evils.

Hud, 114

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