

SPIRITUAL ENCOUNTERS OF A WANDERING SOUL

In the name of Allah, Most Beneficent, Most Merciful

"When My servant asked thee (O Muhammad) concerning Me, (tell them) I am indeed close to them. I listen to the prayer of every supplicant when he calls on Me, let them also listen to My call and believe in Me that they may walk in the right way." (Quran 2:186)

"Who have believed and whose hearts find peace in the remembrance of God, verily in the remembrance of God do the hearts find peace." (Quran 13:28)

I have been wandering on this planet close to half a century, and my ancestors for at least 1,400 years. I am told that I am a descendant of Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh), and that my ancestors migrated from Arabia to Syria, to Iran, to Kashmir, and finally settled in Bihar, India, several centuries ago. Thus, I was born into a Saiyyed family, who were originally land owners during the British rule in India, but subsequently they lost everything. My father was a judge, and my mother was a homemaker (may God be pleased with both of them).

We had a good family of five brothers and one sister. We were neither very spiritual nor too religious. The sign of Islam in my home during childhood was my mother doing her prayers, fasting in the month of Ramadan, and celebrating other festivals like Eid and the birth of Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh).

My father, though a good father and good human being, was not a very religious person. He never talked to us, the children, about religion. One day when he was close to 80 years old and visiting me in America, he sat down after the morning prayer session with me and my children. I usually talk to them about verses of Quran that I recite during the prayer and its interpretation.

That day I asked my father to talk to his grandchildren about religion. His two-minute talk was very impressive, and I will always remember it. He said to his grandchildren: "Dear children, Islam is a very simple religion. It does not require

reading a lot of books and pamphlets and articles, but just knowing the orders of Allah and His Messenger from Quran and Hadith, that we should do what Allah asks us to do and avoid what He asks to avoid. After we have this knowledge, we try our best to implement it in our day-to-day life." And then he remained quiet after that.

By the time of his death, he was close to 90 years old, and he had lost most of his distant memory except for the verses of Quran that he had memorized during his childhood that were not erased from his memory by the miracle of Quran.

I myself did not learn Quran until age 25, after my final M.B.B.S. examination.

Then one of my classmates, who had mastery on reading,

Reciting and understanding Quran, taught me during the summer vacation which followed after exams. Subsequently, I learned that year the life of the Prophet (Pbuh) in the Urdu translation of the book "Benefactor," which had a lasting effect on my life. However, when I arrived in the U.S.A. in 1969, I did not know much about my religion other than the rituals and four to five short Surahs.

My coming to the U.S.A., though, was apparently motivated by my desire to further my knowledge and experience in medicine and have the financial reward of it; however, God had different plans for me which I did not know at that time.

When I was 10 years old, living in a small town in India, I had an early morning dream which I want to share at this time. At that time we had never talked about going to Pakistan, and I never had heard of the country U.S.A. In the dream I saw that I was standing on the top of a hill, with a green valley around it, but there were no human beings that I could see anywhere.

Then during the dream, a thought came to me that if I give Adhan (call to prayer) and if there are any Muslims nearby, they will come to me. Thus, I started giving Adhan and woke up while still saying "Come to prayer, come to success." That dream is still vivid in my memory, and now clearly defines my purpose of stay in the U.S.A.

Another dream I had was very interesting. In this dream I saw Muslims praying in every direction in a haphazard way, opposing each other sometimes, and when I joined that crowd, they lined up behind me and I led them to prayer in the direction of Kaba.

During my Hajj, Kaba started to come into my dream even before I had seen it. One night after the Tawaaf (circling around Kaba), I saw in the dream that a book was being brought to me, and someone was asking me to read this prayer which was in Arabic. The translation said, "I seek refuge from the punishment of hellfire," and I was asked to memorize this prayer. I had not known this prayer before so I did memorize it in the dream.

During my Hajj in 1983, many wonderful experiences happened to me. The sight of Kaba is so impressive that your heart fills with the majesty of God, and you don't want to remove your eyes from Kaba. During the Tawaaf, you should keep your eyes on Kaba, but one time I noted that one old lady was injured while doing the Tawaaf because of a broken, sharp piece on the ground as some Muslims wrongfully bring blades to cut a piece of the cloth covering Kaba.

Thereafter, I made a habit to look down and pick up any sharp pieces from the ground during Tawaaf. This is a most dangerous thing to do, to pause and bow down to pick up any object during Tawaaf because most likely, you will be run over by hundreds of people if you do. However, I continued doing it during each Tawaaf and would pick up many such objects, put them in my pocket and throw them in the trash bin after Tawaaf.

The old saint in our group who never saw me doing this but was a great spiritual person, having done 23 Hajj in his lifetime, one day told me that because of what you do during Tawaaf, you have a special place in the sight of God. I was dumbfounded. It happened that my airline ticket which was in my pocket got lost during this crowd of 2½ million people. There was no way I could have found it. My wife's ticket, also in my pocket, fell out at the same time, and I discovered the problem a day later. My wife, who is in a much higher spiritual level than I, and comes from the family of saints, obviously had angels watching over her. Thus, two days later, her ticket was delivered to me through someone I had never known, but mine was not.

In the same way when I took the stones or pebbles while going for Rami to stone the great Satan, when I threw my stones, they never struck the Satan in the center; but when I threw her stones, they went straight to the center of the big Satan and struck it. I was amazed and immediately realized that the Satans were after me.

Now, after Hajj, we went to Medina. I still don't have my ticket on the bus, and there are checkpoints for pilgrims to be examined by the Saudi police to make sure that there are no illegal aliens trying to sneak out of the country.

At one checkpoint, the bus was stopped and the police officer came and started examining the documents of each passenger. Our leader knew that if the officer found that my airline ticket was missing, he would immediately take me off the bus and put me in jail.

So he put my passport underneath everyone else's at the bottom, hoping that maybe he would not get to my passport.

The officer came and started to examine the passports and tickets, identifying each person one by one, and my passport was at the bottom without a ticket.

I was perspiring, not for the fear of being put in jail, but with the sadness that if I were taken off the bus, I would never be able to go to Medina and visit the grave of Prophet Muhammad. I was praying in my heart the best that I could.

Interestingly, a miracle happened. Just before the officer reached to the level of my passport, the call for sunset prayer came from the nearby mosque. The Saudis have an excellent habit of leaving all work when there is a call for prayer, so the officer stopped at that point and handed over all remaining passports without even looking inside to see if there were a ticket or not, and I was let go. Allah o Akbar!!

When our leader during Hajj told us the night before that during each Hajj, prophets and saints of the past are sent down to lead that year's Hajj (Grand Marshal), I did not believe the story.

During the Tawaaf, I saw a young lady dressed in white, circling Kaba, holding a prayer book in such grace and beauty that no man or woman would come close to her. A feeling came to me, "She is Mary, mother of Jesus."

Some of my dreams were related to certain events, like this one. During the Ethiopian famine crisis six years ago, one Indianapolis family saw an Ethiopian orphan child on TV, searching for food. They were so moved that the wife, Carol Shots, flew to Ethiopia to bring this child here for adoption, with difficulty with the Department of Immigration. Then it was national news that "an American family adopts a dying 11-year-old Ethiopian child, Mohammed."

Some Muslims were upset that a Christian family was adopting a Muslim child, while according to Shots, some Christian evangelists were knocking at their door to "make Muhammed a Christian."

They called me. I visited them, thanked them for helping a fellow human being, and asked what I could do.

They said they wanted help in raising the child in the religion of his father, since they knew nothing about Islam.

So I invited them to my house for dinner. The child Muhammed spoke little English but prayed behind me. Then I gave the family children's books on Islam and a copy of Quran with English translation, and told them to teach these books as he learns English. A week later, I saw in a dream that I was in Hajj and an African man was giving me zam zam (holy water) to drink. Then he said, "I am

Muhammed's father, and I want to thank you for helping my son." That boy is now in college and is a practicing Muslim.

However, some of my dreams were spontaneous and not related to anything I had thought that night. For example, two years before the movie was released, Malcolm X appeared in my dream, on the set of the movie, when he was holding a press conference upon return from Mecca. He looked at me and smiled. Then I could not understand why I saw him in the dream and why he smiled, only to find later that a certain Islamic magazine had devoted a whole issue to him, and also put me in his company by placing one of my best articles in the same issue.

Another inspiring dream occurred a week before his death. Imam Khomani appeared in my dream and said to me in Farsi, meaning "the salvation for a believer is in striving for the cause of God." Unfortunately, despite all my wishes, I have not reached the level that Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh) has come into my dream yet.

Subsequently, a lot of really interesting things started to happen to me during the daytime rather than in a dream. I was trying to memorize the Surah al-A'la (The Most High). It was a somewhat long Surah for me, and with the lack of time, I had difficulty memorizing it. During one of the prayers, I decided to go ahead and recite the first few verses that I had memorized. When I reached the sixth verse, in Arabic, which said, "We shall make you remember (O Muhammad) so that you will not forget," tears of despair and frustration came to me as I did not remember any more after that verse. Suddenly, all the verses which remained came into my memory like a flash, and I continued my recitation and I have not forgotten any of the nineteen verses of this Surah since then.

My belief in God solidified after reading one very short verse in Quran during prayer in Ramadan night prayers, and that was in Surah al-Fatir, which in translation says, "O you mankind, it is you who is needy of God, and it is God who is above all needs."

I was again dumbfounded by this bold statement challenging man, and then I started to realize how much we need God.

One morning I was reading Quran after morning prayers, and I came to the verse mentioned in Chapter 24, Verse 24, that man's tongue and feet will be a witness against him for the crimes that they have committed on the Day of Judgment.

I stopped at this verse and could not continue any further, wondering how our hands and feet, under our control now, would be ordered to speak and be a witness against us.

Since I could not comprehend it, I closed the book and went to work. That morning I had a very busy schedule.

In between patient visits, my secretary buzzed me on the intercom and asked me if I would have time to see a patient who just dropped in to see me immediately, without any appointment. Since I had known this particular person, I decided to go ahead and see him rather than turn him away. Therefore, I told her to bring him to my office, and that I would like to know why he wanted to see me.

Nevertheless, Mr. H came to my office and in my usual cordial manner, I wanted to shake his hand. Unfortunately, my hand was in a way paralyzed and would not move at all to shake this man's hand. I could not understand it since I was in good health, as to why my hand would not move forward to shake this man's hand. Then I used my left hand to raise my right hand, and extended my right hand to shake hands with him, which I did.

Then I asked this person what was wrong with him, and I was amazed at what he said. He said, "Dr. Athar, I am 65 years old, I have committed adultery last night, and I want you to give me an injection of penicillin so that I do not get gonorrhea or syphilis." I was in shock, realizing this was the reason that my hand was ordered not to shake hands with this man.

I did not want to discuss any further with this man, so I instructed my nurse to go ahead and dispense the oral antibiotic for him, and I did not say a word to the patient, nor did I charge him any fee for my time or for the medicine.

Then there was the case of a lady who was very nice to me, living in another town, always bringing gifts for me.

She was not a rich lady but had a small store and would always bring items from the store as gifts for me. She was very sick with terminal cancer. Sometimes I felt ashamed for not giving her gifts. One day I was so overwhelmed with her good gestures and her poor health that I decided to give her something.

I had a prayer rug in my office on my chair, on which I used to say prayers at noontime on workdays. One day she looked at the rug and liked it very much, so I told her I would give you this prayer rug as a gift, and she was immensely pleased. I told her what this rug was for.

For some reason, I didn't get to see her for the next whole year. Then she came to me one time and was in very good health. All the pain of bony metastasis from cancer was gone.

I asked her what she had been doing, which cancer treatment was she taking or which new doctor did she go to, and she said she had not done any of these things, but that she had been sleeping on the prayer rug. I was impressed by the mercy of Allah. I had another patient with a tumor called pheochromocytoma, who after a procedure in the hospital, went into shock. I visited her and she was near death.

I was very sad for her, and I asked her what I could do for her. Interestingly, she said, "Pray for me," so I did. I used the same prayer which was used by Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh), who when he visited the sick, he said, "O My Lord, cure him and comfort him."

I put my hand at the site of the tumor and said this prayer three times. During the next few days, not only did she recover and go home, but also x-rays showed the tumor had disappeared.

The radiologist tried to explain that the procedure (arteriography of the adrenal gland) caused the infarction of the adrenal gland, and that is why it disappeared. It didn't matter much to me as to how or why, because I knew the answer.

One thing interesting occurred again in the dream. After 18 years of solo practice, I was ready to take a new partner, but recalling the experience of my fellow physicians forming groups and breaking up after six months, I was not very keen toward it although I wanted one. I was actually looking for a Muslim physician to join me, so this Muslim physician who had read many of my articles in another town far away on the East Coast, came to interview me, looking for a job since he had completed his endocrine training.

I interviewed him and liked him, but still I was not sure whether or not I would take him. So I told him to go back and wait for my reply, which I told him I would mail in one week. That night I went to sleep, thinking about what my decision would be. In the dream, one of my Christian secretaries who has been with me for a long time, came to me with an open Quran and asked me to read one verse.

Interestingly, although I could not memorize the verse of Quran, in the dream in which she was asking me to read, I noted the chapter and verse number and went to sleep again, only to wake up in the morning to remember the dream. Then I realized the chapter number and verse which was Chapter 20, Verses 29-32, in which the Prophet Moses (Pbuh) is praying to Allah, saying, "Allah, give me an assistant, Aaron as my brother, to give me strength and share my task." Then I realized that this was an indication from God for me to take Dr. Habib, so I called him right away. I always have observed and believe that God's hand is guiding me, and He is watching over me. At the same time, I have noted that Satan is after me

all the time. One day I will write about my Enemy and things he made me do, and I ask God's forgiveness, the only one who can forgive me.

"O my Lord! We have wronged ourselves and if You do not forgive us and do not have mercy on us, we will be losers." (Prayer of Adam and Eve mentioned in Quran 7:23)