

Why Was I Created?

The Truth of your existence!

By K. Sherman



Book description

After discovering the purpose of her own life, this author takes readers down the same spiritual path she took, in hopes that they may discover theirs. In this eye-opening book, readers can judge for themselves whether her thought process was correct, and whether or not she came to the right conclusions. Her first reaction, upon discovering the truth, was outrage. How could no one have told her this? Anger then gave way to solid determination that what happened to her would happen to no one else.

About the author:

The author is a mother of five, originally from New Jersey. She left the States in her third year of college. She used to ponder over the meaning of life while strolling through the beautiful campus of her small town university. She would often wonder who put us here and why. These thoughts gave her no rest. When a fellow student postulated, "if God is real, then we are probably all doomed for hell", she took the comment seriously, and went looking for answers. Her findings have opened up a whole new world for her. She hopes that the fruit of her labors, detailed in this book, can do the same for scores of others.

“*To my brethren in humanity-
this is for you!*”

Author K. Sherman

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction



Introduction

Foreword

Note: (**pbuh**) means May peace be upon him, and is used when making mention of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh).

(**raa**) means "May God be pleased with him/ her" (in Arabic, *RadiAllahu anuhu/ anuha*), and is used when mentioning previous Prophets and the companions (i.e., early followers) and family members of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh).

Dedication: To my brethren in humanity- this is for you!

Foreword:

A human being is a mix of both body and soul. We in the West are adept at catering to our body's physical needs, while we have become sorely neglectful of the soul. What does the soul need to thrive? How can we care for our hungry, aching souls? Let us consider the facts...

Introduction

Coming of age in the 1980's in the US, I was never given a satisfactory answer to the question: Why Was I Created? This put me in a terribly quandary. It made me extremely uneasy and always on edge. Neither I, nor my peers, knew exactly why we were here. What was expected of us? What should (and shouldn't) we be doing? What was our ultimate purpose in life or reason for being? Was it to party? Was it to play? Was it simply to procreate? Was it to pray? Who knew? Furthermore, who really cared? To some, it didn't seem to matter. But to me, it did. For most of us, as long as life was good, as long as there was plenty of food on the table, as long as there was money to spend, and enough diversions around for everyone to enjoy, most of us were quite content with the status quo. Not me.

I tried to keep my inner disquiet a secret, by portraying a bold, unfazed exterior. This trick of sorts would go on for the better part of my adolescent years. Try as I might, I just could not go on like that forever. Reaching rock bottom by the time I was eighteen, haunted by years of living what I called 'the lie', I was finally forced into a mental institution for the severely depressed and inconsolable. What was wrong with me? How fast and far I had fallen in a few short years! Why had life become an endless tunnel of despair?

I threw myself on the floor, in humble prostration. Then, raising my hands to the Heavens, in humble supplication, I asked my Creator for help.

There was no immediate response. I didn't hear bells from heaven ringing, or see anything supernatural. I didn't even know if my prayer had been heard. I would remain in that same wretched emotional state for the better part of the following year. Towards the end of that grueling period, the answer did come, to my relief and surprise, in a rather unexpected way. When I was a sophomore in college, I was introduced to the most exquisite way of life, known as *al-Islam*, while searching day and night for the truth in my school's campus library. My efforts were finally bearing fruit. And the results were simply astonishing. I could not believe what I had come across. I had discovered the truth, as plain and simple as it was. There was no obscurity, no nonsense, no hogwash, just the truth, plain as could be. Amazing! Convinced of what I had discovered, I sat back, breathed a sigh of relief, and then wondered... How could so many of us be so deluded and so far off-track? How could there not have been one person to show me the way? How could I have been left in the dark for so long? How in the world could such basic, fundamental truths be lost on so many of us, generation after lost generation? I felt like a fool. I also felt betrayed. After all, I had a boyfriend from Palestine!

I was apprised of the truth right there in the campus library of my small town university. The truth was Islam. No, not the violent, oppressive, backward, intolerant religion we have all heard about, but rather the peaceful, tolerant, lenient, exquisitely beautiful way of life of the same name. What attracted me to Islam, in particular, and ultimately made me reject everything else I had read about, is what attracts all sincere seekers of truth. Read on and you, too, shall see.

As I pondered over the books in front of me, one recurring thought was... when a poor, illiterate, uneducated orphan from seventh century Arabia suddenly starts speaking words of truth, uttering words and expressing ideas he had never uttered before, truths comprising volumes and volumes, truths that would remain apt and ring true down the centuries, truths which contain the solution/ nay the pre-emptive strategy for dealing with every single potential problem or challenge human beings would face from then on, all the way down through time, you have to wonder...

After researching the matter sincerely (as God only guides those who are sincere) it soon became as clear as day. When God wishes to guide someone, I later learned, He opens their heart to Islam. I couldn't believe what I had stumbled upon- in hindsight, it was so simple, yet seemingly so remote. The truth was out there, plain for all to see... but I had been blinded, oblivious, un-aware of my own vast potential. My heart had had been opened- as were my eyes, my ears, and my whole being, all praise be to God, to the most beautiful and timeless message in the world- the message of Islam. And how refreshing it was! Islam would no longer remain obscure, but would become the nearest and dearest thing to my heart. I was so gung ho about my new faith I wanted to tell everyone.

I discovered there is an All-Powerful Lord watching over us. My Lord did hear my calls to Him, and He did answer them, and not a moment too soon, opening my eyes and heart to the most extraordinary message in the world. Before learning about Islam, nothing made sense. Now, everything started to become clear. I knew my Lord existed. That was all that mattered. This was the greatest relief and main focal point, after which my life would literally never be the same.

I now knew what Muslims (my Palestinian ex-boyfriend and countless others) had known all the while. And I knew why it was not my boyfriend who was going to tell me. What would he stand to gain except shame, guilt, and a jilted lover if he let me in on his coveted secret? There is certainly a great, mighty, powerful Lord watching over us. And He will call us to account for our actions. He knew that. All Muslims know that- sinful as well as devout. And now I knew it, too. Our Lord sees all that we do. Our Lord knows everything. So, I cut it off with the Palestinian. He bid me farewell, knowing that I deserved better than him, and I cursed him for nearly leading me to Hell's door. Now it was time to get my life in order. God is our Creator. His name is *Allah* in Arabic.

My real life could now start. My whole world would take a 180. Nothing would ever be the same again (thank God).

I had always been under the impression that faith was blind- you just had to put all your faith into some creed without proof or certainty. I thought you could never arrive at the ultimate truth. I thought it was impossible to verify whether your religion was right or not. I even considered the possibility that no religion was correct- that all religion was hogwash- just opium for the masses. I was literally lost, by all accounts. I didn't know what to believe, or who to trust. And boy was I paying the price- with severe unmitigated depression and no relief in sight, incessant feelings of guilt, shame, and hopelessness, zero self confidence, such disillusionment with life, I was ready to call it quits at any moment. It was a nightmare. I pity my former self and anyone in the same shoes.

I was raised nominally Jewish, by parents who had no interest in religion besides lighting a few candles at Hanukkah and giving us loads and loads of presents. What I had now discovered literally blew my mind. Faith is not blind. It is based on reason, facts and indisputable proofs. You just have to use your power of reasoning as it was meant to be used... in the God-given way.

True blindness, I learned, is blindness of the heart. It is not an act of blindness to accept religion and God into your life. Rather it is the faithless who actually render themselves blind by rejecting the truth when it comes to them. Blindness is to reject the plain and obvious truth. And it is blindness of the heart, not of the physical eyes. Equally blind it is to follow in the footsteps of your ancestors, your parents, or whomever just because that was how you were raised- with no further consideration. It is rather like playing Russian roulette with one's own soul. Who would do that?

Let us consider the facts:

The veracity of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and the authenticity of the message he (pbuh) brought are beyond question. Who can dispute the undisputable? How could a poor orphan child from seventh century Arabia, with no formal education, and very limited means, come up with the remedy that could fix every single problem that could arise from his time onward, (as we will see), cultivating a nation that has been described as the best nation ever?

Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was an orphan from the time of his noble birth. His father died within months of his marriage to Amina bint Wahb. The Prophet's mother saw in a dream that light was coming out of her abdomen. She surmised that she must be pregnant. Her intuition was correct. She was pregnant, but with who? Inside her womb was none other than the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), the Seal of the Prophets, after whom no other message or messenger will come. Through the message of Islam, darkness would soon vanish and the world would light up like never before.

The advent of Islam signaled an end to idol worship, superstitious beliefs, and outdated creeds. Even the divinely revealed messages of Judaism and Christianity, valid and true in their respective times and to their respective peoples, had been changed and tampered with and were no longer in their pristine form. Time was ripe for a confirmation of the same message. This would be the task of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). What a momentous task it was! He was to rid the world of the darkness of *kufr* (disbelief) and *shirk* (associating partners with God), of worshipping anyone or anything except the One true God worthy of our worship. It was a colossal challenge, hardly possible for one man to undertake. But then again, if God is on your side, what can stop you?

Revelation started to descend on the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) for the very first time when he (pbuh) was alone meditating in a cave, called the Cave of Hira, located in the foothills surrounding Mecca. It was his custom to spend long periods of time there, in solitude, pondering the wonders of creation. The angel Gabriel approached him (pbuh) one day and told him (pbuh), "Read". Even he (pbuh) was uncertain of what was to come when he (pbuh) heard that voice of an angel for the first time.

< Read! In the Name of your Lord Who has created. He created man from a clot. Read! And your Lord is the Most Honorable, Who has taught by the pen. He has taught man what he knew not. > 96: 1-5

The angel then proceeded to squeeze the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) tightly around his chest. He (pbuh) was scared stiff. He (pbuh) didn't know what to say or do. The words mesmerized him (pbuh). The Prophet (pbuh) then responded, "I am unable to read." The angel squeezed him (pbuh) once again, and then left him (pbuh) alone.

The Prophet (pbuh) was overcome with fear and anxiety and ran home to the protective, warm embrace of his loving wife, Khadija (raa). Her famous words of consolation, recorded in the annals of history, were:

"Do not be sad; God will never disgrace a servant* like you. I know that you always speak the truth. You perform duties that have been given to you and safeguard that which has been entrusted to you. You interact closely with your relatives. You treat your neighbors in a very kind and caring manner. You help the poor. You open your doors to strangers and entertain them as guests. You help the community during disasters and tribulations! Oh my Uncle's Son, persevere. By God, I hope that you are this community's Prophet."

*(footnote: Adherents to the faith are called servants in Islamic religious discourse.)

She then took her visibly shaken husband to a cousin of hers who was well versed in the scriptures of old, named Waraqa ibn Nawfal. Upon seeing the Prophet (pbuh) and hearing what had happened, he informed the couple that these were indeed the signs of prophethood. He lamented the fact that he was old; he wished he could live on to see the day when his (i.e. Prophet Muhammad's) people would rebel and turn against him (pbuh)- so he could be there to provide support. The Prophet (pbuh) asked if his people would really turn against him (pbuh). Waraqa replied, "No one has come with that which you have come, except that his people turn against him."

His mission had now begun.

Proofs of the legitimacy of Muhammad (pbuh) as a true servant and Messenger of God:

As a true Prophet of God, the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was well-equipped with his fair share of miracles and convincing evidence conferring his legitimacy beyond the shadow of a doubt. Additionally, there is strong circumstantial evidence in his favor, as per the following:

1.) There was a long lapse of about two years subsequent to the incident in the Cave during which no new revelation was sent down to the Prophet (pbuh). He (pbuh) was left utterly perplexed and bewildered. Had he (pbuh) been a prankster, why would he (pbuh) have been so startled and puzzled by his own prank? And why would he (pbuh) wait so long...

Two years seems like quite a long time to squander when supposedly receiving divine inspiration from above. Why would he (pbuh) wait two whole years, or even two months, or even two weeks to get on with the show, if it was indeed a show...?

2.) The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was given the honorary title, *Al-Amin* (the honest, trustworthy), before being tasked with prophethood. He (pbuh) was known for his honesty and integrity before the advent of Islam. People trusted him (pbuh), honored his opinions, sought his advice in settling disputes, and would deposit their valuables with him (pbuh) for safekeeping. A genuinely honest person like that, with seemingly no aspirations for worldly profit or gain is not likely, at the ripe age of forty, to come up with the biggest lie of all: falsely claiming to be a Prophet sent by God.

3.) A faker is likely to bow and falter under pressure. Not the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). When his mission first started to gain momentum and the pagans of his day began fearing the worst, they gave him (pbuh) a most tempting offer to stop preaching Islam. They offered him (pbuh) riches, an array of desirable women, and even offered to make him (pbuh) king. He (pbuh) flatly refused with his famous retort:

"I swear by the name of God, that if they place the sun in my right hand and the moon in my left hand in return for giving up this matter (calling people to Islam) I will never desist until either God makes it triumph or I perish defending it."

He (pbuh) was solidly determined to take his mission to the last. All attempts at bribery and dissuasion proved futile and did not daunt him (pbuh) in the least.

4.) In the same vein, the Prophet Muhammad's whole mission was entirely devoid of the desire for material gain, pomp, power, fame, recognition, a rise in status, or any worldly consideration. Yet the noble Prophet (pbuh) dedicated his entire life (post forty, that is) to the cause. What made him (pbuh) and his noble companions so intent on their mission, risking life and limb, in propagation of the message of Islam? What was keeping them going, if not the promise that if they remained vigilant, they would find what they had striven for- the fruits of their labor- in trust for them with God?

5.) Another point to consider is that the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was the first to practice what he (pbuh) preached. A trickster would not be so keen to put his own innovations into immediate practice. The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), on the other hand, was quick to implement all the rules and regulations of his budding new faith. He (pbuh) was described as a living embodiment of the Qur'an. This is according to his wife Aisha (raa), who became a renowned female scholar under his tutelage. He (pbuh) would spend hours reciting the holy book that he (pbuh) was endowed with, pondering over its meanings and gleaning from it the guidance we all need as human beings. He (pbuh) would spend long nights bowing down and prostrating to his Lord, in deep gratitude for all the favors and blessings given to him (pbuh)- although he (pbuh) was the least to partake of material favors- until his feet would swell. When asked why he (pbuh) did this, his reply was, "Should I not be a thankful servant?"

6.) The holy book that the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was inspired with contains verses admonishing him (pbuh) personally for certain objectionable behaviors. Why would he (pbuh) reprimand his own self? The following verse is a case in point:

Example one: *< (The Prophet) frowned and turned away, because there came to him the blind man. And how can you know that he might become pure? Or he might receive admonition, and the admonition might profit him? As for him who thinks himself self-sufficient, to him you attend. What does it matter to you if he will not become pure? But as to him who came to you running, and is afraid (of God's punishment), of him you are neglectful and direct your attention to another. Nay, indeed it is an admonition. So whoever wills let him pay attention to it. > 80: 1-12*

In this example, the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was blamed for giving his attention to someone less deserving rather than to someone more deserving. When a blind man, named Ibn Umm Makhtum, came running to him (pbuh) to ask him about a religious matter, he (pbuh) frowned and turned away. At that critical time, he (pbuh) was attending to some high profile members of an opposing clan, in ardent hope that they would see the light of Islam.

But who should have been given precedence? The Prophet (pbuh) should have given priority to the blind man, who had the potent fear of God in his heart, over those with no such fear. For this act of neglectfulness, he (pbuh) was reprimanded in the noble Qur'an.

Example two: *< O Prophet! Why do you forbid (for yourself) that which God has allowed you, seeking to please your wives? And God is Oft-Forgiving, Most-Merciful. > 66: 1*

In this example, the Prophet (pbuh) was being admonished for refusing to eat honey (a substance that is not only lawful, but full of healthy benefits), just to placate his wives. The story goes thus:

The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), by the permission of his Lord, was allowed up to nine wives.*

*(footnote: It should be noted that his first wife Khadija remained his only wife as long as she lived. The Prophet (pbuh) never took another wife until after her death, in the twelfth year of his mission as a Prophet, when he (pbuh) was over 50 years old.)

This was an exception for him (pbuh) alone, the rule being that the maximum number is four. All of these marriages were commissioned by God and were conducted with an eye to furthering the cause of Islam. This was accomplished by making various alliances with opposing tribes, and then bringing their members into the fold of Islam.

As one can imagine, there was a fair amount of jealousy and sensitivity among the wives, each of whom loved him dearly. It was the Prophet's (pbuh) daily custom to visit each wife for a short period of time, usually after the *asr* (late afternoon) prayer.

Once, over a certain stretch of time, some of the wives noticed that he (pbuh) would spend a little longer at one particular wife's house. This made the others quite jealous and aroused their curiosity. After inspection, they found out why. That wife had been given a jar of honey by one of her relatives. The Prophet (pbuh) had a soft spot for honey. And, so the story goes, the jealous wives collaborated and concocted a plan. They complained to him (pbuh) of a foul smell coming out of his mouth, supposedly from the tainted 'honey', in hopes that they could win just a little more of his blessed company (and their co-wife just a little less). Believing their trick, the Prophet (pbuh) vowed not to eat the 'honey' again, for fear of offending them. For this he (pbuh) was called to account by God. The holy verses commanded him (pbuh) not to deny himself a lawful substance, such as honey, as shunning it could make the believers at large think it was wrong to eat.

Incidentally, the wives were also rebuked by their Lord. These holy verses were sent down as an admonition to them:

< It may be if he divorced you that his Lord would give him instead of you, wives better than you- Muslims, believers, obedient, turning to God in repentance, worshipping God sincerely, given to fasting, previously married, and virgins. > 66: 5

The magnitude of their sin was thus made known to them, and they repented to their Lord.

Example three: ***< But you did hide in yourself that which God will make manifest; you did fear the people, whereas God had a better right that you should fear Him. So when Zaid had accomplished his desire from her (i.e., divorced her), We gave her to you in marriage, so that there may be no difficulty to the believers in respect of the wives of their adopted sons when the latter have no desire to keep them. And God's command must be fulfilled. > 33: 37***

In the third example, the Prophet (pbuh) sought to hide a matter that he (pbuh) should have disclosed. The Prophet (pbuh) had been commanded to marry Zayneb Bint Gahsh, who was the divorcee of his adopted son, Zaid. The wisdom behind this marriage was to dispel the commonly held belief and custom the Arabs held that an adopted son was like a real son in all respects. This old custom would have made marriage to his adopted son's wife off-limits. The Prophet (pbuh) was hesitant to implement the order, as it would have been construed as a bold and unprecedented move. And for this, he (pbuh) was censured in the Holy Qur'an.

The takeaway: when God decides a matter, it is best not to resist.

Logically speaking, why would the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) commit these infractions, and then rebuke himself for his own wrongdoing, and then go and record it all in a holy book that is to remain venerated and sacred for all time? Was he (pbuh) really censuring himself? Ask yourself, in all honesty, what you think.

7.) The Qur'an itself is a veritable miracle the Prophet (pbuh) brought that could not have been fabricated by a human being. It was sent down gradually, over a period of some twenty three years, with new verses being revealed which catered to the precise circumstances the Prophet (pbuh) and his companions found themselves in. If the Prophet (pbuh) had penned it, as some say, why would he (pbuh) have waited long stretches of time, with new verses coming weeks, sometimes months, apart? Why wouldn't he (pbuh) have completed his work and unveiled it all at once, as all authors do? And how does an illiterate and uneducated merchant 'write' an unparalleled literary masterpiece, a work that has silenced all critics has left linguists speechless for centuries? There is an explicit warning and challenge mentioned in the Qur'an, aimed at those who think they can produce something comparable.

< And if you are in doubt concerning that which We have sent down to Our servant (i.e., the Qur'an), then bring a chapter of the like thereof and call your witnesses, besides God, if you are truthful. > 2: 23, 24

The challenge is still on, some millennium and a half later. No one has ever been able to- nor can they ever- produce something of equal brilliance, eloquence, lucidity, or beauty. Despite the loftiness of its meanings and the richness of its speech, its verses are amazingly terse and easy to memorize. Within the Qur'an are predictions, all of which have eventually come true. It is replete with scientific facts, none of which conflict with modern science and some of which have only been discovered with the help of powerful tools of observation. The Qur'an tells us of the stages of fetal development, for example, describing facts which were unknown for centuries, and only discovered relatively recently. We learn that the developing fetus is enclosed in three veils of darkness. The bones are formed first, and then become "clothed with flesh" as stated in one verse. Another verse tells us that all living beings are created from water. This is in conformity with modern scientific findings. The Qur'an has withstood the test of time and will continue to do so as it has been promised to be guarded by God. Most important of all, it explains to us why man was created:

< And I have not created jinn* and mankind except that they should worship Me. > 51: 56

*(footnote: *Jinn* are a class of creatures who, like the angels, are unseen to us human beings. They are made out of fire, and are thus non-material. There are two types of *jinn*: believing and disbelieving. Disbelieving *jinn* are referred to as satans or devils. *Jinn* will be held responsible for their actions, just as human beings are.)

Man was created to worship God.

We also know from a *hadith qudsi*,* *(footnote: A *hadith qudsi* is a statement directly from God revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) outside of the Qur'an.)

Related from his Lord, glorified and exalted be He:

"I was a hidden treasure. So I created man, that he may know Me."

Alas! The purpose of our creation and reason for being is spelled out clearly for all to see. Our purpose is to worship God, our Lord and Cherisher, Sustainer of the entire universe. We were created to worship and revere the One Who created us. We were created to know our Creator. We were created to know and to worship the One Who brought us into existence. Our purpose in life could not be more distinct, or more direct, or any more sublime! Our reason for being is not simply to party, not simply to play, not simply to procreate, not simply to pray, but it is to worship God in all spheres and in every way sanctioned by Him. So what are some of these ways?

Islam is built upon five pillars, fundamentals of the faith that all Muslims must believe in and adhere to. Aside from these five pillars, there are a host of commendable and highly praiseworthy acts of worship which promise great rewards, benefits, and blessings. The greatest of these is the act of *dhikr*, or remembering God. In line with our being created to know and to worship God Almighty, it is only natural that one of the most highly esteemed actions in Islam is to praise and glorify Him. Once a person has confirmed that God exists and that He hears and sees and knows everything, the believer is encouraged to express his/ her gratitude towards God in words of His praise and thanks.

Believers make a habit of repeating some simple and highly rewarded phrases: *subhanAllah* (how perfect God is), *alhamdulillah*, (all praise and thanks be to God), *la ilaha il'Allah* (there is none worthy of worship except God), *Allahu akbar* (God is Greatest), and *la hawla wa la quwata ila bi'llah* (there is no might or power except with God). These special words are to be said frequently, as they are the most beloved to God. Additionally, there are many more sayings and phrases that believers should learn and repeat throughout the day on different occasions. They are all to be said in the original Arabic, are relatively easy to memorize and are uttered at specified times; for example, there is a phrase to say upon waking from sleep, entering the bathroom (a place of impurity), entering the house, leaving the house, riding in a vehicle, going on a journey, sneezing, wearing new clothing, greeting people, hearing surprising news, when tragedy strikes, etc.

People who are searching for comfort, inner peace, and calmness and tranquility of the heart and soul need look no further. Through remembering your Lord, repeating His praises, and glorifying none but Him you have an optimum formula for treating many mental health-related issues. As a person's faith grows, and one seeks nearness to God by calling upon Him and pronouncing the words of His praise and thanks, one eventually finds the peace of mind and comfort they had been missing.

Most of those suffering from depressive conditions are not clinically ill. In fact, there may be nothing wrong with them at all. They just haven't found the path leading to true inner peace and comfort of the soul. They are literally lost, like I was, looking for comfort in things that can bring them none. They have come to realize, perhaps subconsciously, that life without a goal or purpose is really not worth living. Life becomes dull, boring, and routine at best, and for some it becomes agonizing and unbearably painful. After all, we were born to know and worship our Creator. To know God is the very purpose of our existence. How, then, can our lives amount to anything, how can we even enjoy a moment's calm, unless we understand and go about fulfilling the purpose for which we were created?

The noble Qur'an declares:

< Then if there comes to you guidance from Me, then whoever follows My guidance he shall neither go astray, nor shall be distressed. But whosoever turns away from My Reminder, verily for him is a life of hardship. > 20: 123, 124

What more proof do we need than this clear, unequivocal verse of the noble Qur'an, the holiest book in existence, the only extant miracle from the time of the Prophet (pbuh) until our time? This verse explains it all. We see this phenomenon all around us. People are, for the most part, unable to find happiness. And they are, for the most part, out of touch with God. Most have relegated religion to the back burner.

We try to hide our discontent. We try to keep ourselves amused. We try to feign a smile. We try to keep the show running, day after day after uninspiring day. We try to calm our distressed souls, and put ourselves at ease, perhaps turning to Calgon to "take us away", or to our favorite drug, or to our alcoholic beverage of choice, but we will never reach our goal unless we invite God into our lives. The widespread epidemic of depression that is plaguing the masses is the net result. Most people are sick and tired of living the lie, and of going on with their meaningless, unfulfilling, dull, and ignoble existence. They are worn out, discontent and downright miserable, just like I was. People are out of touch with their Creator.

Depression is bound to exist, spreading its treacherous claws even further, as people stray farther and farther from their original purpose. Depressive conditions are actually a very normal, natural and expected reaction to the abnormal and unnatural way most of us were raised and taught to believe. We were never given any answers. We were deprived of the glorious truth. The path to true inner peace must include knowledge of your Creator and what He wants from you. He wants you to be mindful of Him. He wants you to be grateful to Him. He wants to reward you with Paradise. He wants you to steer clear of Hell-fire. He wants you to direct your worship to none but Him.

Remembrance of God is as nourishing and indispensable to the soul as food is to the body. Once we have come to know our Lord we begin to praise Him, and find comfort and solace in His presence, knowing He hears us and is always there for us.

Once a person correctly establishes their purpose in life: that is, to believe in God and work righteousness, s/he becomes hopeful that one day they will meet up with all the good they have done. This person becomes a force of good in the world, benefiting not only themselves but everyone around them. Their life takes on a whole new meaning and significance. They are living to please God. Confident in their faith, they seek to remain upon the Straight Path outlined for them by the religion of Islam.

Once the Prophet (pbuh) drew a straight line through the sand and then drew lines to the right and lines to the left of the first line. Then while the people were looking intently at the drawing, he (pbuh) recited the verse, **< And verily, this is My Straight Path so follow it, and follow not (other) paths, for they will separate you away from His Path." > 6: 153.** There is only one right way. All other ways lead to perdition.

A Muslim sees his/ her life as a chance to prove him/ her self, gaining that coveted seat in Paradise that is destined for him/ her.*

*(footnote: Every person has a place designated for him/ her in Paradise and a place designated for him/ her in Hell-fire).

Suspended in a delicate balancing act between hope, on the one hand, and fear on the other, believers are hopeful to attain God's good pleasure and gain admission to Heaven one day as a result, while the same time they fear the consequences of leading a life of sin and heedlessness. Scholars have likened this scenario to a bird flying; the head of the bird symbolizes the love of God which propels us forward, and the two wings symbolize hope and fear.

In Islam, there is always that delineation between hope and fear. In the noble Qur'an, for instance, we are apprised of amazing rewards, pleasures, and bounties in store for believers in Paradise, raising one's hopes to the highest level possible. At the same time, just as many verses warn of the grave punishment upon death and beyond for those who deny God and spread corruption on earth. The balance between hope and fear is ever present.

God has inscribed upon His throne "My mercy outweighs My anger."

God is more intent on rewarding people than on punishing them. His mercy knows no bounds. He rewards manifold for good deeds, giving that extra push and incentive to press forward and take the lead in the race for Heaven. This can be gleaned from the following *hadith qudsi*.

Related from his Lord, glorified and exalted be He:

"Every good deed is multiplied from ten to seven hundred times, while bad deeds are recorded as a single bad deed."

Thus, it is made easy for believers to glide, or soar through life, earning the rewards that will eventually lead to their heavenly abode. Believers see their life- the short span of time they are allotted on this earth- as a chance to gain reward for all their righteous actions, receive remuneration for their suffering and after all their hard work inherit Paradise. Believers see themselves as if in a race, striving to earn as many 'points for Paradise' (*hasanat*), as possible. This 'race' is alluded to in the Qur'an:

< ... and for this (i.e., the comforts and pleasures of Paradise) let (all) those strive who wish to strive (i.e., hasten earnestly, as if in a race, to the obedience of God)...> 83: 26

< So vie with one another in good deeds; to God is the return of all of you. > 5: 48

< And vie in the race for forgiveness from your Lord, and for a Garden whose extensiveness is the heavens and the earth, prepared for the pious. > 3: 134

Believers strive as if in a race, trying to outdo one another in the accumulation of good deeds, much as we may strive to outdo one another on the worldly front, by trying keep up with the Jones's, for example. The faithful try to compete for the reward of Paradise, while relying on God at every turn. Through the good and not-so-good believers know and trust that God is with them, responds to their pleas, records their deeds, and rewards them for their patience and their gratitude. Whatever good you do, God knows it.

< *Never will I allow to be lost the work of any of you, be they male or female.* > 3: 196

All children are born pure and sinless

"Every child is born on *al-fitrah* (the natural disposition of human beings) but his parents make him into a Jew, a Christian or a Fire-worshipper, as an animal delivers a perfect baby animal. Do you find it mutilated?"

The pure, natural state we are all born into is called *al-fitrah* in Arabic. This interesting *hadith* tells us that all the children of Adam are originally good, upright, free from sin, and inclined toward recognizing and worshipping God as their Lord. That has been our primal, unspoiled, nature from the time of our earliest ancestors, down to the last soul to ever be born on earth.

We all come into the world with this inclination toward goodness, and toward accepting God as our only Lord. A pure, sound heart, along with a pure, sound '*fitrah*' will recognize God (or *dios* or *dieu* or *Allah* or whatever word they use) and worship Him alone, seeking nearness to Him. If this person is born of Muslim parents, and is taught Islam from his youth, he will likely remain on the path of Islam, eventually recognizing his religion as the only true religion. If his parents teach him a different set of beliefs, or perhaps no beliefs at all, he will not be at rest until he has found the Straight Path leading to his Creator. That is, if his innate nature, or *fitrah*, remains pure and uncorrupted. The religion of Islam is often referred to as *deen el-fitrah*, or the religion of unspoiled human nature. This is because it is perfectly in line with the physical, spiritual, and emotional needs of human beings.

Every person is born upon this sound, upright, natural inclination toward faith and goodness. Then Satan, our sworn enemy, comes along and introduces to us another similarly appealing path. This is the path of deceit, of infidelity, of vice, of betrayal of one's Lord. It is the path followed by the ingrates, the losers, the sinful, and the denizens of Hell. The fact the Satan tries to entice us is stated explicitly in the Qur'an:

Satan declares: **< "*I will sit in wait against them on Your Straight Path. Then I will come to them from before them and behind them, from their right and from their left, and You will not find most of them as thankful ones.*" > 7: 17**

Satan's full time job is getting people off the Straight Path of Islam. He uses his cunning trickery to deceive anyone who will give him an ear. His favorite trick seems to be to convince people that he doesn't exist- nay that God doesn't even exist. Then, he can play with our minds at will. Although his plots are decidedly weak and easily foiled, he manages to mislead all too many. Steer clear of him if it is peace, safety, and ultimate salvation you wish to attain.

God tells Satan: **< "Get out from here, disgraced and expelled. Whoever of them will follow you, then surely I shall fill Hell with you all." > 7: 19**

This is a stern warning to all those who take religion in jest, giving Satan's whispers any legitimacy. The devil's whispering is called *waswasa* in Arabic. He whispers into the hearts, feeding us lie after lie after lie. Whenever you encounter a thought or feeling makes you fretful, distraught, uneasy, or the like, Islam teaches us that it is brought on by none other than the arch-enemy of mankind, Satan, the accursed.

A common Arabic expression is, "Nothing is strange (foreign, unfamiliar, etc.) except the devil." The devil will stop at nothing to corrupt you, and make you see things from his slanted angle. The devil turns logic on its head, making you see everything upside-down. He would have you think the worst of yourself, and of those around you. He makes the benign seem malignant, just like vinegar spoils milk, in an instant. Only pure, wholesome, and comforting thoughts are real. The rest should be discarded. When Satan tells you only fools believe in God, the only fool is you. You are his dupe. Muslims are taught to repel these Satanic intrusions in the following ways:

< Indeed, those who fear God, when an impulse touches them from Satan, they remember Him and at once they have insight. > 7: 201

Muslims are told to seek refuge with God from the devil whenever they feel his ominous presence. They are instructed to say "I seek refuge in God from Satan, the accursed". This phrase is to be repeated in its original Arabic, "*Audhu b'illahimin ashaytan al-rejeem*", before doing certain actions, such as reading from God's holy book- the Qur'an, upon initiating the prayer, before entering the bathroom (a place of impurity), upon seeing/ hearing of a shameful deed, before engaging in sexual relations with one's spouse (to protect any offspring from the Satanic threat), as well as at other specified times.

Muslims are also to recite the last two small chapters of the Qur'an, which serve as a protective shield from the devil and his whispers. The devil runs through our veins like blood, the Prophet (pbuh) said. Therefore, the believer must be vigilant to protect him/ her self from this constant bombardment. The Qur'an warns:

< O children of Adam! Let not Satan deceive you, as he got your parents out of Paradise, stripping them of their garments, to expose their shame. Verily, he and his party see you from where you cannot see them. > 7: 27

Satan is a real, not an imaginary, threat.



CHAPTER TWO

Islamic Solutions



Islamic Solutions

Obesity

What most impressed me as a new Muslim was- and still is- how the religion of Islam has an answer and a solution for nearly everything. The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was the last in a long line of Prophets; these Prophets and Messengers were sent to impart guidance to humankind. As no prophet will come after him, his guidance is comprehensive, covering all aspects of human existence. Through his wise instruction, we find the solution to any and all problems we may face. There is not one single dilemma, whether political, social, economic, psychological, moral or any other front, that cannot be solved by implementing the rules and tenets of Islam. This section includes a random list of everyday problems and their solutions from an Islamic perspective. The list is by no means exhaustive- but it does address a fair variety of common issues. Additionally, I have included some articles I have written on some of these topics, after being inspired by the wisdom of Islamic teachings.

Obesity

The ever-growing epidemic of obesity has its cure in Islam (providing it is not clinical obesity, brought on by disease). I am referring the problem of over-eating, to be precise. Islam tells people how to eat, and how not to eat.

It tells us: "A human being fills no vessel worse than his stomach."

And it tells us: "It is sufficient for a human being to eat a few mouthfuls to keep his spine straight. But if he must (fill it), then one third for food, one third for drink and one third for air."

Islam also encourages fasting (i.e., voluntary fasts) which helps develop self control..

By following these guidelines alone, we could not only cut down on obesity, but reduce the risk of many other diseases as well.

A word on breakfast: It is interesting to note that when I was a youngster, breakfast used to be touted as the most important meal of the day. However, that tune has changed. The latest advice coming from expert nutritionists is that the best breakfast is actually no breakfast at all. As long as one does not feel hungry- and is therefore not in need of any extra calories- one should not eat. This is right in line with the guidance given by our Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) through the religion of Islam.

Islamic Solutions

Athlete's foot and other skin maladies

Athlete's foot and other skin maladies:

It would be very hard for those fungi that cause athlete's foot and other skin conditions to multiply if you are in a constant state of *wudu*, or ritual ablution. A Muslim must wash certain body parts, including the feet, as a prerequisite for prayer. Shoes and socks must be removed at least once a day. A person retains his/ her state of *wudu* until it is voided. This happens when one uses the toilet, passes wind, sleeps, or has sexual relations. One may pray several prayers with the same ablution, as long as it remains valid.

A word on cleanliness and personal hygiene: "Cleanliness is next to godliness", as the saying goes. In Islam, the saying goes "Cleanliness is from faith". Just as Muslims are clean and pure from within, they should be clean and pure on the outside as well. Muslims should maintain a certain level of cleanliness and tidiness in their appearance, and in the general upkeep of their homes and environment. Islam encourages cleanliness and good personal hygiene: the frequent washing of hands, frequent bathing, proper washing of the private parts after urination or defecation, removal of body hair, the use of perfumes, hair dyes, the frequent brushing of one's teeth, etc. The Prophet (pbuh) said, "If it weren't too much of a burden upon my *Ummah* (nation). I would have ordered you to clean (i.e., brush) your teeth before every prayer." The Prophet (pbuh) discouraged people from neglecting their own personal hygiene. God likes to see the signs of His blessings upon His servants. We should not dress shabbily or have unkempt hair or clothing, as Muslims. "God is beautiful, and He loves beauty" says one *hadith*. Another says "who ever has hair, should take care of it." Another *hadith* says, "Five practices are characteristics of the *fitrah* (unspoiled human nature): removing the pubic hair, clipping the nails, depilating the hair of the armpits, cutting the moustaches short and circumcision," (the last two for males only). Believers should not neglect these basic components of proper hygiene. It is a sign of faith that we take care of ourselves, and keep our bodies clean and fit.

Islamic Solutions

Fighting plagues and epidemics

Fighting plagues and epidemics:

The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said:

“The plague is a calamity (or a punishment) that was sent upon those who came before you. If you hear of it in some land, do not go there, and if it breaks out in a land where you are, do not leave, fleeing from it.”

This is sound advice, in line with proper protocol, regarding what to do when an infectious disease breaks out.

Taken from an Islamic website:

"The teachings and principles of Islam are designed to benefit all of humankind. Rules and recommendations for personal hygiene and cleanliness promote the well-being of individuals and communities. Infection control is inherent in Islamic hygiene behavior. Washing the hands frequently, covering the mouth when sneezing or coughing, voluntary isolation when one is feeling unwell, restricted travel, covering the food and killing the dangerous animals is an effective and comprehensive public health strategy. Measures taken in the 21st century to prevent the spread of infections and viruses conform almost exactly to the hygiene and infection control practices taught by our Prophet Muhammad (pbuh)."

Islamic Solutions

The trauma of being teased, insulted, ridiculed, and otherwise made fun of

The trauma of being teased, insulted, ridiculed, and otherwise made fun of:

How many of our youth (and later on, adults) have been emotionally scarred for years on end after being called offensive nicknames, or being belittled, or being bullied by their peers, or even by their own family members? How much pain and suffering have these needless jeers and swear words caused? How many countless others have been traumatized by the barrage of insults and insolent comments they hear, or read, on a daily basis, so traumatized that they may resort to suicide, preferring to die than to live, dying a needless and preventable death, all because of someone's sick tongue? Well,... in Islam, it is a major sin to bad-mouth, swear at, or otherwise abuse others. Equally odious is it to talk about others behind their back, even if what you say is true. On bad-mouthing, the Qur'an says,

< O you who believe! Let not a group scoff at another group. It may be that the latter are better than the former... Nor defame one another, nor insult one another by nicknames. How bad is it to insult one's brother after having faith! > 49: 11

No one has the right to bad-mouth, insult, backbite, slander or talk down to others. Believers are commanded to either say what is right or not to say anything. The *hadith* reads: "Whoever believes in God and the Last Day, either speak a good word or keep silent." Consider how much emotional and psychological trauma could not instantly be alleviated by putting this one precautionary measure into practice. It is similar to what we were taught as children, and right from the teachings of Islam: If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say it!

With regard to backbiting, the Qur'an says: **< Neither backbite one another. Would one of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother? You would hate it (i.e., you would hate to bite into the flesh of your brother). And fear God. Verily, God is the One Who forgives and accepts repentance. > 49: 12**

The Prophet (pbuh) explained the difference between backbiting and slander.

"Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) asked his companions, "Do you know what backbiting is?" They said: "God and His Messenger know best." He (pbuh) then said: "It is to say something about your brother that he would dislike." Someone asked him: "But what if what I say is true?" The Messenger of God (pbuh) said: "if what you say about him is true, you are backbiting him; if it is not true, then you have slandered him."

Note: Slander, an even more egregious sin, carries an even greater punishment.

A word on gossiping, tale-carrying, and the like:

It is part of proper Islamic manners that a Muslim ignores, or disregards, that which does not concern him. A Muslim is not supposed to pry into other peoples' affairs, especially with the intention of stirring up trouble. We are warned in a certain *hadith* that while Satan has despaired of trying to make believers become polytheists, he will not cease to try and sow enmity and discord between them. Adherents to the faith should do their best to avoid engaging in gossip, tale-carrying, smearing peoples' reputations, etc, because these sins tear at the very heart of a Muslim, or any other, community. The problem is compounded if the person spoken of is innocent of the claim.

Once, the Prophet's (pbuh) own virtuous and most beloved wife, Aisha (raa), was suspected of marital infidelity. The accusations against her reached such proportions that her own family, who knew their daughter to be pious and chaste, did not know whether to believe her. The scandal undoubtedly caused her and her family much grief and anxiety. Aisha (raa) became physically drained and emotionally devastated by the false information being spread about her, and was desperate for a way out of her predicament... Until, to her amazement and delight, she was absolved of guilt by verses in the Qur'an which came down, revealing her innocence. The holy verses warn believers against talking about matters they have no proof or knowledge of. The last of these verses says **< God forbids you from it and warns you not to repeat the like of it forever, if you are believers. > 24: 17** God thus gave a stern admonition to future generations to never, ever repeat the likes of what happened to poor Aisha (raa).

The mere act of suspecting someone of committing a crime or any sort of misdeed, if you have no hard evidence, can be sinful. Believers cannot harbor baseless suspicions about other people. The Qur'an warns,

< Indeed, some suspicions are sinful. > 49: 12

Another verse in the noble Qur'an warns people not to believe any Tom, Dick, or Harry who may come to you with news, unless you can verify it first. The verse reads:

< O ye who believe! If a fasiq (liar, evil person) comes to you with any news, verify it, lest you should harm people in ignorance and afterwards you become regretful for what you have done. > 49: 6

This admonishment is meant to ensure that false tales and gossip do not travel far- no farther than the last person's ear. If the tale can't be verified, we cannot believe it. And even if it is verified, we should not go and pass it on to others. According to an authentic *hadith*, "The gossip-monger will not enter Paradise." In another narration, "The tale-bearer will not enter Paradise." People who freely engage in gossip and tale-carrying may take the matter lightly, and may not consider their behavior as sinful, while in the sight of God these are high crimes. Another verse in the noble Qur'an warns against spying on other people (except, of course, as a tactic of war). We cannot dig up dirt on our neighbors, for example, and then broadcast it, even if we happen to see it with our own eyes.

Muslims are supposed to be sympathetic well-wishers of everybody else. They try to conceal the faults, shortcomings, and secrets of others, not make them public.

Islam teaches proper etiquette. People should be careful of the harvests of their tongues:

< The Prophet (pbuh) once took hold of his tongue and said to his companion: "Restrain this."

His companion asked: "O Messenger of God, will we held accountable for what we say?"

He (pbuh) replied: "May your mother be bereaved of you (an Arabic expression). Is there anything that topples people on their faces into the Hell-fire as much as the harvests of their tongues?"

God warns us in the Qur'an: < ***Woe to every slanderer and backbiter.*** > **104: 1**

And from *hadith*:

The Prophet (pbuh) said "A *qattat** will not enter Paradise."

*(footnote: A *qattat* is someone who conveys disagreeable, false information from one person to another with the intention of causing enmity between them.)

The Prophet (pbuh) informed us, "Whoever can guarantee (the chastity of) what is between his two jaw-bones and what is between his two legs, I guarantee Paradise for him."

Imagine a world where people restrained their tongues, and only spoke words of truth and decency...

Advice to victims of abuse:

All of us will be abused by other people some time in our lives, whether physically, mentally (i.e, verbally), or both. It is all part of the test- those trials and tribulations of life-through which God tests some people by means of others. This world is more of a testing place than a resting place, as one prominent Islamic scholar put it. Not everyone in our lives is going to be that faithful friend, that trusted confidante, that sincere well-wisher that we wish they were. People can be cruel, callous, and heartless. And that is exactly why *believers* are instructed to choose their friends and spouses according to specific criteria, as per a *hadith* (to be explained).

The first thing to keep in mind is that abuse victims will be compensated for every ounce of pain and suffering they are made to endure in this life, provided they bear it with patience*
*(footnote: refer to *sabr*, page 114) and are true believers. Knowing there is divine compensation in store for us makes it that much easier to deal with abusive situations.

Another thing to note is that people who abuse others are sick; they are morally depraved, and they are deficient. When they lash out, or abuse others, they are simply venting some of their built-up animosity and frustration. You, the victim, become the unfortunate recipient of all their misplaced anger. Be sure whatever abuse is meted out to you has very little to do with you or with anything you did. Rather, it has to do with your abuser's own built-up unhappiness and with his/ her own troubled state of mind.

Knowing this, we should be better able to protect ourselves from any further damage to our psyche and well-being. Try not to let it get the best of you. Never believe what your abuser says to you, or about you, and never, ever take his/ her words to heart. Of course, by all means, try removing yourself from an abusive situation if at all possible. Instead of sinking into depression and self-loathing, whereby you actually give your oppressor the satisfaction that s/he has achieved something, try to remain strong, vigilant, and resolute. Believe in yourself. You do not deserve to be treated like this. You deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. Rather than get all worked up and unnerved by the abuse, you should have nothing but pity and empathy toward your abuser, who has lost all sense of these things. Pray for his/ her guidance. Pray that God helps you to remain firm and steadfast. Pray that your abuser comes to see the folly of his/ her ways, much like our pious predecessor, Caliph Omar Ibn el-Khattab, did.

The renowned Caliph Omar Ibn el-Khattab (raa) was not always the pious, practicing believer he came to be later on in life. Reportedly a very strong and foreboding figure, he once set out on a mission to kill the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), back in the early days of Islam. With his sword in hand, he headed for the Prophet's (pbuh's) house. On the way, he was told to look a little closer to home. Someone informed him that his own sister and her husband had embraced Islam. He stormed into their house. Alas! They were reading from pages of the holy scripture; it was true! Omar hit his sister on the face, and then went after her husband. She rose to defend her husband stating, in effect, "Yes, we are Muslims, and we believe in God. You can do what you like, but you can never turn our hearts away from Islam." Surprised by her determination and noticing the blood streaming down her face, he suddenly felt remorseful for what he did. He apologized to the pair, and asked them politely if they could show him what they had been reading. Upon hearing the holy verses being recited, he knew it was the truth.

These holy verses were: *< Ta Ha (two letters of the Arabic alphabet) We have not sent down the Qur'an to you to cause you distress. But only as a reminder to those who fear (God). A revelation from Him Who has created the earth and the high heavens, the most Gracious rose over the throne. To Him belongs all that is in the heavens, and all that is on the earth, and all that is between them, and all that is under the soil. And if you speak aloud, then verily He knows the secret and that which is yet more hidden. God! None has the right to be worshipped but He! To Him belong the Best Names. > 20: 1-5*

All of a sudden, he experienced a complete change of heart. He had heard something divine; these words were not the product of a human mind, nor the speech of a human being. Henceforth, he would live his life in the service of Islam. He then proceeded straight to the Prophet's house (pbuh) with the intention, not of killing him (pbuh), but of declaring his faith in God. There is always hope for even the worst hardened sinner, that they may repent one day and mend their ways. When faith enters the heart, it undergoes a total transformation.

Islamic Solutions

Abandonment and neglect

Abandonment and neglect:

The Prophet (pbuh) said: "Beware, every one of you is a shepherd and everyone is answerable with regard to his flock. The Caliph is a shepherd over the people and shall be questioned about his subjects (as to how he conducted their affairs). A man is a guardian over the members of his family and shall be questioned about them (as to how he looked after their physical and moral well-being). A woman is a guardian over the household of her husband and his children and shall be questioned about them (as to how she managed the household and brought up the children). A slave is a guardian over the property of his master and shall be questioned about it (as to how he safeguarded his trust). Beware, every one of you is a guardian and every one of you shall be questioned with regard to his trust."

A common thread throughout the religion of Islam is the concept of rights and limits. People have rights, as well as limits to these rights. And they also have responsibilities- they are obliged to give others their rights. Each one is free to live as they please, as long they fulfill their trusts and do not infringe on other people's rights. A person is responsible for any children that they have, for example, financially, physically, morally- in all respects. The father carries the financial burden. Both parents must see to the needs of their children- and to each other's needs- for the system to flow smoothly. A parent cannot just pick up and go, for example, leaving his/her family members in the lurch. This kind of abandonment, and betrayal, is contrary to all Islamic values. We must all see to each other's needs.

A grown son cannot ignore his elderly parents, or entrust them to the care of an institution, if they grow old and feeble. Children are responsible for parents in their old age. Parents have special rights, children have special rights; even your own body has rights over you in Islam.

Some of the specific rights some have over others:

"A Muslim has six rights over his brother Muslim: When you meet them, offer greetings, when they invite you to a feast, accept their invitation, when they sneeze and say "*alhamdulillah*" (praise be to God), reply with *yarhamuk Allah* (may God's mercy be upon you), when they ask you for advice, advise them sincerely, when they fall ill, visit them, and when they die, follow their bier."

A Muslim is forbidden to violate another Muslim's blood, property, or honor.

The husband has the right to be obeyed by his wife. Parents have the right to be obeyed by their children.

Children's rights: Some of a child's rights are to choose a good mother for them (i.e., to choose a marriage partner who is likely to be a good mother), to give them a good name, and to teach them something of the Qur'an.

Even animals have rights in Islam. You cannot abuse them, deprive them of food, mistreat them, overwork them, use them for purposes they were not intended for, kill them for no reason, etc.

A parents' rights:

A woman in China filed a lawsuit against her own son. What was her complaint? Her son had not visited her or kept her company for years. She actually won the lawsuit, which stipulated that he must keep her company and go to visit her at least once every six months thereafter. A judge in a non-Muslim land was thus cognizant of the rights of a mother, and the duty of her offspring towards her. This verdict should come as no surprise when we realize that basic human instinct, or *fitrah*, is not susceptible to change. It remains constant right down through the ages. The judge was simply uttering what is already instinctual behavior for us to do- in this case, to give one's parents their due. Without filing such a lawsuit, this bereaved mother had her rights affirmed by Islam. The following *hadith* highlights one aspect of a mother's rights:

A man once asked the Prophet (pbuh) who was the most deserving of his good companionship. The Prophet (pbuh) replied, "your mother." The man inquired again, and then who? The Prophet replied, "your mother." And then who? The Prophet again said, "your mother." And then who? He (pbuh) replied, "Your father."

Mothers are held in high regard in Islam. "Paradise is under the feet of your mother" is a well-known quote of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). According to the above *hadith*, a mother is three times more deserving of her child's companionship than even the father is. Children must keep up the ties of kinship with the whole family, not just with their mother and father. They cannot cut off their parents, or any of their relatives, indefinitely. Children must respect their parents, honor them, obey them, and help them in their time of need. If the parents grow old, their children are to take full responsibility for them, in reciprocation for what their parents did for them when they were young and helpless. Children- especially grown-up children- must see to their parents' needs and treat them with all due kindness and respect. They are not allowed to raise their voices in anger or frustration at their parents, or even utter a word such as '*Uff*', an Arabic expression denoting a lack of patience or loss of temper. Some Islamic injunctions in this regard:

The Prophet (pbuh) once exclaimed: "Shame on him! Shame on him! Shame on him!" When asked who the man in question was, the Prophet (pbuh) replied: "He is the one who had one or both of his parents with him in their old age yet he failed to enter Paradise by virtue of serving them and gaining their blessings."

To remain by one's mother, attending to her needs, is more commendable than going out to fight the enemy in battle. Once, the call to fight the infidels came. A man's mother made a request that her son stay by her side, and not participate in the battle. Upon asking the Prophet (pbuh) about this, he (pbuh) replied, "Go and remain with your mother. I swear by the Lord who has sent me on a true mission that to remain with one's mother (serving and doing good to her) is better than fighting the infidels in the way of God for a whole year."

< And your Lord has decreed that you worship none but Him, and that you be dutiful to your parents. If one of them or both of them attain old age in your life, say not to them a word of disrespect, nor shout at them but address them in terms of honor. And lower to them the wing of humility out of mercy and say, "My Lord! Have mercy upon them as they brought me up when I was young. > 17: 24

An article inspired by Islam:

An unwelcome precursor to the Day of Judgment is that children will start to have less and less respect for their parents as the Last Day approaches. This disturbing trend can be detected nowadays, whether it be among believers or disbelievers. Parents no longer command the respect they once did, nor that they should.

We ought to consider how much our parents go through to bring us into the world: how many sacrifices they made, how many sleepless nights they spent, how many temper tantrums they put up with, how much trouble and discomfort they experienced all for our sake. Don't our parents deserve a whole lot more than what we give them in return?

Islam reminds us of our duty towards our parents. In fact, we are informed by a very close companion of the Prophet (pbuh), Abdullah Ibn Omar, that no matter how hard we try, we can never, ever make it up to our parents for everything they have done for us, not even for a single birth pain! It was related that once a man, seeking to please his mother and compensate her for all the pain and suffering she experienced for his sake, vowed to take her with him on pilgrimage, carrying his mother all the way as she had become old and incapacitated. Believing his efforts to have been enough, he told some people what he had done, to which the reply was: you have not even compensated her for one birth pain that she experienced while delivering you!

But that's not to say we can't try. Kindness and goodness to parents is repeatedly mentioned in the noble Qur'an right after worship of God. It is such a fundamental and important obligation that a person can be denied Paradise if it is not fulfilled. Children are to remain dutiful and obedient to parents even after they reach adulthood. They should listen to and obey their parents in everything except in any command or request that may go against their beliefs. Many parents of Muslim reverts*

*(footnote: Those who 'convert' to Islam are commonly called 'reverts', as they see themselves as coming back to the primal state of submission they were born upon.)

have gone on to recognize Islam as the truth, after seeing their children's attitudes and behaviors toward them change firsthand. Believers pray for their parents, that they may eventually join them in their Heavenly abode.

An orphan's rights:

Under Islamic law, no one can willingly give up their children to an orphanage, or even to the care/ custody of another family. This greatly limits the number of orphans or foster children. Many orphans or foster children are the product of an unwanted pregnancy, something which does not happen when Islam is enforced. Again, this greatly limits the number of vulnerable children out there. A true orphan, according to the teachings of Islam, is anyone who is under-age (under the age of puberty) and whose father has passed away. The Prophet (pbuh) himself was an orphan, and went on to become a champion of orphans' rights. He (pbuh) encouraged people to take orphans in, saying "I and the one who takes care of an orphan are like this in Paradise" and he (pbuh) raised his middle and pointer fingers. He told people there is a reward for stroking the heads of orphans, as a gesture of love and affection. One of the worst sins in Islam is to mistreat an orphan, or to mix their property with yours, seeking to deprive them of what is rightfully theirs. Whatever savings or inheritance an orphan has is to be kept in trust for them, and is to be given to them when they reach maturity. The Prophet (pbuh) was forever the advocate of the weak and downtrodden.

The Qur'an warns:

< And come not near to the orphan's property except to improve it, until he (or she) attains age of full strength. > 6: 152

< "Verily those who unjustly eat up the property of orphans, they eat up only fire into their bellies" > 4: 10

Note: Taking care of orphans can mean taking physical custody of them, or simply helping them out financially. Both are extremely meritorious and encouraged by the above-mentioned *hadith*.

Islamic Solutions

Household quarrels/ spits and spats

Household quarrels/ spits and spats:

A daughter becomes upset with her mother's constant nagging, and the daughter lashes out by refusing to comply with even the simplest of requests, thus setting off an ongoing pattern of frustration and animosity between them.

Islam insists that children listen to and obey their parents (that is, except in anything that goes against their faith). It is a parents' God-given right to be obeyed- unconditionally. If all children did this, I believe it would mostly be smooth sailing for all.

Note: Admittedly, getting children to listen (i.e. to obey) is not always going to be easy. Religion demands this of them, yes, but after all they are human beings, not angels. Children have the free will to obey or disobey us. As Muslim parents, we endeavor to explain to our young ones the fundamentals of our faith, and show them the grave importance of treating parents with utmost dignity and respect, of honoring thy mother and thy father. We may give them examples of people such as Owais el-Qarni of Yemen, who has gone down in history as being a most excellent example of a devoutly obedient and dutiful son to his mother. We may try to coerce them by warning them of divine chastisement if they were to disobey us. But, at the end of the day, our children are probably not going to comply with our wishes all the time. Children tend to comply according to the soundness of their innate natures, and according to their level of understanding. If their intrinsic nature, or *fitrah*, is sound and pure and they are taught Islam correctly, you will find that they willingly and zealously apply the various tenets of their faith, once they know what these things are. If their innate character, or *fitrah*, has been sullied or stained, even if they are raised properly and taught about Islam from their youth, they may choose not to follow the rules, and would rather live by their own set of rules. Satan has beautified his path for them, the path that leads to nowhere, and worse. So, what recourse do we have?

One the most often-repeated supplications by religious leaders at Islamic gatherings or during the Friday sermon, is the one which says: "We ask God to make us see the truth as (being) true, and bless us with following it; and make us see falsehood as (being) false, and bless us to stay away from it." Supplications such as this remind us that we are to seek divine aid in being able to distinguish what is right from wrong (in the ultimate sense, according to God- and not according to our own warped vision), and we are also to seek divine aid in being able to follow and apply what is right, and in being able to keep away from what is wrong, thus avoiding the traps of Satan which cause us to fall off the Straight Path. We pray that our children see the truth as true, and live according to it, and we pray that they see falsehood as false, and seek avoidance of it. We pray that our children see the light, and realize that it is ultimately in their own best interests to do the right thing, even if they would rather not.

Islamic Solutions

Laziness and procrastination

Laziness and procrastination:

The Prophet of God (pbuh) would often supplicate, "My Lord, I take refuge in You from laziness and helpless old age". Islam is a practical, dynamic religion which stresses working hard, doing things for one's self, helping others, doing things to the best of one's ability, utilizing one's talents, managing one's time wisely, fulfilling one's obligations, praying on time, being strong and independent, and so on. Laziness is considered an un-Islamic trait. People who are lazy tend to be unproductive, slow-moving, and unmotivated. Laziness leads to procrastination-putting off until tomorrow what can be done today. There is a very wise *hadith* about making good use of your time and other resources.

The Prophet (pbuh) advised us to take advantage of five before another five:

"Your youth before your old age, your free time before you become busy, your life before your death, your rich status before you become poor, and your health before your illness."

We are not to wait until tomorrow, or beyond, to get up and get moving. Believers, motivated by their belief in God and an afterlife, should be active, productive members of society. They see time as their biggest asset, and they put it to good use. A person does not know when the above-mentioned blessings will run out, so it is best to take advantage of them while they last. Laziness precludes one from reaching one's full potential. Precious hours are wasted away with the net result being nothing at all... has been accomplished. The Prophet (pbuh) informed us that there are two blessings most people lose out on, and do not take proper advantage of, ostensibly because we do not perceive their true value. They are health and free time.

Islamic civilization witnessed an amazing period of growth over the couple of hundred years following its advent. Believers were keen on learning and applying the various teachings of their faith, and spreading what they knew, along with the "good news", far and wide. Those early generations of believers never slacked- they did not know apathy, laziness, or procrastination. As Islam encourages the acquisition of knowledge, as well as the spread of ideas, Islamic civilization flourished quickly (as did many other fields and disciplines, such as medicine, anatomy, physics, optics, ophthalmology, mathematics, chemistry, botany, geology, hydraulics, geography, philosophy, art, and architecture). Islam was able to spread peacefully to Europe, reaching all the way to France in the West, and all the way to China in the East. Because of the boldness and dedication of these tireless pioneer Muslims, men and women, armed with nothing more than their faith and the noble Qur'an, we in the West have come to know of their phenomenal way of life. We have also benefited from the spark in learning and progress they ignited. Early Muslim scientists laid the groundwork for many important discoveries to come, paving the way for the eventual coming of the Industrial Revolution. When Islam takes hold, it transforms everything for the better.

Islamic Solutions

Domestic violence

Domestic violence:

A repeated charge against Islam is that it condones violence, and incites its followers to blow themselves up, raise the call for *jihad* (see note on *jihad*, page 157), annihilate all disbelievers, and terrorize innocent victims. Nothing could be further from the truth- or further from Islamic values. The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) must be considered the ultimate pacifist. He (pbuh) has said, "The Muslim is one from whom you are safe- from his hand and his tongue."

Islam seeks to discipline its followers, to tame the wayward soul, and quell any violent tendencies. It does not condone violence or bloodshed, especially in the home. Fighting is always a last resort- and never to be instigated. A husband is supposed to treat his wife with dignity and respect. And vice versa. There is reference to a slight tap the husband can use for modification of behavior. It is not meant to hurt or affect the wife physically, but rather it is meant to have an emotional impact. This tap is to be done with something as flimsy as a tooth stick (*miswak*), and is only to be employed when other attempts at correction have failed. Muslim parents cannot hit their children, except under one special condition- if the child has reached the age of ten and has not yet begun the ritual of prayer. The parents are then supposed to use physical coercion. It is not permissible to hit in the face under any circumstances. The only other categories of people deserving corporal punishment are those guilty of theft, those who consume intoxicants, and those accused- and convicted- of illegal sexual intercourse or who falsely accuse a wife of the same. The accused are to receive a hundred lashes, and eighty lashes respectively. Under these guidelines, domestic violence, and violent tendencies in general, would all but cease to exist.

Islamic Solutions

Problems related to free-mixing

Problems related to free-mixing:

Which problem or issue surrounding the free mixing thing could not be solved by Islam? First of all, no boyfriends/ girlfriends allowed. No more friends with benefits, and no more homosexuality, either. Islam forbids the free mixing of the sexes. It also forbids homosexuality in the strongest terms. In God's infinite knowledge and wisdom, He has legislated marriage to be the only legal association between members of the opposite sex. The couple enters into holy matrimony, forming a sacred union through which children are gifted by God. Marriage becomes a *sunnah* (the way of the Prophet (pbuh)) for those who are physically and financially able, and is described as completing half of one's religion. Getting married is highly recommended and encouraged to promote peace, tranquility, self-respect, mutual love and caring- and, naturally, to perpetuate the human race. The Prophet (pbuh) has said, "There's nothing like marriage, for two who love one another."

< And among His signs is that He has created for you wives from among yourselves, that you may find repose in them, and He has put between you affection and mercy. Verily, in that are indeed signs for a people who reflect. > 30: 21

The sanctity of marriage is made very clear in Islam. To keep it that way, there are many regulations regarding appropriate- and inappropriate- male/ female conduct:

"No man is ever alone with a (marriageable) woman without Satan being the third one present."

"For a man to be speared through the head with an iron needle would be better than for him to touch a woman who is not permissible for him."

"No man should ever be alone with a woman except when she has a non-marriageable male relative (or her husband) with her."

Modesty in Islam

A quality all but missing in today's world is a term known as *haya'* in Arabic, loosely translated into English as "modesty". It is part of faith for a believer to shy away from members of the opposite sex. This is inherent in his/ her very unspoiled nature, or *fitrah*. Men should stay in their own sphere, and women in theirs. A woman is not supposed to beautify herself, calling attention to her bodily contours, for men to ogle at. This is the right of her husband only. Simply putting on perfume and going out of the house is to be avoided.

To keep her self pure and chaste, a women should ideally cover her "adornments" in public, wearing loose-fitting, nontransparent clothing which does not reveal the body contours, as revealed in the verse below. Women should not use perfumes or body sprays outside of the home. It is not appropriate to maintain any sort of relationship, however innocent, with a member of the opposite gender. The advice of Aisha (raa, the Prophet's dearest wife and renowned scholar) was for men to stay away from women and women to stay away from men.

< And tell the believing women to... guard their private parts and not expose their adornment except that which [necessarily] appears thereof and to wrap [a portion of] their head covers over their chests and not expose their adornment except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands' fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers, their brothers' sons, their sisters' sons, their women, that which their right hands possess (female slaves), or those male attendants having no physical desire, or children who are not yet aware of the private aspects of women > 24: 31

< O you who believe! Enter perfectly in Islam and follow not the footsteps of Satan. Verily, he is to you a plain enemy. > 2: 208

Following Satan's footsteps could be interpreted in the following way: a man takes a glimpse at a marriageable woman, then he takes a second look (while the first look is permissible, the second is not), he likes what he sees, approaches her politely, asks for her phone number, calls her, invites her out, etc....

If Islam were to be established in the land, there would be no room for illicit relationships, break-ups, heartaches, unintended pregnancies, unwanted children, abortions, extra-marital affairs, pre-marital affairs, sexual deviation of any kind, pornography, pedophilia, and the like, not to mention the many diseases and ill-effects, both physical and psychological, which accompany these behaviors. Islam seeks to preserve the modesty and sexual purity of human beings. Intimacy is only sanctioned within the confines of marriage, and the couple is actually rewarded for this. The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) informed us: "...in a man's sexual intercourse (with his wife) there is a *sadaqa* (a charitable deed rewarded by God). His companions, rather surprised, inquired of him: "Messenger of God, is there a reward for him who satisfies his sexual passion among us?" He said: "Tell me, if he were to devote it to something forbidden, would it not be a sin on his part? Similarly, if he were to devote it to something lawful, he should have a reward."

Islamic Solutions

Divorce

Divorce

Of all the permissible (*halal*) actions in Islam, divorce (*talaq*) is the most despised by God. It is the break-up of a family, the core of society- with dire consequences for the entire human race, not least of all children. Satan delights in the divorce of a couple as he delights in nothing else. It is his dream to watch families break down, one by one. And it looks as though his sinister plan is working.

The nuclear family is the building block of society. Every effort must be made to keep it intact. A number of rules and regulations in Islam, if applied faithfully, will lead to a strong, stable family unit, God-willing (*insha'Allah*).

First and foremost- as prevention is better than cure- is the command to marry from among the pious. Your choice of a marriage partner is of key importance in order to prevent divorce and other marital problems down the line. Choosing a religious- minded spouse, a person who fears the long term consequences of his or her actions, is definitely the preferred course of action. A pious predecessor of the past, named Hasan el-Basry, gave this advice to women: "Marry a man for his piety; for if he loves his wife, he honors her. And if he does not love her, at least he will not oppress her." Following this advice, a woman can ensure her- as well as her future offspring's- well-being.

As for a man choosing a wife, one *hadith* informs us:

"A woman is married for four things, i.e., her wealth, her family status, her beauty and her religion. So, you should marry the religious woman, may you succeed."

Think about it. A woman is, throughout the ages, usually sought after for her looks, her wealth, perhaps her nobility, but rarely for her religious commitment. While the first three qualities may attract a potential mate, they are all superficial qualities which are not directly in her control. They are all external qualities which say nothing about the girl herself. They will be nigh useless in the future success of this marriage unless they are coupled with a pious, virtuous interior. Of all the blessings the world over, God cites a virtuous woman as the best of them.

"The world is a quick-passing enjoyment and the best enjoyment is a virtuous wife."

When choosing a life partner- Islam confirms- piety is the way to go. Consider how many marriages could be salvaged, and how many other problems avoided, if both men and women were to take this advice to heart.

In a similar *hadith*, aimed at the parents/ caretaker of a bride-to-be:

"If there comes to you one whose religious commitment and attitude please you, then marry (your daughter/ female relative under your care) to him."

How concise and effective a remedy! Treat the problem before it even starts. Pious, God-fearing men are good husbands. They are good fathers. They are good to their wives. They are good to their children. In fact, they are good, period! In all likelihood, you will never come to regret your choice of a devout, pious husband. How many men out there do not deserve the hand of our daughters in marriage because they just don't fit this bill?

Wait- there is a consequence for not following this advice. The *hadith* continues:

"...for if you do not do that, there will be tribulation on earth and much corruption."

Alas! We wonder why the world is so... screwed up! Does it come to us as any surprise that immorality, vice, homosexuality, divorce, social decadence, family dysfunction, unstable homes, unstable children, single parent households, and so on, have become the norm? Who listens to guidance from above any more? Could this be the reason?

There are several other directives aimed at preventing divorce in Islam, as well. In the Prophet's farewell address, the last sermon he (pbuh) would ever give, he (pbuh) implored men to treat their women well. In the same vein, he (pbuh) proclaimed in one *hadith*: "The best of you are those who are best to their wives and family. And I am the best of you to my wives and family." Men are encouraged to treat their wives and family members in the best way possible. In reciprocation, a wife is supposed to treat her husband with all due kindness and respect. Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said if he were to have ordered someone to prostrate to another besides God, he (pbuh) would have ordered a woman to prostrate before her husband. This is indicative of the high regard a woman should have for her husband. She should be attentive to his needs and try to make life generally pleasant for him- just as he should do for her. She should be quick to please him, and slow to anger him- and consider it an honor to serve and comfort him. She is supposed to accede to her husband's request for intimacy, even if she had to come down from on top of a camel, as one *hadith* puts it. She cannot withhold herself from him for any reason (an illegitimate reason), or the angels will curse her until morning. Once again, if your choice of a partner is based on piety, these and many other marital spats would not even arise.

There is an interesting *hadith* which deserves mention here. A woman once came to the Prophet (pbuh), as an ambassador for women and said, "O Messenger of God, men have surpassed us in reward through praying in congregation, praying the Friday prayers, visiting the ill, participating in funeral prayers, and spending out of their wealth" (i.e., while women cannot compete with them in these areas). The Prophet (pbuh), after expressing his admiration for her keen observation, informed her...

"Your adorning and beautifying yourselves for your husbands and your striving to please your husbands and your obedience to the wishes of your husbands equals these actions in reward."

The Prophet of Islam (pbuh) wanted men and women to succeed and attain true marital bliss. If the above-mentioned advice does not lead to a successful, blissful union between a man and his wife, then what will?

Note on choosing the right partner: Choosing the right spouse is of paramount importance to a believer. However, it is not always as easy as it sounds. This is one decision one does not want to rush into. Be patient, and wait for the right person. Enlist the help of your Creator, if it is Him in whom you believe, by praying the optional prayer called *salatul Istikhara* (to be explained). Know that not every person who professes belief in Islam really practices what Islam preaches. Many nominal Muslims are out there- and they can be very charming when they want to be. You must be careful not to fall into the trap of marrying any ordinary person just because he was the first one to propose, you feel bad about rejecting him because he seems like a nice guy, and he is even rich and cute, too, but he smokes a pack a day, talks back to his mother and can't keep a job down for whatever reason. Righteous, pious people have certain defining traits, and it these you should be looking for, such as those mentioned in this book with regard to the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and his righteous, pious companions, not whether he wears brand-name clothing, how much his job pays, or where he promises to take you on your honeymoon.

Islamic Solutions

Keeping the peace/ preventing emotional upset

Keeping the peace/ preventing emotional upset:

Islam is rife with directives commanding believers to treat others with kindness and respect, always taking other peoples' needs and feelings into consideration. How much better life would be if people were a little more kind and considerate! The Golden Rule of Islam states that "None of you truly believes unless he loves for his brother what he loves for himself." Following this one mantra alone could immediately reduce tensions the world over. Imagine if everyone treated everyone else in the same selfless, upright, dignified manner they wish to be treated. This is what Islam demands of us. Some other directives aimed at keeping the peace:

< Two people cannot engage in a private conversation when a third one is present (as it might annoy him/ her).

< Anas (the Prophet Muhammad's young servant boy) reported: "I served the Prophet (pbuh) for ten years, and he never said to me: *Uff!* (a word denoting impatience), and he never blamed me by saying: Why did you do this? or Why did you not do that?"

Thus, Muslims should follow the Prophetic example and refrain from unduly criticizing and/ or blaming others.

< The Prophet (pbuh) forbade believers to go more than three days without speaking. The one who breaks the silence (by offering the first greeting of peace) reaps a great reward.

< You are instructed to pay a person his wages (think: the repair guy) who does a job for you before his sweat dries.

< It is highly commendable to write off debts for those who owe you money (and can't pay you back in the foreseeable future).

< It is forbidden for a person to scare another person.

< "The Muslim is one from whom people are safe--from his tongue and his hand."

< "He is not a true Muslim who is not kind to those who are older and does not respect those who are younger."

< "The Muslim is the mirror of his brother." (and therefore points out his faults to him)

< "A good word is a charity."

< "To smile in the company of your brother is charity. To command others to do good deeds and to prevent others from doing evil is charity. To guide a person in a place where he can not go astray is charity. To remove troublesome things like thorns from the road is charity. To pour water from your jug into the jug of your brother is charity. To guide a person with defective vision is charity for you."

< "Hell-fire is forbidden to touch a person who is kind, gentle, and easygoing."

< "Spread the greeting of peace amongst yourselves." This will increase love and mutual goodwill amongst you.

< One of the seven types of people God will shade on the Day when there will be no shade but His*

*(footnote The *hadith* in its entirety: "There are seven whom God will shade in His Shade on the Day when there is no shade except His Shade: a just ruler; a youth who grew up in the worship of God, the Mighty and Majestic; a man whose heart is attached to the mosques; two people who love each other for God's sake, meeting for that and parting upon that; a man who is called by a woman of beauty and position [for illegal intercourse], but he says: 'I fear God'; a man who gives in charity and hides it, such that his left hand does not know what his right hand has given; and a man who remembered God in private such that his eyes shed tears.)

is a person who loved another person solely for the sake of God. They met and they parted that way (with no worldly considerations between them).

< It is a sin to refuse to do minor favors for other people. (see Qur'an, chapter 107)

< "The connection between Muslims is like that of a strong building- one part strengthens the other". The Prophet (pbuh) then showed this by interlocking the fingers of one hand with those of the other.

< "You will recognize the believers by their having mercy and compassion for one another and by their love for one another, and by their kindness towards one another. Like the body, when one member of it hurts, the whole body hurts."

< "If you help someone out of a worldly calamity, God will help you out of a bigger calamity on the Day of Judgment."

< It is a duty upon a Muslim to visit his brother if he falls ill.

What a wonderful world it would be... if everyone was Muslim!

The fruits of good conduct, a story that deserves to be re-told:

Before the advent of Islam, Arabian society was steeped in ignorance and ignominy. This period is commonly referred to as *Jahiliya*, or Time of Ignorance. People were engaged in many uncouth, inhumane practices. They worshipped idols made of wood and stone. They would circumambulate the *Kaaba*, the holy shrine in Mecca, in the nude. In their ignorance, they would bury their newly born daughters alive. As Islam began to spread among Arabs, such cruel practices stopped for Islam taught love and peace. It also taught morality, kindness and respect.

Prophet Muhammad himself (pbuh) was a very kind and gentle person. He (pbuh) treated everyone, young and old, with dignity and respect.

Because the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was spreading the word of God, he (pbuh) was changing, for the better, the lives of many Arabs. Some Arabs felt that by the teachings of Muhammad (pbuh) their old idols were losing power and so they disliked the Prophet of Islam (pbuh) and planned to kill him (pbuh). Every time they tried to kill him (pbuh), though, they failed. This angered the enemies of Islam even more, so they began to harass him (pbuh) in every way they knew.

One old woman made a habit of throwing garbage on Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) whenever he (pbuh) passed by her house. The Prophet (pbuh) would routinely pass that house on his way to the mosque. Even when the old woman threw garbage on him (pbuh), he (pbuh) would pass silently without showing any anger or annoyance. This became a regular, daily event.

One day when the Prophet (pbuh) was passing by, the woman was not there to throw the garbage. He (pbuh) stopped and asked the neighbor about her well-being. The neighbor informed the Prophet (pbuh) that the woman was sick in bed. The Prophet (pbuh) politely asked permission to go and visit the woman. When given permission, he (pbuh) entered the house. The woman surmised that he (pbuh) had come to take his revenge, at a time when she was unable to defend herself due to her illness. But the Prophet (pbuh) assured her that he had come to her, not to take any revenge, but to see her and to look after her needs, as it was the command of God that if any one is sick, a Muslim should visit him and help him if his help is needed.

The old woman was greatly moved by this act of benevolence and mercy of the Prophet (pbuh). By the example of the greatness of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), she understood that he (pbuh) was truly the Prophet of God and Islam was the true religion. She accepted Islam at once. Can you see the fruits of good conduct?

Islamic Solutions

The oppression of women

The oppression of women:

In most societies, historically-speaking, women have had to fight for their rights. Women have often been denied their basic rights, such as the right to education, voting, free speech, participating in public debate, owning, buying, selling, working, receiving equal pay, inheriting, driving and the list goes on. Before all the various women's rights movements and struggles for equality over the last couple of hundred years, Islam had already been granting women novel rights for centuries. These are her God-given rights, and are therefore fair, equitable, perfectly suited to her nature, and applicable to all times and places.

Some of a woman's rights: A woman is entitled to maintenance, first in her father's home, then in her husband's. She has the right to an education, and is to be given a proper religious upbringing. She may work, and all of her earnings are hers to keep. A woman is not required to spend a penny on herself or on anyone else, unless she so chooses (with the notable exception of her annual mandatory alms [*zakat*] payment, if her assets reach a certain level). She has the right to inherit from deceased relatives; she receives a fixed, fair share which she cannot be denied. In this area, she made quite remarkable progress considering that back in seventh-century Arabia, not only was a woman barred from inheriting, she herself could be inherited along with her husband's other 'goods'!

In pre-Islamic Arabia, female infanticide was commonplace, as mentioned. News of the birth of a baby girl would be met with dismay. The Qur'an says about this:

< When news is brought to one of them of (the birth of) a female (child) his face darkens and he is filled with inward grief! With shame does he hide himself from his people because of the bad news he has had! Shall he retain it on (sufferance and) contempt or bury it in the dust? Ah! what an evil (choice) they decide on! > 16: 59

The fate of a female before the dawn of Islam was either to be kept as a thing of contempt, or else have her life mercilessly ended. There was no genuine respect or appreciation for female kind. Through Islam and its humane teachings and rigorous moral code, the abominable practice of burying female infants alive, as well as the stigma of having a daughter, were completely uprooted. The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was able to change the perception that girls were a source of shame and disgrace. He (pbuh), himself the proud father of four exemplary daughters, apprised parents of the great reward from the Almighty for those who raise three girls to maturity. When asked about the reward for having two daughters, or only one, the Prophet (pbuh) replied, "Yes, there is a reward for bringing up only one."*

*(footnote: This is if one brings her up in a proper Islamic way.)

A girl cannot be forced or coerced into a marriage she does not want. She cannot be beaten, tortured, or otherwise abused. She has the right to ask for domestic help (after marriage), if that was her custom (before marriage). She can buy, sell, and own property (which was not even allowed for most women in the US until around the time of the Civil War). A woman who is unhappy in her marriage can seek divorce. She is not forced to live out her days in misery, as is the case where divorce is not allowed. She is to be treated with all due kindness and respect. The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) stressed the honorable treatment of women in his Farewell Address, the last sermon he (pbuh) would ever give.

A woman's opinion is valued in Islam. The Prophet (pbuh) would often elicit the advice of his wives, and they would provide solutions to seemingly insurmountable problems. Her testimony is accepted in the court of law. She can sue for her rights and is entitled to representation if convicted. She can advise her husband in all matters, but at the end of the day he has the final say. This is because God has given men a degree of authority over women.

From the Qur'an: *< and the male is not like the female. > 3: 36*

Men and women are different. And God's laws cater to those differences. Men are not superior to women, but due to inherent differences in their natures, God has made men responsible for women, not only financially, but morally as well. A man should know where his wife is, for example, as he will be asked about his wife and children before God. A pious woman understands this and accepts her position vis a vis her husband; therefore, she tries to accommodate his wishes and guard what he would have her guard in his absence. God's satisfaction is contingent on a husband's satisfaction with his wife, as stated in one *hadith*. A woman is guaranteed Paradise, and is permitted to enter from any of its eight gates, if she fulfills the following four:

"observes her five daily prayers, fasts during the month of Ramadan, guards her chastity and obeys her husband"*.

*(footnote: Women, in Islam, are not seen as subservient to men; however, just as every ship has a captain, so must every household have a leader. A pious woman acknowledges her husband as that leader and that he has the final say in all matters- after taking his wife's feelings and opinions into consideration. In practice, the divine injunction to obey one's husband does not serve to oppress women, nor to disempower them. On the contrary, it works to their advantage. At the very least, tension between husband and wife will be kept to a bare minimum. And at most, she will earn the respect and admiration of her husband, as well as the pleasure of her Lord.)

Women in Islam are considered the backbone of society. Many are busy preparing the next generation, with hardly any credit to their name. Only God knows what a mother has to go through, day in and day out, when bearing and caring for her young. Islam does not neglect this most monumental of all human sacrifices. She is rewarded for all her pain, suffering, and forbearance, all in due time.

"A mother is a school" is a common expression. It is her noble calling to rear the little ones, teaching them right from wrong, helping to ensure they are raised on a high standard of character. The Prophet (pbuh) said, "I have been sent only to perfect good manners." He (pbuh) also said "The best thing you can teach your child is good manners." A father is responsible for the moral upbringing of his children as well. In order to give them the best chance possible, he should choose a suitable mother for them. A good-natured, pious woman can provide an excellent example for her children.

A woman can stipulate in her marriage contract that her husband remain faithful to her only, and not take another wife, if she so desires. She can also stipulate that he help her in the upkeep of the home, and with domestic chores. The prospective husband is expected to give his wife a dowry upon marriage- an agreed-upon sum of money which is hers to keep, while she remains free of all marriage and wedding-related expenses. If her father is non-Muslim, the prospective bride is entitled to a guardian (*wali*) from the Muslim community to represent her in her marriage and to safeguard her rights in cases of abuse, neglect, maltreatment, etc. The religion of Islam does not oppress women, nor deny them their rights, as so many societies have historically done. On the contrary, it raises their status to unprecedented heights, gives them the rights and privileges they deserve, while seeking to ensure their safety, well-being, and ultimate success.

Islamic Solutions

Sibling rivalry

Sibling rivalry:

Parents are instructed to treat all children equally. If one gets a new gadget, they all get the same. If one gets a smooch, they all get the same. No shows of favouritism allowed.

Islamic Solutions

Drug, alcohol, cigarette and gambling abuse/ addictions

Drug, alcohol, cigarette and gambling abuse/ addictions:

Intoxicants are forbidden in Islam, as are games of chance (playing for money). In one fell swoop, Islam eradicates all of these illicit activities, and concomitantly, the social ills they foment. From the Qur'an:

< They ask you about intoxicants and gambling. Say (O Prophet), "There is gross sin in them and some benefits for people, but their sinfulness outweighs their benefit. > 2: 219

< Satan wants to provoke strife and hatred among you through intoxicants and gambling, and to prevent you from the remembrance of God, and from prayer. Will you not desist? > 5: 91

Cigarette and pipe (tobacco) smoking is also forbidden (*haram*) in Islam, as it is detrimental to one's health and wealth.

Note on addictions:

Most people develop an addiction when their psychological/ emotional/ spiritual balance is out of whack. Invariably, people go looking for a substitute to replace whatever they feel is missing in their life. However these addictions usually only exacerbate whatever problems the person already has, cause harm, both physical and psychological, and are never the answer. When people feel good inside, spiritually and emotionally fulfilled, they do not go looking for artificial means of escape.

Islamic Solutions

Dating/ relationship dilemmas

Dating/ relationship dilemmas:

See above, on free-mixing. There is no dating, per se, in Islam. Another potential problem is nipped in the bud, before it can proliferate. No dating means no date-related incidents of violence, rape, misogyny, cheating, break-ups, heartaches, unintended pregnancies, unwanted children, etc. A couple who is interested in each other (interested in a lawful, committed relationship, that is) can meet, talk face-to-face, get to know each other, discuss issues that may come up after marriage, enjoy each other's company, all in a friendly atmosphere in which at least one of the prospective bride's male relatives is present. The couple cannot be alone together, touch each other, or see the body parts that must normally be covered in public. If the girl wears the face veil (*niqab*), she can (read: must) remove it to show her face, at least once.

Islamic Solutions

Time Management

Time Management:

Of the most precious commodities we have, as human beings, is time.... our precious, valuable time that we often squander away idly, wantonly, mindlessly, day in and day out. If we knew the value of time, perhaps we would put it to better use. One of the questions we will be asked, come Judgment Day, is with regard to our life, and how we spent it; i.e., how did we spend all those precious days, months and years we had on this earth? Did we use our time to better ourselves and the world around us, or did we waste many such opportunities? Did we use our time mostly in selfish, selfless, or in mainly idle pursuits? We do keep busy, are preoccupied with this, that and the other, but have we accomplished all that much?

Scholars of the past, who perceived its true worth, hated to squander a single minute of their much-valued time. To that end, they would always try to make the maximum use of it. If they had a free moment, perhaps when waiting for someone or something, they would repeat one of the many phrases and supplications taught to us by the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) which bring immense reward. Many of them would make a daily schedule, write it down on paper, and stick to it meticulously, to avoid letting their time slip by. It has been recorded that Abu Hurayra, the most famous and prolific narrator of Prophetic *ahadith*, managed his time most wisely. During the day, he was busy in some aspect of learning, memorizing, or teaching Prophetic narrations or the noble Qur'an to people. When night fell, he, his wife, and his daughter would take turns standing for the Night Standing, or *Qiyam el Layl*, so at least one of them would be standing in worship the whole night through.

It is recommended that we use our time in ways that will bring about the most benefit, both in this life, and in preparation for the next. Rather than wasting away precious hours on the phone, in front of a tv or computer screen, or even in bed, sleeping too much, we should try to use our time more productively. We should try to prioritize and give more time to that which is most important. Believers must be aware of the prayer times, for example, and make prayer a top priority. A believer is expected to pray at the earliest possible time, after the call to prayer (*adhan*) is sounded. If it is not sounded, they are expected to know when it is time to pray. It is not acceptable to delay, or defer, the prayers unless there is a valid excuse to do so. There are countless other ways to make the most of one's time. Be mindful not to put off until tomorrow what can be done today, as per the Prophet's (pbuh) advice to take advantage of one's free status before one gets busy. One thing is for sure: you do not want your day to pass without making some headway in your quest for a better, future life, if that is where your aspirations lay. Many of us are under the false impression that we have so much time- it seems we have 'all the time in the world'- and that it never runs out. But the stark reality is that time passes far more quickly than we care to admit. And somewhere down the line, perhaps not too far off, it does run out. And we never know when that will be. Following Islamic guidelines with respect to our time ensures that we spend it in ways we will not come to regret.

Islamic Solutions

Pessimism

Pessimism

A pessimistic attitude is not indicative of a true believer. A believer is an eternal optimist, anticipating the proverbial "light at the end of the tunnel", having the best opinion of God, and entrusting all affairs to Him. Pessimism is a disease brought on by none other than the arch-enemy of mankind, Satan, the accursed. The devil incites people to reject God, and to always expect a negative outcome, lose faith in the entire system, believe that everything is only going to get worse, etc. Satan wants the whole world to revel in failure and decadence. He wants everyone to feel just as lost, hopeless, frustrated, forsaken, defeated, dejected, and worthless as he is, and so he whispers these false suggestions into our hearts, to anyone who will listen. He continues to do so until we finally believe it. Now we are his victims, under his control. He can manipulate us at will.

The believer, however, is immune to such attacks because he knows better. He knows Satan's devilish ploys are no more than a nuisance, and so dismisses them. They are no match for him, for he has faith in an All- Powerful Lord. A true believer is anything but pessimistic, seeing the cup as half full, rather than half empty. Believers are the most content, most optimistic and most carefree of all. They have the power of the Almighty behind them, and well they know it. They do not despair over minor, or even major, mishaps. Everything is taken in stride. In their minds, it is futile to get overjoyed or over-saddened by the inevitable. They know that what has reached them was never going to miss them and what has missed them was never going to reach them. Whatever God decides- that is what will be.

Furthermore, believers know that God's help is never far away. No matter how bad things get, there is a promise, binding upon Him in the Qur'an, that God will always provide a way out. No matter how hard the difficulty, how bad the pain, or how dire the situation, God always brings relief.

< Verily, along with every hardship comes ease. Verily, along with hardship comes ease. >

94: 6

While they are expected to take all possible means, believers leave the result of their affairs up to God- and ideally, find satisfaction with His decree. A common expression among Muslims is "leave it up to God." Release all the pressure, give up the reins to the One in the Heavens, and relax. A daily supplication of the faithful is "O Ever Living, O Self-subsisting and Supporter of all, by your mercy I seek assistance; rectify for me all my affairs and do not leave me to myself even for the blink of an eye." Even for a split second, believers cannot stand the thought of being deprived of divine aid and protection. Believers know they are always in good hands. Children, too, in their pure and innocent natures, are among the happiest, most optimistic, and most carefree as well. Could it be because Satan has yet to work on them, and try to bring them down to his level?

< O humankind, indeed the promise of God is true, so let not this present life delude you, and be not deceived about God by the deceiver. Indeed, Satan is an enemy to you, so take him as an enemy. > 35: 5,6

As we mature, we must learn to counteract the Satanic threat. All pessimistic thoughts are brought on by Satan. We are to treat him as the enemy he is. Do not let Satan ruin your day, do not let him ruin your life, and do not let him ruin your chance to inherit Paradise.

Islamic Solutions

Disparity in the distribution of wealth

Disparity in the distribution of wealth:

God, in His infinite wisdom, has made the rich ones rich, the poor ones poor, and the rest of us somewhere in between. He bestows His provision (*rizq*) upon whom He wills. There is great disparity in the distribution wealth, with some people receiving a far greater share than others. This is not injustice or a lack of insight- it is all out of God's infinite knowledge and wise plan.

In Islam, it is incumbent on those in better financial standing to help out those less so. God has legislated obligatory alms (*zakat*) for this purpose. The rules of *zakat*, the third pillar of Islam, stipulate that once a person's wealth reaches a certain threshold (called the *nisab*, which is the equivalent of 85 grams of gold) or more, they must give a fixed portion, that is, 2.5% of total assets every lunar year, to the poor and needy (excluding those who they are already obliged to spend on).

Zakat has many other benefits as well. It helps to relieve tension and animosity between the social classes. It purifies a person's wealth, adds blessing to it, and combats the natural tendency toward greed and miserliness. It is a form of social cooperation out of which only good can come. Early Muslims were so keen and insistent on paying their *zakat* that they reached a point where literally no one was in need. Out of their innate goodness and desire to help, they decided to form something called the House of Funds. This was a charity organization in which members would pool their resources, depositing any extra income they had, as well as the income brought in by collection of local taxes, and then distribute this money to anyone who became needy of it. The most striking aspect of those early followers of Islam was their altruistic nature and intrinsic desire to help their brethren in humanity. These values were inculcated in them by the guidance and example of their noble Prophet and Messenger, Prophet Muhammad (pbuh).

Zakat is incumbent upon every financially able Muslim whose assets have reached the *nisab* level. A punishment is in store for anyone who does not carry out this duty. As a formal pillar of Islam, it is considered obligatory (*fard*). But Muslims are not to stop there. Huge rewards and blessings await those who give other forms of charity as well. Any form of giving is called *sadaqa* and has no pre-requisites or formalities associated with it, except that one should remember to say "*bismillah*" ("in the name of God"), beforehand, for the action to be blessed and to receive the maximum reward possible. If *zakat* was widely instituted among people, poverty could soon be eradicated.

A consolation to the underprivileged:

The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) set the best example with regard to turning a blind eye to the riches of this world. He (pbuh) actually chose a life of austerity over a life of plenty, when given the choice. He (pbuh) preferred being in the company of the poor over the company of the rich. This was due to his innate humble nature and his complete lack of desire to procure anything from anyone. He was always the first to give, and the last to partake. He would supplicate to his Lord, "O God! Provide me with the bare minimum (of sustenance)!"

He (pbuh) said the worst feast you can attend is the one to which the poor are denied access. He hated ostentation, wastefulness and lavish displays of pomp and wealth. He (pbuh) affirmed that happiness is in no way attached to how much or how little you possess. Your heart can be completely satisfied and content, even if you have next to nothing, just as his (pbuh) was. By the same token, you could possess a fortune, but feel a void inside that wealth is simply unable to fulfill. Satisfaction with your God-given lot, as well as satisfaction with God as your Lord, are what give a person true contentment and inner peace. If you are unable to find these things before you get rich, you are no more likely to find them afterwards.

The Prophet (pbuh) affirmed, "The happiness of the son of Adam depends on his being content with what God has decreed for him."

The Prophet (pbuh) advised people never to look up to those who are better off, when comparing lots. He (pbuh) said to compare your self with those who are struggling even more. This way, you will feel even more blessed and fortunate for what you have. Looking up to people who possess more than you may make you feel envious, greedy, ungrateful, and spiteful towards them. Good things come in due course. It is said that the poor will beat the rich to Heaven by a whole span of five hundred years! If we are patient with our lot, we will eventually be rewarded- a priceless reward of eternal Heavenly bliss. And for the lucky few who are truly grateful to God, they are promised to be given more.

< And (remember) when your Lord proclaimed, 'If you give thanks, I will give you more (of My favors). > 14: 7

Needless to say, many people fall short of this great station- that of being truly grateful to God for all the blessings and favors bestowed upon us. After all, being grateful entails not being so eager for more...

Ironically, wealth can actually be more of a trial than anything else. Wealth tends to divert people away from their true purpose in life. It keeps people more involved with worldly, base matters and away from the more important business of remembering God, seeking His pleasure, dedicating time for worship, fasting, supplication, etc. Wealth is a great distracter. Moreover, wealthy people are required to pay the mandatory alms (*zakat*) and make the once in a lifetime pilgrimage to Mecca (*hajj*), whereas the poor are exempt from these.

Excessive wealth may also damage a person's character. Instead of remaining humble and thankful for what a person has, that person may become haughty and boastful. S/he may start to think of him or her self as being self-sufficient, having no need for God. This is definitely a major predicament. Wealth can be a curse; it is only a blessing if it is used in the correct way: toward the pursuit of noble ends, and with the correct attitude- as a mere means toward pursuing noble ends, and not an end in and of itself. Many are the pious few who have been granted wealth in abundance- people with a conscience, those who comprehend their religion, as well as their main purpose in life- who use their wealth to procure the basics, and then are charitable with much of the rest. The 'excess' holds virtually no appeal to them. They are more than happy to give it away in charity* (see footnote below) helping others- thereby helping themselves, in reality, to gain the pleasure of their Lord (which is what they are really after). By following the Prophetic example (thanking God much, being content with little, and being charitable to others) we can bring much-needed happiness into our lives. This happiness extends to those on all sides of the economic spectrum.

*(footnote: To be fair to any heirs, Islamic law does limit how charitable a person can be with his/ her assets. Only up to a third can be earmarked for charity, when writing one's will.)

A small anecdote from the time of the Prophet (pbuh) illustrates how believers are to view wealth:

One of the companions of the Prophet (pbuh), whose name was Musab Ibn Umayr (raa), had been brought up in the lap of luxury. His loving doting mother used to pamper him, while giving him the best of everything. Her generosity, however, had its limits. Upon accepting Islam, he was subjected to harsh treatment by the same, who eventually threw him out of her house.

One day, a few years after this incident, Musab came upon a gathering of Muslims sitting around the Prophet (pbuh). They bowed their heads and lowered their gaze when they saw Musab, and some were even moved to tears. This was because his *jilbaab* (long cloak worn by Arabs) was old and in tatters and they were immediately taken back to the days before his acceptance of Islam when he was a model of sartorial elegance. The Prophet (pbuh) looked at Musab, smiled gracefully, and said:

"I have seen this Musab with his parents in Mecca. They lavished care and attention on him and gave him all comforts. There was no Quraysh youth like him. Then he left all that seeking the pleasure of God and devoting himself to the service of His Prophet."*

*(footnote: Embracing Islam does not necessitate that a person completely turn his back on the world. But in this individual's case, he was being actively persecuted for his faith, so he was forced to give it all up. He was, in effect, trading this life for the next. In his mind, it was probably a paltry price to pay, seeing as he attained the pleasure of his Lord as a result. He also knew that what lay in store for him was much better than what he had left behind.)

The Prophet (pbuh) then went on to say to his companions:

"There will come a time when God will grant you victory over Persia and Byzantium. You would have one dress in the morning and another in the evening and you would eat out of one dish in the morning and another in the evening."

In other words, the Prophet (pbuh) prophesied that the Muslims would become rich and powerful and that they would have material goods in plenty. The companions sitting around asked the Prophet (pbuh),

"O Messenger of God, are we in a better situation in these times or would we be better off then?" He (pbuh) replied: "You are rather better off now than you would be then. If you knew of the world what I know you would certainly not be so much concerned with it."*

*(footnote: As a true Prophet of God, the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was given special insight into the hidden reality of things. Most people associate financial success with happiness and overall well-being. He (pbuh), however, knew the truth. He (pbuh) knew that a surplus of wealth, worldly goods and possessions mainly distracts people and is not what contributes to a person's genuine happiness. In fact excessive wealth, above and beyond what one needs to procure the basics, tends to have more of a negative, corrupting influence than a positive one. It deludes people into thinking they've somehow 'got it made'. Many people become so attached to their wealth, they view it as their *raison d'etre*. From a true believer's perspective, the prospect of achieving those coveted millions or billions is not their main concern. Rather, attaining God's good pleasure is. This is accomplished by showing indifference to what is much, and showing appreciation for what is little. For richer or for poorer, for better or for worse, a believer remains satisfied and content.)

Let us consider what the Prophet (pbuh) feared most for the future of his nation:

"I swear by God! It is not poverty that I fear for you. Rather, what I fear the most for you is that the pleasures of this world will be presented to you as they were presented to those before you. And you will compete against each other for it, as they competed against each other. And it will destroy you, just as it destroyed them."

It seems as if his worst fears have been founded... Most of us put so much stake in our mundane, worldly existence... not knowing that what is with God is better and everlasting:

< *Nay, you prefer the life of this world. Although the Hereafter is better and more lasting* > 87: 16, 17

Islamic Solutions

Lying, cheating, and other forms of deception

Lying, cheating, and other forms of deception:

Lying is prohibited in Islam. A Muslim should be sincere. Lying is forbidden (*haram*), except under three special circumstances. One is only allowed to lie: to fool/ confound the enemy, when complementing/ flattering one's spouse, and when reconciling between people. At these special times, one may bend the truth for the sake of personal protection and of saving and strengthening bonds.

Otherwise, lying is a major sin. A Muslim should stay away from lying because it is a breach of trust. A believer should be able to trust his/ her brothers and sisters in faith. As one united front, believers in Islam are forbidden to deceive or mislead others. This is in accordance with "loving for your brother what you love for yourself," which is comparable to "Do unto others..." in English religious discourse.

Once, the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was asked if a Muslim could be a coward. He (pbuh) replied "Yes, it is possible." Then, he (pbuh) was asked if a Muslim could be stingy, and the answer was, "Yes, it is possible." Then, he (pbuh) was asked if a Muslim could be a liar, to which he (pbuh) emphatically replied, "No!" A related *hadith* says, "a Muslim can neither act treacherously nor be a liar."

On the virtue of honesty:

The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said, "Truthfulness leads to righteousness, and righteousness leads to Paradise. In addition, a man keeps on telling the truth until he becomes a truthful person. Falsehood leads to wickedness and evildoing, and wickedness leads to Hell-fire, and a man may keep telling lies until he is written before God as a liar."

On cheating and deceiving others:

Cheating is a form of deception that is condemned in the strongest terms. The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) once said, "Whoever cheats us is not from us." This implies that the one who cheats other people has transgressed all the limits- and has turned against one's own kind, so to speak. Cheating is a form of oppression (*dhulm*, see note below). May God protect us from the evil of our souls.

Note on *dhulm*, as a term in Islam: Loosely translated into English as oppression, *dhulm* means any act of injustice or transgression against another individual, or even against oneself. It is a major sin to harm, mistreat, or oppress people. The moment a person crosses the bounds of loving for one's brother what one loves for him/ her self, s/he becomes what is referred to as an oppressor (*dhalim*). On the Judgment Day, according to *hadith*, oppression will become actual darkness- as it stems from the root word for darkness- and will put its perpetrators in severe peril.)

Other forms of deception are absolutely forbidden as well, such as: selling something without warning the buyer of any known defects, lying about one's age, nationality, background, etc, pretending to be someone you are not, offering services you are not qualified to give, giving someone false or insincere advice, promising something to someone without following through, taking a loan with no intention of paying it back, not giving full measure, etc. How can a person be a sincere well-wisher of humanity if they behave so underhandedly?

An anecdote from early Islamic history, 'The girl who would not cheat':

Caliph Omar Ibn el-Khattab (raa), the famed companion and dear friend of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), was making his rounds one evening, going from house to house, in search of anyone who was in need of his help. He was the second Caliph to be appointed after the death of the noble Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), right after Abu Bakr el-Siddiq. His honorary title was "Commander of the Faithful." Omar felt it was his personal responsibility to take care of the welfare of his subjects; i.e., this includes their physical as well as spiritual well-being. As he approached one particular house, he overheard a conversation between a girl and her mother. The mother was telling her daughter to add water to their milk, so as to sell it more profitably. The girl said, "Did you not hear the Commander of the Faithful warning us about cheating, and that it was prohibited?" The mother said to her daughter, "Where is the Commander of the Faithful now? Can he see us?" (Actually, he could!!) The girl said, "Perhaps not, but even if he cannot see us, surely the All-Seeing can." This response delighted the Caliph to no end. He returned home and informed his sons about this very virtuous young lady he had chanced upon. He gave them an ultimatum. "Either, one of you goes to marry her, or I will propose marriage to her myself!" Then he (raa) supplicated, "I pray that she will give birth to one of the leaders of Arabia." One of his sons, Qasim, followed his father's insight and went ahead and married her.

This pious young lady was later to become the maternal grandmother of Omar ibn Abd el Aziz, or Omar II (raa), considered the fifth of the rightly guided Caliphs, after Abu Bakr el Siddiq, Omar Ibn el Khattab (his great grandfather and namesake), Othman Ibn el-Affan. and Ali Ibn Abi Talib. Although he was appointed to the highest office under duress, and with no aspirations toward it, Omar II did a remarkable job of legislating and bringing back the pure values of Islam. Omar II introduced many social and economic reforms. Under Omar II's leadership, not a single Muslim was in need of *zakat*, or any financial assistance from the public treasury. He got rid of corrupt officials, abolished high taxes, and rooted out many of the evils that had crept into his society. A large number non-Muslims entered the fold of Islam during his short reign of only two and a half years.

In one notable instance, some local officials complained to him that revenues from *jizya* taxes (taxes required of non-Muslims who live in Muslim lands) were dwindling, due to the influx of converts (i.e, 'reverts') who were entering Islam in droves. His reply to the complaint was: "I accepted this post to call people to the true religion, and not as a tax collector." Omar Ibn Abd el Aziz left a lasting impact on the Muslim *Ummah*. He was surely a blessing from God upon his people. And all of this goodness sprouted from one righteous seed- the girl who would not cheat.

A note on eternal justice in Islam:

The world we live in was created in truth, and with justice. It is our job, as deputies or vicegerents of God, to keep it that way. Many Qur'anic verses and Prophetic narrations warn against causing corruption and injustice on earth. People should be aware that there are consequences- eternal consequences- for our every action, and that justice will prevail, whether that happens here or in the hereafter.

In the Qur'an, for example, we are warned not to usurp another's wealth unlawfully. We are told to give orphans their due rights. We are not to mix their wealth with ours. The Qur'an tells us that God knows the one who means mischief from the one who means well, so beware.

Several *ahadith* extol the just ruler and the just merchant as exemplary characters- those who do not abuse their power nor take undue advantage of people. Because of his high standing and moral integrity, the just ruler will be one of those who will be shaded by the throne of the Most Merciful come Judgment Day, the Day there will be no shade but His.

Many Qur'anic verses command people to weigh justly and never to tilt the scale in one's favor. A person cannot lie, even if it means testifying against one's own self. If someone asks you for advice, you must advise them sincerely. You must not withhold evidence, and must bear witness to the truth, if you are called upon to do so.

Because eternal justice will be served, we are advised to take all necessary precautions. We are reminded in certain *ahadith* to redress all wrongs, and compensate people for any harm or loss we may have caused them, before a day comes when the *dirham* and the *dinar* (two forms of currency) will hold no weight, as one *hadith* puts it. One's capital on that day becomes one's good and bad deeds. Any outstanding debts you have incurred (i.e. anything due to those whom you have wronged) will be deducted not from any wealth, but from your storage of good deeds.

That is why the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) would repeatedly invoke God's forgiveness for any wrongdoing he may have committed, and encouraged us to do the same. He (pbuh) also encouraged us to seek the forgiveness of people whom we may have wronged. He (pbuh) told us to supplicate to God to obliterate our sins, and keep them as far as the East is from the West. He (pbuh) would make the following supplication to his Lord every night before sleeping, "O God, Keep your punishment away on the Day you raise up your servants." He was so concerned about eternal justice and final reckoning that he (pbuh) implored God to forgive him (pbuh) for the fact that he (pbuh) felt more love toward one of his wives (i.e., Aisha, raa) than the others. To this fine degree, he (pbuh) was worried about his final state of affairs, and did not want to be taken to account for something which he could not control (i.e., his heart). He was the furthest one from any type of injustice because he knew the reality. He (pbuh) knew that his merciful, beneficent Lord was also the Lord of Retribution. He (pbuh) knew that a Day will come when God's wrath would befall every doer of injustice, as well as every stubborn rejecter of the truth.

< O you who believe! Keep your duty to God and fear Him, and speak (always) the truth. He will direct you to do righteous good deeds and will forgive you your sins. And whosoever obeys God and His Messenger, he has indeed achieved a great achievement (i.e. he will be saved from the Hell-fire and will be admitted to Paradise.) > 33: 70, 71

Islamic Solutions

Feeling empty, as if one's life has no purpose or meaning

Feeling empty, as if one's life has no purpose or meaning:

The cure, from an Islamic perspective:

For one, this feeling is fomented, brought on by Satan, has no place in reality, and should be discarded along with yesterday's trash. The person who feels this lonely, empty feeling inside has obviously not discovered true Islam yet. Only Islam can replace the emptiness we all feel inside. Just ask someone like me, who has lived both sides of the coin.

Islam delineates for us the great, sublime purpose we were created for. God has honored the son of Adam, blessed him, and made him the apex of His vast creation. He has honored mankind, raising our status over all other created beings. God has shown us how we can reach the great heights expected of us. He puts spiritual reassurance and tranquility into the hearts of the faithful. Knowing one is on the right path makes him/ her feel positive, upbeat, and on top of the world. There is also another path, though- the path of humiliation, failure, and ultimate disgrace. God shows us both ways. The Qur'an explains:

< By the soul, and He Who perfected it in proportion, then He showed him what is right for him and what is wrong for him. Indeed he succeeds who purifies his own self (by accepting the truth). And indeed he fails who corrupts his own self (by rejecting the truth). > 91: 7-10

Just as human beings are able to soar to great heights, reaching the great potential destined for them, they can just as easily fall from grace. Each one makes the choice.

If one is troubled and haunted by feelings of inadequateness, loneliness, emptiness, guilt of conscience, despair, and the like, one should be aware that these feelings are most likely a sign that the person should re-evaluate his/ her priorities in life and take religion a bit more seriously. Satan is the culprit here. Believers are rewarded with spiritual reassurance that lets them know they are on the right track. God will show us the way, but we must take the first step.

< Surely, God does not change the condition of a people unless they change what is in themselves. > 13: 11

Islamic Solutions

Fighting boredom and restlessness

Fighting boredom and restlessness:

To the true believer in God, boredom is a foreign concept. Juggling between the demands of his worldly, temporal life and concomitantly those of his otherworldly, spiritual life, such as praying, praising God, saying the daily supplications, reciting/ listening to the Qur'an, pondering over its meanings, volunteering for good causes, visiting relatives, visiting the sick, rearing children in the best manner, seeking knowledge, there is hardly a moment to spare. A Muslim is encouraged, by the promise of huge rewards and blessings, to always utilize his/ her time in ways that will bring him/ her benefit in the next life.

A *hadith* says: "An intelligent person is the one who calls himself to account and prepares for the life that starts after death. A foolish person is the one follows his desires (in this world) and (then) has false expectations from God."

Intelligent people are not necessarily those with the highest IQ. Smart people are those who go about fulfilling their true purpose in life. They utilize their twenty-four hour daily allowance wisely and efficiently, instead of wasting it away in idle pursuits, or in ways that may harm them. The Prophet (pbuh) set the best example in this regard. He (pbuh) always kept himself busy in some form of worship or another, sacrificing sleep and other comforts he (pbuh) could have enjoyed. He (pbuh) spent long hours bowing and prostrating to his Lord, reciting the holy Qur'an, and teaching his beautiful religion to all who would listen. He (pbuh) would supplicate to his Lord for almost anything and everything he (pbuh) wanted or needed. He (pbuh) taught us many of these different supplications as well, so we can learn them, understand them, and try to repeat them whenever we have a free moment. He (pbuh) taught us that supplicating to God, *du'a*, is not just a part of worship, but worship itself. His most oft-repeated supplication was, "O The One who turns (i.e., controls) the hearts, keep my heart firmly fixed on the religion (*deen*) of Islam."

Beseeching God for our needs is part and parcel of us being mindful, humble, reliant servants of God. God loves those who put their trust in Him. Muslims are called upon to 'rely' on God, and leave things up to Him. After taking all necessary steps, we are to leave the result to God. Pray, supplicate, pray some more, and wait for an answer. Do not become despondent, bored, or lose hope.

Unlike human beings, God never tires of our constant begging and nagging. In fact, the more fervently we supplicate, the more likely our call will be answered. God gives precedence to the oppressed person, the traveler, and the parent who prays for the welfare of his/ her children. If, after all our supplications are made, there is no response, no need to worry.

We may be answered in due time. Or else, God rewards believers for any unanswered supplications in the form of mountains of good deeds to their credit, to the extent that they will wish they had never been answered on earth! The third way God responds to our supplications is by averting some imminent harm that was going to befall us.

Of course, a believer cannot be busy in worship all the time. S/he needs time to refresh, and recharge the batteries as well. There are many permissible (*halal*) ways to enjoy oneself in Islam.

While many types of entertainment and recreation are Islamically unacceptable- as they involve prohibitions under Islamic law (either they violate the dress code, involve free mixing, promote un-Islamic values, depend on musical instruments, etc.), there are just as many permissible ways to have fun and enjoy one's self in Islam. Playing *halal* games, sports, swimming, racing, going on picnics, hiking, sightseeing, riding bikes, going to museums, going on road trips, camping trips, boating, canoeing, doing arts and crafts, puzzles, mazes. mind games, word games, painting, the sky is the limit- as long as it does not involve anything objectionable (such as dice, for example, which are forbidden under Islamic law, as is depicting images of human beings or animals).

The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said: "When someone abandons something for the sake of God, He will replace it with something better."

If this promise is true- then no need to fret over the things one will have to give up, if one decides to commit one's self to religion. The word Islam means peace attained through submitting one's self to God. You will attain peace when you submit. Whatever you miss will be made up to you later; it's a win-win proposition.

A note on boredom and restlessness: It is part of a person's innate nature, or *fitrah*, to feel naturally fulfilled, complete, and rich inside, just like children do- and just like we felt at their age. We were happy just being- living in the moment- without the need for external diversions and more and more 'stuff', and, as we got older, intoxicants, expensive excursions, the latest gadget, or anything else one finds to ward off the pangs of boredom and restlessness. Satan incites people to look for ways to escape from their very existence by convincing them that life is boring unless they have something to do. If they don't have anything in particular to do, he makes them feel anxious and restless. Some people literally cannot sit still unless they have their day, or week, fully planned out and know exactly where they expect to be, what they will be doing, etc. A believer, on the other hand, does not suffer from such afflictions. Just sitting at home with a good book, sharing memories with friends, sitting in Mom's or Dad's warm embrace, enjoying a moment in the praise and adoration of one's Lord, is enough to make him/ her content, and feeling like a million bucks.

The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) informed us, mentioning what a person really needs to feel good: "Whoever possesses three things has the whole world at his disposal: a healthy body, security from the enemy, and his provision of food for the day."

This doesn't sound like much, or is it? Believers are satisfied and content with the *little* things in life.

Islamic Solutions

Stress

Stress:

If there is one negative trend that is on the rise, and no amount of 'progress' has been able to curb, it is stress. You would expect, or at least hope, that the more progressive and advanced we become, the less stressful life would become. Isn't that the point- that technological innovations serve to make our lives better and easier- more serene, less stressful and even more comfortable? Well, that is not the case. Stress-related issues are on the rise like never before. And, again, Islam has answers.

The amount of stress a person faces is nearly proportional to the number of unhealthy decisions one makes in his/ her life. Think about it. While some stressors are out of our control, we often let havoc into our lives inadvertently, by our own doing. Consider the problems you face. Could some, if not most, have been largely avoided if you had made some wiser moves?

The religion of Islam, in its entirety, consists of mere advice. The Prophet (pbuh) is quoted as saying, "Religion is advice." But who will take it? If you want to live as near a stress-free life as possible, follow the example of the noble Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). He (pbuh) was sent as a "mercy to the world". He (pbuh) was sent to make life easier. He (pbuh) was sent to make life better. He (pbuh) taught people how to behave, how to act, and how to avoid the situations that will land us in more trouble. His way is the only way toward true peace of mind. The solutions he (pbuh) brought are timeless and universal; they have remained apt from his time until ours. Islamic solutions do not necessarily fix problems, rather they keep them from happening in the first place. The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) advised:

"I have left you with two things that, if you hold onto them, you will never go astray: the Book of God (the Qur'an) and the *sunnah* (the practice and collected sayings of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) that together with the Qur'an form the basis of Islamic law). Hold fast (literally bite onto them) by your molar teeth."

Putting divine law into practice makes life that much easier. The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) came as a mercy to the world, to impart divine guidance to us. After all, who knows us better than our Creator? But we are informed in God's holy book, the Qur'an, that human beings were created "in toil". We all suffer from loss, stress, hardships, and difficulties. While following prophetic wisdom can alleviate a lion's share of undue stress, it cannot relieve it all. When pressure builds up we turn to our Lord, in humble supplication, and recite prayers such as this:

There is no one who is afflicted by distress and grief, who says: "O God, I am Your servant, son (or daughter) of Your servant, son (or daughter) of Your maidservant, my forelock is in Your hand, Your command over me is forever executed, and Your decree over me is just. I ask You by every name belonging to You that You have named Yourself with, or revealed in Your Book, or taught to any of Your creation, or preserved in the knowledge of the unseen with You, that You make the Qur'an the life of my heart and the light of my breast, and a departure from my sorrow and a release for my anxiety"- but that God will take away his distress and grief and will replace them with joy. He was asked: "O Messenger of God, should I learn this?" He (pbuh) said: "Of course; everyone who hears it should learn it."

There are other supplications and words of remembrance (*adhkar*) one can make in order to calm the nerves, and take a load off our shoulders. For example, we can say:

"I entrust my affairs to You, O God, You are All-Seeing of the servants."

"O God, I take refuge in You from anxiety and sorrow, weakness and laziness, miserliness and cowardice, the burden of debts and from being overpowered by men."

"God is sufficient for me, none has the right to be worshipped except Him, upon Him I rely, and He is the Lord of the exalted throne."

"O Ever-Living, O Self-Subsisting, and Supporter of all, by your mercy I seek assistance. Rectify for me all of my affairs and do not leave me to myself, even for the blink of any eye."

When the pressures of life build up, a Muslim turns to his Maker for help.

More advice on removing stress and tension from our lives:

Islam has laid down the guidelines we are supposed to follow, with regard to our personal life and in our dealings with others. The more diligently we stick to the rules, (to the Qur'an and *sunnah* of Islam) the smoother life tends to go. The system is rigged. When we align our will with the will of God, we attain a more peaceful, fulfilling life. The more we bring God to mind, for example, and bow down to Him in worship, the more humbled and tranquil we will become. The more we surround ourselves with the righteous and pious, all the more de-stressed and harmonious our lives will be. The more we rely on God for our needs, the less burdened and pressured we will feel. The more we praise and thank God for His favors upon us, and the more we share these favors with others, the more honorable we become, and the more He gives us in return, etc.

If we flout the rules, thinking we can somehow navigate through life on our own, we will be sorely disappointed, and only stress ourselves out in the process. In addition, we will find it difficult to reach our goals and aspirations. We all seek to live a happy, stable, fulfilling life. But who actually does? Islam shows us the way. It is through submission. Happiness, stability, and fulfillment in life are all attainable, but are the prerogative of the pious. The following *hadith* illustrates how God intervenes to de-stress our lives for us, once we set our priorities straight.

"Whoever is mainly concerned about the hereafter, God will make him feel independent of others and will make him focused and content, and his worldly affairs will fall into place."

The takeaway: If you are looking for peace, turn toward the Owner of Peace.

Islamic Solutions

Crime

Crime:

The ideal Muslim society is crime-free, drug-free and strife-free, rather like a utopia. Islam has a built-in system of checks and balances, and ways of enforcing the rules. The rules in Islam are clear: anything that causes harm, either to one's self or to others, is strictly forbidden. Everybody is expected to be the sincere well-wisher of everybody else.

Just as with any other legal system, there must be deterrents in place, to dissuade people from perpetrating crimes, or otherwise abusing others. Islam is rife with a whole long list of these. Some aspects of the law may sound strict, even barbaric. But in Muslim theology, thievery, adultery, looting and murder are considered even more barbaric. The various punishments, which differ according to the crime committed, are meant to hit hard, so as to make the offenders think not twice, but hundreds of times before breaking any of the laws. And if the laws don't appeal to you, it is better just to stay away from the crime.

Some punishable offenses, with a fixed, prescribed punishment (*hadd*) according to the Qur'an and the *sunnah* (sources of Islamic law) are:

Theft: the hand of the thief is to be cut off (but this is not for petty theft). A party of believers should be made to witness the punishment, so as to deter any would-be thieves.

Highway robbery: The punishment of a highway robber may take one of these forms depending on the seriousness of the case. The robber may be put to death or crucified (in cases where murder is involved), or else have his hand and leg cut off on opposite sides, or else be imprisoned.

Adultery: the convicted is to be stoned to death*, but with very strict rules to convict (i.e., there must be at least four witnesses to the act).

*(footnote: This very severe punishment reflects the seriousness and egregiousness of this particular crime. Betrayal of one's spouse is a capital offense, not something to be taken lightly. The punishment may sound too harsh in this day and age, but we must take certain facts into consideration. For one, the nuclear family is the core unit, or foundation, of any society. Anything that compromises its integrity cannot and should not be tolerated.

Two, lineage could be disputed if a child happens to result from the act. It is the right of every child to know who his or her rightful parents are and have legal access to any inheritance they may be due. It is also the right of a child to be born as a legitimate member of a family, and not to be born under shady or illegitimate circumstances. Three, a Muslim man has the option of marrying several women at the same time (although the common law of most countries prohibits this), thus giving him some latitude, and leaving him with no excuse to engage in clandestine behaviors (i.e., in places where Islamic law is still upheld). It is interesting to note that while the option of marrying several women at once is there for them, the vast majority of Muslim men adhere to monogamy, whereas non-Muslim men, who don't have that option readily available to them, are much more likely to engage in it anyway, simply calling it by another name, doing it behind closed doors, not acknowledging its legitimacy, and thus assuming no legal obligations toward the 'other woman' or 'other women' involved.)

Fornication: the convicted is to be lashed a hundred times

Unfounded accusation of illegal sexual intercourse (slander, calumny, defamation): The punishment of a false accuser is flogging him eighty stripes and not admitting any evidence from him throughout his life.

Drinking alcohol: the convicted is to be lashed eighty times.

Murder: the convicted faces capital punishment

Offenses other than these can carry either a punishment of retribution- whereby the perpetrator is made to suffer the same fate as the one s/he victimized, or else a discretionary punishment, whereby the judge can use his or her own discretion in deciding the type of punishment called for. The various punishments range from reprimands to flogging to paying a mandatory fine to imprisonment. The three main objectives of the penal system in Islam are:

1. to protect the society from needless transgression against other people, thereby maintaining peace and security, which is accepted as a universal right.

2. to seek to reform the criminal, through the inclusion of the option of repentance, in verses such as these:

Regarding fornication,

< It they both repent and mend their ways, then leave them alone. Verily, God is the Acceptor of repentance, the Merciful. > 4:16

Regarding theft,

< Whoever repents after his wrongdoing and makes amends (i.e., returns what was stolen), then indeed God will accept his repentance and indeed God is the Forgiving, the Merciful. > 5:39

3. to intimidate or deter would-be criminals from perpetrating crimes by promising recompense, whereby the accused will actually be made to feel the pain and anguish they have caused others. This is illustrated by the following holy verses:

< The thieves, male and female, cut off their hands as a recompense for what they have earned... > 5:38

< The recompense for those who wage violent transgression against God and His Messenger and who go forth spreading corruption in the Earth is that they should be killed or crucified or that their hands and feet should be cut off on alternate sides or that they should be sent into exile... > 5:33

Islam seeks to establish a peaceful society, conducive to the well-being of its citizens, where people are free to pursue their goals in safety and security. It does not tolerate violent agendas or undue transgressions against others. Even the rights of non-Muslims are safeguarded in Islam. Non-Muslims are not forced to change or reform or accept Islam, as there is no compulsion in religion. Non-Muslims are expected to pay a small tax, called a *jizya*, in return for the rights and privileges they are afforded, if they choose to live in Muslim-controlled lands.

Islamic Solutions

Racism

Racism:

There are no racial tensions to speak of, if people upheld the values of Islam. Adherents to the faith love each other unconditionally. The only distinction to be made among people, as to who is better, is based on piety, which is only known to God.

< Verily, the most honorable of you in the sight of God is the most pious of you. > 49: 13

Being whiter than someone doesn't make you better than him. Being smarter than someone doesn't make you better than him. Being richer than someone doesn't make you better than him. Being better looking than someone doesn't make you better than him. Having a more righteous character does.

Bearing that in mind, any form of discrimination among human beings is baseless, uninformed, and ill-conceived. It is satanic delusion to insist one is better than another due to some superficial quality one happens to possess. This is exactly what Satan did when ordered by God to bow down to Adam. In defense of his refusal to submit to a clear and simple command from his Lord, Satan offered, "but you created me from fire, and him from mere clay." Using faulty reasoning- who is to say which is better- he tried to justify his own arrogance and intransigence, only sinking further in ignominy with his Lord.

In the Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) Farewell Address, the last sermon he (pbuh) ever gave, he (pbuh) seems to have had a premonition of what was to come when he (pbuh) said:

"Remember, one day you will appear before God and answer for your deeds. So beware, do not stray from the path of righteousness after I am gone. All mankind is from Adam and Eve. An Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab; also a white has no superiority over black nor does a black have any superiority over white except by piety and good action. Learn that every Muslim is a brother to every Muslim and that the Muslims constitute one brotherhood."

What if people took these words of wisdom to heart and treated their brethren in humanity with a little more respect and a little- rather, a lot- less prejudice?

Islamic Solutions

Indecision

Indecision:

While I know of no general cure for being unable to make decisions, in Islam there is a solution. The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) told us of a special prayer to make (called *salatul istikhara*), if we face doubt or indecision about something. Should I follow this path, or that? Should I go here, or there? Should I marry this person, or not? Only God really knows. So we elicit His help. We pray two units of prayer, just like any other, but with an extra insert. This is to be said at the beginning:

"O God, I seek Your counsel by Your knowledge and by Your power I seek strength and I ask You from Your immense favor, for verily You are Able while I am not and verily You know while I do not and You are the Knower of the unseen. O God, if You know this affair (and here you mention the matter to be decided) to be good for me in my religion, my life, and my end (i.e., my end state of affairs) then decree and facilitate it for me, and bless me with it, and if You know this affair to be ill for me towards my religion, my life, and my end, then remove it from me and me from it, and decree for me what is good wherever it be and make me satisfied with such."

Believers rest assured that, after enlisting the help of the Almighty, they will not be disappointed. In God we trust.

Islamic Solutions

Economic woes

Economic woes

I am not an economist, but from what I can tell, most economic trouble stems from two main causes: greed and the charging of interest. In Islam, interest or usury is prohibited (*haram*). One cannot pay it, and one cannot charge it. You are not allowed to sell money for money at a higher price, which is basically what interest is. And you are not allowed to exploit other people, taking undue advantage of them. If a person needs a loan, he should not be expected to return any more than he originally took (except, to be fair, the amount could be re-adjusted for inflation). Charging any more than that is greed, which is the other main problem. If interest- and somehow greed- were removed from the system, economic depressions and other woes would probably not repeat themselves. Islamic finance deals with interest-free transactions. This system has proven very effective and lucrative. See if your bank has this option, if interested.

Islamic Solutions

Anger management

Anger management:

A man said: "Advise me". The Prophet (pbuh) told him three times: "Do not get angry."

A Muslim should not overreact to provocations or get infuriated easily. It is the devil who incites people to become angry and lose their temper. One should keep this in mind the next time they feel their blood pressure on the rise. If you do get angry, according to the advice of the Prophet (pbuh), you are advised to sit down if you were standing, and to lay down if you were sitting. Then, the person is instructed to perform *wudu*, or ablution, which will quell the flames of anger and allow the person to regain control. In Islam we know that what has reached you was never going to miss you and what has missed you was never going to reach you. When you can't do much to change the situation, you might as well accept it, try to cope, and await the reward for your patience (for believers only). Your eternal fate, or *qadar*,* has already been written down, and inscribed in a preserved tablet, and the ink has dried. So there is no point in getting overly anxious, or overly despondent, over the inevitable. Knowing your fate is set in stone, so to speak, and nothing can change it, except *du'a*, goes a long way towards accepting any curveballs that come your way.

*(footnote: *Qadar*, loosely translated into English as fate or destiny, has a more precise meaning as a term in Islam. It is the culmination of events from birth until death that one goes through during one's lifetime. These events have been written down for that person. One cannot escape his or her *qadar*, or change it- except through sincere supplication, which is then accepted.)

Muslims should be strong and resilient in the face of calamity. They know it is all from God- both the good and the bad. One *hadith* informs us that one's patience is assessed from the initial shock. This means that a person's patience is tried the moment they see that tragic accident, or hear that awful news. At this critical time, when tensions are highest, one's patience is really tested, is it not? It is at this volatile moment we are told not to overreact. Screaming, yelling, beating the chest, shouting out expletives will do nothing to change the situation, and will only cause us to fail the test. Islam literally means peace attained through submitting one's self to God, and to divine decree. Believers are complacent with God's decree, or *qadar*, and thus attain peace. When a calamity occurs, believers are instructed to say: "*Inna lillah wa inna ilayhi rajaan*", "To God we belong, and to Him we return." Or they may say "*Qadar Allahumma sha faal*" "God has decreed, and His decree has come to pass." Or they may supplicate, "May God compensate me for my loss and give me something better (in return)."

One day, the Prophet's (pbuh) young son Ibrahim died. The boy was only eighteen months old. The Prophet (pbuh) wept at his young son's passing. Surprised by his reaction, someone inquired as to why he (pbuh) was crying. He (pbuh) replied "It is my humanity". We are allowed to cry, and grieve, and mourn people's deaths. This is only natural- it is our 'humanity'. But sudden emotional outbursts, excessive wailing, swearing, accusing God of being unjust- these should be avoided.

The story of how a very wise woman dealt with her child's death:

She was Rumaysa (raa), the wife of Abu Talha (raa). She was also the mother of Anas ibn Malik (raa), the young servant boy of the Prophet (pbuh). One evening Anas' younger brother, who had fallen ill, passed away. His mother was grief-struck, but did not want to appear that way in front of her husband, who had just come home. Suppressing her grief and sadness, she met her husband in the usual way. When he inquired about their son, she replied, "He has never been more tranquil." Satisfied with her response, her husband approached her that evening for intimate relations. Later on in the evening, she broke the news in this way: "If someone gives you something, and they want it back, do you have a right to withhold it from them?" Her husband replied in the negative. She told him, "Then seek divine recompense for the loss of your son."

In shock, Abu Talha went to the Prophet (pbuh) to 'complain' about what his wife had done. Instead of reprimanding his wife, the Prophet (pbuh) made a supplication that God bless them. Later, he (pbuh) gave Abu Talha the glad tidings that the couple would soon be granted another son, who would be a blessed child, conceived that fateful night. This boy grew up and went on to have nine children of his own, all of whom were highly devout memorizers of the noble Qur'an.

The lesson: when God is pleased with someone, He compensates them in this life before the next. Ostensibly pleased with how this woman dealt with her young son's passing, God rewarded her for her wisdom and patience in dealing with hardship. One might surmise that if things had gone in a different way, (i.e., if she had not done what she did) she may not have received this very special gift.

Islamic Solutions

Nightmares

Nightmares:

To relieve the horror of nightmares, Islam has given us pre-cautionary measures to take before sleeping, as well as pragmatic steps to take if they do occur. The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) taught that if anyone experiences a nightmare, they should:

- < know immediately it is from the devil and disregard it completely.
- < sit up, turn to the left, and spit dryly in the air three times, as if to show your disgust.
- < change your position- i.e., if you were sleeping on the right side of your body, switch to the left.
- < try to forget about it; do not tell anyone about it, as if it never occurred.

And as a precaution before sleeping, one should:

- < take refuge in God from Satan, the accursed.
- < recite the last two short chapters of the Qur'an, *el-Falaq* and *el-Nas*.
- < recite the verse of the chair, verse 255 of the second chapter of the Qur'an. This verse offers special protection against the devil, as we learn from a certain *hadith*. Satan will not be able to approach you all night through.

Islamic Solutions

Dangers of believing in superstitions

Dangers of believing in superstitions, omens, horoscopes, astrology, black magic, fortunetelling, and the like:

"When you stop believing in God, you start believing in anything."

This comment was made by an Egyptian theologian and scholar of Islam. He was amazed at the prevalence of superstitious beliefs he encountered while living and studying abroad. He went on to say, lambasting us in the West, "they will believe in outrageous conspiracy theories, in horoscopes, in fortunetellers, in unlucky number thirteen, and in the power of a lucky rabbit's foot, yet they maintain that belief in God is irrational!"

As Muslims, we are forbidden to put any stock in anything approaching superstition such as evil omens, black magic, fortunetelling, divination (with arrows), and the like. Since all power is in God's hands, it is a breach of faith to attribute special or supernatural powers to any other entity besides, or alongside, God.

The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) forbade believing in superstitions. It so happened that a solar eclipse occurred on the day of his son Ibrahim's death. People attributed this event to the heavens, perhaps showing sympathy with his loss. He (pbuh) condemned this erroneous and misguided interpretation, saying that heavenly bodies do not eclipse for the birth or death of any human being. Eclipses are phenomena of nature, and have nothing to do with worldly events. When you see an eclipse, you are advised to supplicate to God and perform a special prayer to mark the occasion at the time of its passing.

It was common in pre-Islamic Arabia for people to believe in evil or auspicious portents. People would sometimes change their plans, or withhold their intention to travel, based on the movement of a certain type of bird. He (pbuh) prohibited them from doing this, assuring them that all power, to help or to hinder, is with God and that doing so will not alter, or improve, the outcome of events. Only God can secure a safe return, as per His will, and only His divine aid and protection should be sought.

Fortunetelling was also common in his society, as it has been in most societies throughout the ages. The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) forbade people from going to a fortuneteller, warning them that going to a fortuneteller and believing in what they say is tantamount to disbelief in Islam. He (pbuh) also gave a stern warning that if someone goes to a fortuneteller, but does not believe in what they say, their prayers (*salah*, literally 'link' between a person and his/ her Creator, i.e., the formal prayers) are not accepted for a full forty days. Believing in horoscopes and astrological predictions is prohibited as well and carries the same ruling.

The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) sought to instill in his followers an unwavering belief in the Oneness of God, or *tawheed*. A strong, firm belief that God is in control of our affairs and that He is our only Protector and Provider negates the possibility that anyone or anything else could possibly protect us, provide for us, cure us, or apprise us of what the future holds. Only God has complete and perfect knowledge of everything past, present, and future. Only God knows and decrees what happens, and what doesn't.

The act of joining partners with God or believing another being, whether animate or inanimate, to have a share in divine powers is an unforgivable sin in Islam. It is called *shirk*. One night, at the time of the Prophet (pbuh), there was a rainstorm. Pre-Islamic Arabs thought rain was brought on by the movement of the stars. The next day, the Almighty revealed this *hadith qudsi* to His Prophet (pbuh):

Related from his Lord, glorified and exalted be He:

"Some of My worshippers remained as true believers and some became non-believers. As for him who said: We have been given rain by virtue of God and His mercy, that one is a believer in Me, and a disbeliever in the stars; and as for him who said: We have been given rain by such-and-such a star, that one is a disbeliever in Me, and a believer in the stars."

This *hadith* constitutes a strict warning against *shirk*, or associating partners with the One true God. Muslims must be aware that committing *shirk* in any of its manifestations takes him/ her out of the fold of Islam and requires immediate repentance and a renewal of their testimony of faith, the declaration that "There is no deity worthy of worship but God, and Muhammad is His servant and Messenger."

Some supplications which serve to remind us that God is in control:

"O God, I seek Your forgiveness and Your protection in this world and the next. O God, I seek Your forgiveness and Your protection in my religion, in my worldly affairs, in my family and in my wealth. O God, conceal my secrets and preserve me from anguish. O God, guard me from what is in front of me and behind me, from my left, and from my right, and from above me. I seek refuge in Your Greatness from being struck down from beneath me."

"We have entered a new day and with it all dominion is God's. Praise be to God. None has the right to be worshipped but God alone, Who has no partner. To God belongs the dominion, and to Him is the praise and He is Able to do all things. My Lord, I ask You for the goodness of this day and of the days that come after it, and I seek refuge in You from the evil of this day and of the days that come after it. My Lord, I seek refuge in You from laziness and helpless old age. My Lord, I seek refuge in You from the punishment of Hell-fire, and from the punishment of the grave. When you say this in the evening you should say "We have ended another day and with it all dominion is God's. Praise be to God. None has the right to be worshipped but God alone, Who has no partner. To God belongs the dominion, and to Him is the praise and He is Able to do all things. My Lord, I ask You for the goodness of this night and of the nights that come after it and I seek refuge in You from the evil of this night and of the nights that come after it."

"God is sufficient for me, and He is the best Disposer of affairs."

"There is no might or power except with God." This particular expression is known as 'a treasure from the treasures of Paradise'.

And from the Qur'an:

< Say: 'Nothing shall ever happen to us except what God has ordained for us. He is our Helper. And in God let the believers put their trust. > 9: 55

< Know that God is your Protector. Excellent is the Protector, and Excellent is the Helper. > 8: 40

Islamic Solutions

Inferiority complexes

Inferiority complexes:

It is little wonder why our children- and a great many of us adults as well- are afflicted with inferiority complexes. This is an unfortunate reality and common phenomenon in present-day societies which do not uphold the timeless religious values of old. We know from Islam that a human being is made up of body and soul. Our Western culture puts inordinate emphasis on the physical- wealth, health, youth, beauty, physical physique, while seeming to care nothing about the soul. This is the crux of the problem. While we are very adept at catering to our body's physical needs, we seem to have no clue how to satisfy the needs of the soul. And so we have neglected the very essence of our being- the soul- and have left it dry and uninhabitable, dry as a desert wasteland. The soul must be nurtured, as well as the body, in order for a human being to thrive.

With constant pressure to fit in and conform to society's norms, it is easy to see how some might fall through the holes. What if one does not want to conform, or is not able to conform? What then? Is s/she to be taunted for life and branded a loser, made to feel inadequate for something s/he can do precious little about? This can do wonders for a person's self-esteem and overall well-being. A girl who is not as pretty, or as smart, or as gifted as her peers, may have to face constant emotional trauma for something that she has absolutely no power to fix. We have all seen this scenario play itself out at one time or another.

Islam confirms that human beings are an honored creation of God. God fashioned Adam, our forefather, with His very own hands, in His own image. He created human beings in the best form, fashioning each one of us as He wills. He gave us a physical form, as well as a heart and a soul. Inherent in our very nature, or *fitrah*, is to feel positive about life and our place in it, with a strong sense of purpose and belonging. This is notwithstanding what we look like, what color our skin is, where we are from, etc. This is apparent across the board- all children display these traits.

Knowing that you are an honored, dignified creation of God goes a long way toward boosting your self-esteem. You are special. You are here for a reason. You are in good hands. No one has the right to harm you or violate you in any way. You are worthy of only the best; your rights have been secured. The entire religion of Islam, if taken wholeheartedly, gives a person confidence, reassurance, and pride in one's very being. You are more valuable than you ever thought.

If people grew up with this healthy mindset they would, in all likelihood, never develop an inferiority complex. They are confident. Who is going to come and tell them otherwise? They are sure of themselves, and of their own self worth. They have everything to live for and to be grateful for. Such a person will not be riddled with doubts and emotional unrest. They will not get involved with people who provoke them by putting them down, thinking they somehow deserve it. They will not believe people who aim to belittle or harass them. They will not get emotionally attached to losers who enjoy feeding off their insecurities. Their relationships will be wholesome and gratifying, not toxic.

Another problem related to inferiority complexes is that people with them tend to be envious of others, whom they perceive to be 'better' or somehow 'above' them. Having lost all hope in themselves, they prey off innocent victims, looking down upon people, and often envying them for qualities they themselves don't have but wish to possess. The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) gave a stern warning against envy. One *hadith* says, "Beware of envy, for it eats up good deeds just as fire consumes firewood." It is easy to see how a heart devoid of faith can easily succumb to envy. People of faith know that it is God Who divides His favors on whomsoever He wills. And we have no right to complain or to demand more than our fair share.

Note: Envy (*hasad*) as a term in Islam, means the desire to possess something another person has been given, assuming yourself to be more worthy of it, and wishing the other to be stripped of it at any moment. May God protect us from the evil of our souls.

To protect from envy, we say:

< Say, "I seek refuge from God , the Lord of the Daybreak, from the evil of what He has created, and from the evil of the darkening (night) as it comes with its darkness, And from the evil of those who practice witchcraft when they blow in the knots, and from the evil of the envier when he envies." > 113: 1-5

Islamic Solutions

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (which may result from an inferiority complex):

I am not a psychologist/ psychiatrist, but I do have personal experience in this area. Known as Obsessive Compulsive Disorder in English, and *waswasa* in Arabic, OCD affects a large segment of the population worldwide. Symptoms can be mild or severe and can be hardly noticeable or severely debilitating. Sufferers feel as if they are being compelled to perform certain actions, often repetitive actions, such as constantly washing hands, folding clothes- exactly on the crease every time- walking only on certain parts of a tiled floor (where the cracks are), eating foods in a specific order, brushing one's teeth in a certain way every time, and so on. The cause is Satanic whispering; it has been known for centuries, and has its cure in Islam.

Believers learn to say certain phrases that are effective in keeping Satan and his whispers away. Of these: "I take refuge in God from Satan, the accursed" is the most common and should be said frequently. Also imperative is to recite the last two short chapters of the noble Qur'an, *al-Falaq* and *al-Nas* regularly. Additionally, the person should never give in, letting these whispers entice or overpower him. S/he should not pay any attention to them at all, or give them the least bit of consideration. A sure-fire technique to rid oneself of this grievous condition is to wipe these Satanic suggestions out of your mind completely- as if you had not even heard them. You will send Satan into a sure frenzy (just as he has been trying to do to you). If you keep this up, and are vigilant against his attacks, he may not even bother coming back. If you are on medications to treat this condition, you may be able to do without them. Wait and see. A practicing Muslim doctor is best to advise.

Note: Another technique (although not from Islam) one can try to help combat this pernicious condition, is for the person affected to imagine that s/he is being watched, or filmed on camera. When a person feels as if they are being watched, or observed by others, they are less likely to show and develop troublesome signs/ symptoms of the disease.

Islamic Solutions

Vanity and conceit

Vanity and conceit:

While it is good to have a healthy sense of one's own self worth, one should not take it to the other extreme of thinking too highly of him or her self. In Islam, we acknowledge all greatness as belonging to God.

< Whosoever desires honor (power and glory) then to God belongs all honor (power and glory) > 35: 10

Whatever you manage to achieve in life, whatever positions you attain, whatever degrees you acquire, whatever admirable qualities you possess, are only endowments from the Almighty and are testament to His ultimate power and grace. It is inaccurate to assume that one is better than another for some petty reason, or for some self-proclaimed reason, as mentioned. God has laid down the criteria for true greatness. And it happens to be through piety- and piety alone.

Islam encourages us to cultivate piety. As a rule, all directives in Islam are ultimately in place to make us more pious and conscious our Lord. The reason we fast, for example, is to become more pious

< O you who believe! Fasting is prescribed for you as it was prescribed for those before you, that you may become pious. > 2: 183

Some Islamic injunctions which are meant to steer people away from vanity and conceit:

A certain *hadith* says, "God does not look at your outward appearance and your wealth, rather He looks at your hearts and your deeds."

It makes no difference whether you are pink, blue, purple or green. Your net worth has no worth in the sight of God. Purity of heart and sincerity of action are what count.

From the Qur'an, *< The Day whereon neither wealth nor sons will avail, except him who comes to God with a sound heart. > 26: 87, 88*

Again, wealth, children, and other endowments hold no sway with God. It is the core of your being, the essence of who you are, that will be inspected and appraised for its true value, come Judgment Day.

When a person looks in the mirror and is pleased with their image, they are instructed to say,

"O God, Perfect my manners (i.e., beautify my inward character), just as You have perfected Your creation of me (i.e., have beautified my outward appearance)."

Saying this phrase serves to remind people not to be vain. It is not just about having a pretty face...

In a certain *hadith* we are told about the fate of those who were haughty and arrogant on earth. The very same people who used to walk upon the earth with pride and conceit, dragging their garments behind them as they are described in the *hadith*, will be raised up on the Day of Judgment as small as ants. They will be crushed under peoples' feet. They will thus be brought back to reality and come to know just how lowly and despicable they really were.

To show the magnitude of having so much as an ounce of pride in one's heart (see note below) The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) once informed his companions, "No one who has the weight of a seed of pride in his heart will enter Paradise." The companions, fearing such a fate, said "O Messenger of God, what if one among us likes to wear nice clothing and wear nice shoes. Is that pride?" The Prophet (pbuh) replied, "No. Verily, God is beautiful and He loves beauty. Pride is to reject the truth, and to look down upon others."

Pride before the fall... Note on *kibr* as a term in Islam: *Kibr*, usually translated into English as pride or arrogance, is the single most dangerous and self-destructive quality one may possess. One becomes blinded to the truth, in one's vain pursuit of his or her own greatness. A person with pride claims to know, while others do not know, and so becomes impervious to guidance. May God rid us of this insidious disease of the heart before it causes our own fall from grace.

Believers are supposed to be humble, grateful well-wishers of humanity. True believers strive to be great in the eyes of God, not in the eyes of men. They humble themselves to their Maker, putting their Lord and their religion first. True believers do not see themselves as better, or more deserving than anyone else. All praiseworthy traits and personal achievements are attributed to the power and greatness of the Almighty.

Conversely, those with pride base their greatness and success on their own merits. They believe they got where they are, or have what they have, due to their own singular efforts, innate talent, and perhaps due to their own genius. People with *kibr* look down upon other people, who may not have managed to achieve what they have. Pride is the biggest obstacle toward accepting the truth. As a rule, faith and pride cannot co-exist in the same heart.

Showing off, bragging and boasting:

A believer should avoid showing off/ bragging about the various blessings they have been given. It is a trait of the arrogant, that they brag and boast and want to show off their prized possessions, in order to gain praise, admiration, popularity, a rise in status, etc. Believers fear that if other people came to know of the blessings they have, this would produce envy and animosity in the hearts of others towards them. So they try to deflect attention away from themselves. If a Muslim couple is blessed with a child who is extremely beautiful or extremely intelligent, for example, they would try not to expose that child to the scrutiny and prying eyes of other people, as far as possible. To protect themselves and their family, Muslims frequently recite the Qur'anic verses which serve to ward off the evil eye. Muslim parents are often seen 'reciting' these verses on their children, as they pass their hand gently over the child's body. As believers, we are aware of the precarious and transient nature of things. We know that just as God gives, He also takes away. Nothing should be taken for granted.

The man who boasted and took God's blessings for granted. The Qur'an relates the story of two men:

< To one of them We had given two gardens of grapes, and We had surrounded both with date-palms and had put between them green cultivated lands. Each of the two gardens brought forth its produce, and failed not in the least and we caused a river to gush forth in the midst of them. And he (one of the men) had property.... And he said to his companion in the course of mutual talk, "I am more than you in wealth and stronger in respect of men." And he went into his garden (while in a state of pride), unjust to himself, and said, "I think not that all this will ever perish. And I think not the Hour will ever come, and if indeed I am brought back to my Lord, I surely shall find better than this when I return to Him." His companion replied, "Do you disbelieve in Him who created you out of dust, then out of a sperm drop, then fashioned you into a man? But as for my part, I believe that He is God, my Lord, and none shall I associate as partner with my Lord. It was better for you to say, when you entered your garden, "That which God wills, will come to pass. There is no power but with God." If you see me less than you in wealth and children, it may be that my Lord will give me something better than your garden, and will send on it bolts from the sky... or the water thereof becomes deep-sunken, so that you will never be able to seek it." So his fruits were encircled (with ruin). And he remained clapping his hands (with sorrow) over what he had spent upon it, while it was all destroyed on its trellises, and he could only say, "Would that I had ascribed no partners to my Lord." And he had no group of men to help him against God, nor could he defend (or save) himself." > 18: 32-43

The life of those who disbelieve always ends in regrets. God gives victory to his humble, pious servants.

Humility:

The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) remained a humble, unassuming servant of his Lord his whole life, even after achieving much in the way of material success. Even then, after becoming virtual emperor of the entire Arabian Peninsula, he (pbuh) kept to his longstanding tradition of depriving himself of all except the bare necessities, spending his days and nights in relentless worship and devotion, while seeing to the needs of the poor and downtrodden of his community. He (pbuh) always remained inconspicuous, and never stood out as leader among his followers. He (pbuh) hated to be given preferential treatment, and avoided any form of petty ostentation. He (pbuh) would wear his ring with the stone turned inward for this reason.

His title, Muhammad, the Messenger of God, was engraved on his ring, and this was used as an official seal, when he (pbuh) sent letters to foreign dignitaries. He (pbuh) insisted the name of God be written above his name (whereas his name comes first in his title, which corresponds to the second part of the *shahada*) as a sign of respect to his Lord. He (pbuh) wished that humanity would follow in his footsteps, warning them against coveting after the insignificant, transient joys and pleasures of this life- a life which is repeatedly referred to in the Qur'an as deceptive and quick-passing. He (pbuh) wished humanity would rise above all of that- he wished to see human beings rise above all the hoarding and the boasting, all the frivolity and cheap talk, and attain true and lasting distinction- among the Highest Companionship*- the distinction of those who are Heaven-bound.

*(footnote: the last words the Prophet (pbuh) said before passing away were "O God, with the Highest Companionship", which refers to the Companionship of his Lord.)

Islamic Solutions

Depression

Depression:

If there is one malady believers are largely immune to, it is depression. Depressive conditions are the handiwork of Satan. His vindictive promise to bring us all down with him is constantly in play, and he will stop at nothing toward that end. If we do not have the tools to fend him off, we will fall prey. We become his dupes, and we feel depressed. Believers confront his blinding treachery by seeking refuge in God, and by disregarding all the dirt and deceit he throws in our direction.

God has promised a miserable life to all who turn away from His remembrance and disdain His worship (having fallen for the Satanic ploy). This would include a lot of people--- hence, all the psychoses, depressive conditions, and many of the other mental health issues out there. People have been swept away unawares. We have lost track of who we are and WHY WE WERE CREATED.

God warns us that Satan is the 'open enemy'- so beware of him. Do not get sidetracked. Do not follow in his footsteps. Do not even give him a chance to beguile you. But, then again, a great many of us are unaware of this. We do not intentionally follow the devil- and hence, turn away from our Lord. We do not intentionally follow our own impulses in defiance of God's orders. Most of us simply do not know the truth of the matter. We do not have correct knowledge about God and an afterlife; we have been sorely misguided. There is widespread ignorance and skepticism, and Islam came to combat it tooth and nail. There is no excuse to remain ignorant and uninformed in the present day and age.

Why do you suppose my life, as one example of many, had become a living hell before learning about Islam? It was ignorance- and a lack of knowledge about my merciful, bountiful, and loving Lord. It was a lack of knowledge about the forces of good- God and His angels- and the forces of evil- Satan and his comrades. I had never heard of the ongoing war between truth (*haqq*), and falsehood (*batil*). If I had known this, if anyone had told me, I probably would not have made many of the terrible, regrettable decisions I did. This probably holds true for a great many of us. The biggest problem facing humanity is that we have become blindsided by our ignorance, and we are all paying the price.

The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) told us to adopt a traveler mentality with regard to this world. We are only here for a short siesta, for a rest under the shade of a tree, and then we move on, as he (pbuh) put it.

This world is not our permanent abode, so try to avoid undue attachment to it. Believers see themselves on a journey- a journey to the hereafter- which *is* their permanent abode, where skies are *always* blue, where troubles...what troubles... melt like lemon drops, where the dreams that you dare to dream really *do* come true.

He (pbuh) told us to remember death often, and what comes after. He (pbuh) told us that if we make it until morning, do not expect to make it until evening. And if we make it until evening, do not expect to make it until morning. God could call us back at any moment. Are these thoughts meant to scare us, to intimidate us, to limit our potential, or to depress us? No. They are meant to sober us, to wake us up from our deep stupor, and to realize our actual purpose in life which is to prepare for the next. It is to worship God while we still have the chance, so He, in His infinite mercy, can grant us an eternity of bliss, so we can reach the land of milk and honey, the never-ever land we only hear of in fairy tales... if only we believed.

Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said, "Everyone from my nation will enter Paradise but those who refuse." A companion asked, "O Messenger of God, who would refuse?". The Prophet said, "Whoever obeys me enters Paradise, and whoever disobeys me has refused."

The takeaway: God created our lives to be enjoyed in the proper way, and to be used to prepare for our everlasting abode. But how can we enjoy ourselves if we remain ignorant about the most basic truths of our existence? Depression would not rear its ugly head if we had been better informed. It is simply God's way of reminding us to get our priorities straight.

A personal observation regarding the efficacy of modern psychology:

People with depression routinely seek the help of mental health professionals, assuming that their condition is treatable and can be reversed, much like a physical illness, with the right combination of medications, talk therapy, perhaps light therapy, and/ or various other treatments and measures.

The premise of modern psychology revolves around the notion that the 'norm' is for a person to 'feel good'. Conversely, feeling bad (without clear cause) is considered 'abnormal' or 'undesirable'. When a patient is feeling psychologically unwell, and they go to seek help from a mental health professional, attempts are made to see what might be 'wrong' with him or her, and based on the physician's assessment of the situation, recommendations are made, medications are prescribed, and instructions are given, in hopes that the person may once again return to a 'normal' state of well-being.

But why assume that to feel good is the 'norm'? And why assume there is something wrong with the patient if he does not? What if this person is justifiably ill? What if this person just could not make any sense of the world around him or her?

What if mental health advocates acknowledged that it is 'normal' for people to reach a certain age and start to feel bad about them selves, guilt-ridden, out of sorts, confused, angry, sad and depressed, often for no apparent reason? What if they actually recognized these symptoms as healthy signs, ones that show that a person's conscience- their intuitive sense of what is right and what is wrong- is alive and well? What if the patient's agony stems from the fact that they no longer find any pleasure or passion in their mundane, materialistic existence, but rather are hungry and thirsty for something more? What if the opposite is true- that people who do not fall into a depressive state, they are actually the odd cases out there, and the ones we should be more concerned about?

Is modern psychiatry prepared to call the person, the one in deep throes of depression, pleading for a way out, unable to cope, as psychologically 'unsound' or 'ill', or is it prepared to admit that there may be some serious fallacies in its approach to treating emotional/ psychological disturbances? Perhaps there is nothing 'wrong' with the 'patient' in question. Perhaps the patient would have never developed any of his or her troubling symptoms had their emotional needs been met, or had they been better informed. Perhaps the patient is perfectly normal, and psychologically sound and intact, and the symptoms they present with are right on the mark, and in fact show just how 'normal' they are? Perhaps they do not need mental health counseling, but rather what they need is spiritual counseling. Perhaps the problem lay not with them, but rather with the establishment all around them. Perhaps the 'patient' will one day be telling the doctor what was really going on. They tried lithium, MAO inhibitors, light therapy, MRI's on my brain, all in a desperate attempt to help, but nothing worked... Nothing got better until I was able to find my way out of the labyrinth on my own.

This is my message to the doctors/ mental health professionals who tried to help me, but could not: The message of Islam is the eternal message of hope and glad tidings. For the true believer in God and an afterlife, there is no cause for pessimism, loss of hope, feelings of emptiness, despair, mental anguish, anxiety and all the rest. In fact, God lets people suffer these things so they may return to Him out of desperation and a longing for something better. Severe cases of depression such as mine occur most often in people who do not know their purpose in life, but have a strong urge and desire to know. Islam is the biggest blessing upon humanity. If people knew this, they would neither suffer nor grieve.

The takeaway: Unless and until modern psychiatry acknowledges the spiritual dimension of a human being, it will remain largely ineffectual.

Islamic Solutions

A guilty conscience

A guilty conscience:

In order to treat a guilty conscience, and alleviate its main symptoms- the pain, the heaviness, all the discomfort- we must first identify the cause. Why do we feel guilty? Chances are it is actually a healthy reaction to the unhealthy way most of us live our lives. Maybe our behaviors are objectionable and blameworthy, so we feel justifiably guilty about them, but we do not know what we are doing wrong, or how to stop. So we persist, and we get into a rut. The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) explained this condition. He (pbuh) taught us that every time we sin, a black dot is placed on the heart. A person's heart can literally be infested with these black dots, and the person doesn't even know it.

The cure, of course, is first to admit there is a problem. A guilty conscience does not just develop for no reason at all- it is a warning sign that should be taken seriously. There must be something way off track. In order to treat it, first we must recognize our behaviors as objectionable- if not to society, then to our Maker. We turn to God for help. We turn in repentance to Him.

Beg His forgiveness for whatever you have done wrong- He forgives all sins. Be remorseful for what you have done, and be sincere. Repentance, or *tawba*, wipes out all sins and, along with them, those little black dots that have been infiltrating the heart, filling it with that dark built-up scum of undue guilt and shame. Doing a good deed also wipes out a bad deed, so do good deeds, in compensation for bad ones. A new Muslim is automatically cleansed of all previously committed sins the moment they acknowledge their Lord and turn back to Him. And those sins actually turn into good deeds, weighing down their scales for them. This is an incentive to get on the right track. This track is called the Straight Path (*siratul mustaqeem*).

Islamic Solutions

Excessive love of wealth

Excessive love of wealth:

In my humble opinion, the biggest preoccupation, rather disease, festering in people's hearts and minds, is the desire for more and more wealth. Everyone wants to climb that material ladder of success. Overall, people spend an inordinate amount of time, energy, and resources dreaming of the day they make their millions, their billions, or whatever they are after. This is especially true for disbelievers, as this world is their only playground. The Prophet (pbuh) is quoted as saying, "this world is the Paradise of a disbeliever."

But this insidious disease of the heart has also crept into the hearts of believers, who should know better. This finding is not surprising, since the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) foretold of this, too. He (pbuh) once prophesied, speaking of his future followers: "one day you shall be numerous, but you will be like the foam of the sea (i.e., having no substance, of no effect) and God will take the fear of you away from your enemies and will place weakness into your hearts." Somebody asked: "What is this weakness?" He (pbuh) said: "The love of the world and the hatred of death." It would seem as if these days are upon us.

Excess love of this worldly life does not befit a true believer. Believers pin their highest hopes and desires on the next life, the perfect life, the everlasting life. Their playground is the world to come. It is sheer folly, in the eyes of a believer, to spend so much time and energy going after riches one's whole life, wasting away precious hours, when s/he knows they will only get what has been decreed for them anyway. Whether it is sought, whether it is scorned, whether we acquiesce to our God-given share, or whether we cry for more, it is all the same. A person will not die until receiving every penny, and eating every morsel of food already designated for him or her. Then what? Do people take their precious coffers to the coffin? Is their fortune going to accompany them, or benefit them at all, in their greatest hour of need?

Believers should spend their valuable time, energy, and other resources- their real assets- more wisely, using them to weigh down their scales, rather than scurrying after more and more "stuff". Any "stuff" one missed on in this life can be more than handsomely replaced for him/her in the next. To show us the insignificance of this low, transient, worldly life, the Prophet (pbuh) once said,

"Had the world been worth even the wing of a gnat to God, He would not have given a drink of water to a disbeliever."

In another narration, he (pbuh) said to his companions, pointing to a dead, malformed goat with short ears, "Do you see this goat? How much is it worth to you?" They said, "It would have no appeal for us even if it were alive." The Prophet (pbuh) said, "The world, in the sight of your Lord, is worth even less."

Article I wrote after being inspired by the religion of Islam: Money means success, and success means money, or does it?

One of the biggest lies we've been made to believe our whole lives is that material success is the real success, and that wealth must be present- in plenty- if we are going to have any chance of a decent, happy, fulfilling existence. Let us analyze some of the implications of this bold claim. People who ascribe to this ideology are tacitly asserting that happiness comes from a tangible, material source. According to them, psychological/ emotional well-being can be attained through material means, and through no other- unless wealth is also present.

Now this begs some questions: First of all, when is it that a person can 'start' being happy? Is it after they've made their first million, or first billion, or what? Is there some cut-off point, before which you cannot be happy, and after which you can? Were you happy as a child? What if your parents were on welfare, and could only provide you with the bare minimum, but they cared about you, treated you well and you felt happy inside..? Was it a farce? You must have been kidding yourself if you thought you were happy, even for a second. Is that it?

What if a person has a good job, good health, good prospects for the future, and they have even found the love of their life, but they are living in a one-bedroom studio in the less desirable part of town because they cannot afford anything better right now? Can they classify themselves as 'happy'? What if they feel happy- who is going to come and tell them, 'no, that is not possible-yet'?

If wealth leads to genuine happiness then wouldn't we notice a correlation between money, on the one hand, and happiness levels on the other? Wouldn't we discover a gradual process by which the 'richer' you are the 'happier' you get? Is that what we find? Are the richest people in your life necessarily the happiest? Are those who commit suicide the most financially destitute?

Was there ever a time in your life when you were not very financially secure, perhaps as a child or a young adult? Compare your happiness levels then and now. Is there a stark difference? Did the extra cash bring a whole lot of happiness with it? What if a person looks back on his or her life and discovers that their happiest days were when they were the least materially well-off? Was it all a delusion? How can that anomaly be explained?

Another question to think about: Aren't there loads of people out there with loads of cash, but who are perpetually dissatisfied and discontent because they always want more? Where is that so-called 'happiness threshold' or 'American dream' they're after? It keeps on eluding them. The quest for material gain never slows down, never ends. No one ever seems to reach that point where they relax and say 'Now I've got it made'. Isn't that true? Many spend their whole lives suspended in this delusional state, never satisfied with what they have, always after more.

The Prophet of God, Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), said this regarding the seeker of material wealth: "There are two kinds of people who never reach satiety: the seeker of knowledge and the seeker of wealth". In another narration he (pbuh) said, "If a man has two valleys full of gold, he'll want a third." In yet another narration, he (pbuh) compared the seeker of wealth to someone who is thirsty and goes and drinks from the sea. The seawater never does the trick. It will never quench his desire for pure, fresh water. It leaves him perpetually thirsty and dissatisfied. Such a person has chosen the wrong substance to satisfy his thirst; likewise, he has chosen the wrong ideology to quench his desire for genuine happiness and well-being, which is presumably what he is really after.

The Prophet (pbuh) himself set a very telling example in this regard. His whole life was a testament to the fact that material status has no bearing on the success and happiness of the individual. He (pbuh) was the most successful, influential person in history, yet he (pbuh) had next to nothing. Although he (pbuh) could have lived like a king, he chose a life of simplicity. He (pbuh) chose to sleep on a straw mat, while he (pbuh) could have slept in comfort. He (pbuh) chose to live in cramped quarters while he (pbuh) could have afforded more space. He (pbuh) chose to fast and eat and drink modestly while he (pbuh) could have had more than his fill. He (pbuh) chose to spend long nights in praise and adoration of his Lord while he (pbuh) could have spent these nights in the company of one of his loving wives. He (pbuh) chose to deny himself many of the physical, material bounties of this life..... because he (pbuh) had a secret.

He (pbuh) knew that with patience and perseverance something much, much better lay in store for him (pbuh). The Prophet (pbuh) once said "What have I to do with the world? In connection with the world, I am just like a rider who sits under the shade of a tree, then goes off and leaves it." He (pbuh) was so unattached to his fleeting, material existence that he (pbuh) would do things no other human being would do. One day, a man was admiring a huge valley of sheep and camels that belonged to the Prophet (pbuh). When asked, "Do you like what you see?" the man replied in the affirmative. The Prophet (pbuh) said, "It's yours". The man couldn't believe his ears.

The Prophet of Islam (pbuh) taught us what real happiness was, and it has nothing to do with the physical- with the tangible- as our everyday experience rightly confirms. 'True richness', he (pbuh) said, (i.e. your real asset) is the richness of your soul. It is how content you feel on the inside and has nothing to do with external conditions. Now, isn't that what experience confirms? Are most suicide victims the most financially strapped, or rather the most spiritually dry and emotionally stripped? Was it a lack of sterling or a lack of spirit that made them give up?

True wealth is wealth of the soul. It is how happy you felt before you knew what the green stuff was. It is manifested in the quality of your day-to-day life. Believers are happy just being, and fulfilling the purpose of their creation. God gives them spiritual reassurance, once they are on the right track. One of the famous religious scholars of the past, who was imprisoned several times for his beliefs, named Ibn Taymiya, said:

"What can my enemies possibly do to me? My paradise is in my heart; wherever I go it goes with me - inseparable from me. For me, prison is a place of retreat; execution is my opportunity for martyrdom; and exile from my town is but a chance to travel."

Believers find contentment in their faith, above all else.

The moral: If people knew and fully understood, as those early followers of Islam did, that this life is just a test, and that we are only here in order to secure our position in the next, they would leave this world to the dogs.

To bring the matter home, one *hadith* says:

"He who desires this world, God will make him a slave to it... but he who abnegates himself, and spurns this world, God will make the world a slave to him."

Islamic Solutions

Bad company

Bad company:

The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) has this to say about choosing friends:

"A person is upon the religion of his close friend so be careful whom you befriend."

"The case of the good companion and the bad companion is like that of the seller of musk and the blower of the bellows (blacksmith). As for the seller of musk, he will either give you some of the musk, or you will purchase some from him, or at least you will come away having experienced its good smell. Whereas the blower of the bellows may burn your clothing, or at least you will come away having experienced its repugnant smell."

Believers should only befriend like-minded people who will be of real benefit to them. Otherwise, they will only distract them. We should be selective in our social dealings.

Islamic Solutions

Peer pressure

Peer pressure:

Peer pressure is mostly exerted by those who want to push other people towards immorality. If we listen to the advice of the Prophet (pbuh) and choose our friends wisely, based on good character, then our friends will only exert positive pressure, not negative.

Islamic Solutions

Physical exhaustion and fatigue

Physical exhaustion and fatigue:

A person may be feeling physically exhausted and run-down for a variety of reasons. The main culprits are poor lifestyle choices and illness, whether physiological or psychological. The Prophet (pbuh) left guidance with regard to both.

One possible cause of fatigue could be that the person has developed poor sleeping habits. In this regard, the Prophet (pbuh) cautioned, it is not advisable to stay up after the *Isha* prayer, (which commences about an hour and a half after sunset) unless there is a specific need. The general rule is that a person should go to bed early if s/he can. Scientific research has shown that an early bedtime is most beneficial to the body and mind. Our bodies derive certain benefits from sleeping early that cannot be derived at other times. The person wakes up refreshed, alert and, hopefully, in time for the dawn prayer (after which they can sleep again). It is not without reason they say, "Early to bed and early to rise..,"

The Prophet (pbuh) advised against sleeping or taking a nap after *asr* prayer (which is around three pm), as this could prevent a person from going to bed early. The Prophet (pbuh), however, did encourage taking naps at other times, preferably earlier in the day.

Before one retires for the night, there are certain phrases to say, taught to us by the Prophet (pbuh)- in praise and adoration of our Lord- which serve to increase one's vitality. This was the advice given to the Prophet's (pbuh) daughter Fatima, when she complained to her father (pbuh) of severe exhaustion. He (pbuh) told her if she were to say these words, then she would no longer need a servant to help her, which she had asked for. The phrases are short, easy to memorize and take no longer than a couple of minutes to say.

There are also specific words of remembrance (*adhkar*) to be said and repeated every morning and evening, in which one asks for vitality and well-being. We invoke God by saying, "O God, grant my body health, O God, grant my hearing health, O God, grant my seeing health. None has the right to be worshipped but You". Repeating these phrases day in and day out will give a boost to our health- God willing- as well as offer protection from disease.

Believers are encouraged to keep fit, exercise regularly, and not overeat. "The strong believer is better and more beloved to God than the weak believer, and in both there is good", is a saying of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). To keep strong and fit himself, the Prophet (pbuh) used to take a walk at least once a day. He (pbuh) would fast often, eat moderately, and never reach satiety. He (pbuh) used to compete in running races with his wives. He (pbuh) encouraged the playing of sports such as swimming, horseback riding, archery, and wrestling. Keeping fit serves to reduce fatigue and body weakness. And it helps one get a good night's sleep after one has been physically active during the day.

As for proper nutrition, the Prophet (pbuh) did not neglect to tell us what foods vitalize and provide the most energy. He (pbuh) advised people to eat dates, in particular, which provide a healthy, nutrient-rich snack. He (pbuh) also recommended honey, another food rich in vitamins and minerals and with many known health benefits. He (pbuh) told of the many benefits of black seeds, saying they contain a cure for everything except death. Olives, pomegranates, figs, bananas, beans, lentils, onions, garlic, and milk are some of the other foods specifically mentioned in the noble Qur'an. He (pbuh) told us to stay away from intoxicants, swine meat, and any meat not slaughtered in the name of God.*

*(footnote: Before slaughtering a sacrificial animal, a butcher is instructed to say "*bismillah*".)

A person may be feeling run-down due to a variety of psychological factors, many of which are preventable if the cause can be identified. How good or, conversely, how bad one is feeling can have a huge impact on one's physiology. A person may suffer from fatigue if they are in generally poor spirits, i.e., life has become dull and monotonous for them. As a rule, this does not apply to the true believer. A person may be feeling the effect of some trial or misfortune they are going through. In such a case, when the trial passes, so will the fatigue. Alternatively, a person may be suffering from an overload of stress, either at home, at school, or at work, which can cause extreme fatigue and a host of other physiological/ psychological problems. If we can identify the cause of our stress, perhaps we can do something about it.

Stress is a mainstay in many peoples' lives. A main trigger of stress is actually the people around us. People have a huge impact on one another's physical and psychological well-being. That is why Muslims are advised to choose discriminately, when it comes to friends and marriage partners. Taking heed of the Prophet's (pbuh) advice, by selecting our close intimates for their innate goodness and high morals, can save us a lot of trouble and heartache down the road. We should try, as far as we can, to surround ourselves with people who are righteous and pious, who offer respite from the cares and worries of daily life rather than precipitate them.

Of course if our fatigue is due to a physical illness, we should seek out a cure. God did not send any disease, except that He sent its cure, according to *hadith*.

Islamic Solutions

Suicide

Suicide:

When the pressures in life build up all around and one has no idea how to cope, it is easy to see how one can reach breaking point. You may reach a point where you just want to end it all. Believe me, I know. I was there. But, as a Muslim, I know better. Muslims know that if they were to take their own life they would meet with the wrath of God, and find themselves in a much bigger predicament than they had been in before.

Unsurprisingly, we find the statistics for suicide rates in Muslim countries to be consistently low. One may be confused as to the low suicide rates, unless they knew better. After all, these countries include some of the poorest, destabilized, and underdeveloped countries of the world. Wouldn't you expect the people there to be the most downtrodden and unhappy?

But anyone who studies the matter objectively can see that poor living/ economic conditions are not what make people ready to pull the plug on their life. Yes, many Muslims are poor, live in squalid conditions, can barely make end meet, are financially strained to the core, but they possess something more precious than gold. They possess inner wealth- tranquility, peace of mind, and satisfaction with their lot- which is the wealth of the soul. True wealth, explained the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), is the wealth of the soul, as mentioned. It is how rich you feel on the inside.

A Muslim's soul finds satisfaction and contentment in his very existence. He is at peace with what God ordains for him. He knows his sustenance, or *rizq*,* is fixed and he will get no more or less than has been written for him. He does not get overly despondent or overly elated by the ups and downs of life.

*(footnote: When a person is still in the womb of his/ her mother four pieces of information are written down for him/ her; one of these is the person's lifelong provision, or *rizq*.)

A believer is at peace knowing God created him, is always there for him, and will procure ultimate justice for him. He is heading down the road toward Paradise, paving his path so it may be as smooth as possible when he gets there. With that mindset, there is no room for emotional unrest, satanic intrusions, doubts, delusions, insanity, nervous breakdowns, and all the rest. A believer is a man on a mission. His mission is clear. He would never even think of ending it all. Clearly, those who are not in touch with this reality can easily reach rock bottom- just as I did- and become so disillusioned with life they just want to give up. May God guide them, and us, to the right way. Keeping in mind the following, perhaps those on the verge of suicide might think again.

Deterrents for the crime of suicide:

"The Prophet (pbuh) said: "Whoever commits suicide with a piece of iron, will be punished with the same piece of iron in Hell-fire."

"He who commits suicide by suffocating shall keep on suffocating himself in Hell-fire and he who commits suicide by stabbing himself shall keep on stabbing himself in Hell-fire."

A man was inflicted with wounds and he committed suicide, and so God said, "My servant has caused death on himself hurriedly, so I forbid Paradise for him."

No matter what is happening in your life, these prospects are much, much worse.

Islamic Solutions

Lack of proper role models

Lack of proper role models:

In order to reach our true potential, human beings need proper role models. We need people we can look up to, admire, trust, and seek to emulate. It is human nature that we get our example from other human beings who have lived before us. Looking up to exemplary human beings gives us a sense of purpose and direction, as well as hope. In present times, there is a dearth of proper role models. People don't know who to emulate, so they mostly emulate those who set a wrong example. As a result, many of us have become disillusioned, uninspired, and suffer from low morale.

The only proper role model for our times, and for all times, the one who can bring back a measure of self respect, high morale, and optimism going forward, was the one God sent with the truth. If you are looking for a proper role model, you need look no further than the example of the Apostle of God, His final Prophet and Messenger, Prophet Muhammad (pbuh).

< Indeed, in the Messenger of God, you have an excellent example to follow for whoever seeks the pleasure of God and the Last Day... 33: 21

The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was, true to a *hadith* about him, a mercy to the whole world. He (pbuh) was sent with guidance- with the light that was to cast away darkness forever. I often wonder what depths of depravity my own life would have sunk to, had I not been saved by the message he (pbuh) brought.

The companions of the Prophet Muhammad, both male and female, loved and revered him (pbuh) with such deep love and reverence hardly found among humankind, whether past or present. They were ready to lay down their lives for him (pbuh), and many of them did just that. They would literally hurl themselves in front of him on the battlefield, singularly preferring his life to their own. One striking example of the intense love and devotion his companions had for him (pbuh) was found in the story of Khubayb. Khubayb had been captured by the enemy. His fate was that he would be put to the cross, and crucified in cold blood, in retaliation for enemy losses at the Battle of Badr. As they tied him up, and began cutting off pieces of his flesh, they taunted him:

"Would you like Muhammad to be in your place while you go free?" With his blood flowing, this dead man responded with: "By God, I would not want to be safe and secure among my family while even a thorn touches Muhammad."

Another companion, who loved the Prophet (pbuh) immensely, was once driven to tears over the prospect that he may never see the noble Prophet (pbuh) again, after his death. He surmised that even if he were to make it to Heaven, he would surely find himself in a much lower level than his beloved Prophet (pbuh) was. He feared they would be irrevocably separated forever. Thereupon the Prophet (pbuh) reassured him that he would be with those whom he used to love on earth. The man was completely relieved and ecstatic.

The companions sought to emulate their beloved Prophet (pbuh) in everything he said and did. It is said that his daughter Fatima (raa) was the closest to him in physical resemblance, as well as mannerisms.

Because the companions loved and trusted the Prophet (pbuh), they readily complied with any orders he (pbuh) gave. Whenever a new command or prohibition was sent down from on high, his companions were the first to take heed and observe. When the prohibition of alcohol was announced, for example, it is said the streets of Medina became as rivers of wine.

The Prophet (pbuh) was highly forbearing and acutely aware of human weakness. He would advise, and persuade people, if necessary, using wit, logic, and basic common sense. He was never condescending or overbearing. Once, a man came to the Prophet (pbuh) and admitted to a certain weakness he had. He divulged that he could not resist the sin of fornication. Instead of bashing him, castigating him, or giving him a full-blown lecture, the Prophet (pbuh) simply inquired of him, "Would you like that someone commit fornication with your sister?... with your daughter?... with your mother?... with your wife?... Each time the answer was a resounding, No, no, no. O Messenger of God, God-forbid!

The Prophet (pbuh) reasoned with him that just as he would not approve of it, neither do other men approve of it. The man was utterly convinced of the evil nature of his sin, and before leaving, he told the Prophet (pbuh) that while fornication had been the most desirable thing to him, it had now become the most abhorrent. The Prophet (pbuh) was able to effect change because of his wise, lenient, and measured approach. A verse in the Qur'an affirms that if he (pbuh) had been hardhearted or severe, his companions would have fled from around him (pbuh).

It was the Prophet's ardent wish and desire that all of humanity would adopt his way, and follow the Straight Path of Islam. He (pbuh) spared no effort and left no stone unturned to that end. He (pbuh) would send delegates to Yemen, Syria, the horn of Africa, and other lands, both near and far, in order to propagate the message of Islam. He (pbuh) repeatedly told his followers to go and seek knowledge, and then teach their newly acquired knowledge to others, for he (pbuh) knew that this was the only path to success. Cognizant of the enormous responsibility that was upon his shoulders, he (pbuh) urged people to convey, or spread, his message, if only one verse, i.e., if only a small part of it. He (pbuh) constantly reminded his followers to pass on whatever knowledge they had, and to instruct people in the basic rites of their religion, as well as teach them the valuable skills of reading and writing because, as he (pbuh) said, "I am a mortal." Indeed, he (pbuh) was a mortal, a mortal whose eternal message and eternal memory live on. He (pbuh) was also the finest example of what a human being can aspire to be. From teacher to warrior to revolutionary to orator to mediator to caring father to loving husband, there is not one facet of life in which he (pbuh) did not excel.

A tribute to the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), a millennium and a half after his passing: The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) is still the most revered figure in human history, nearly 1,500 years after his physical death. Not a single second passes but his blessed name (pbuh) is mentioned by the faithful, by way of praise and adoration. He (pbuh) has the most renown and constant mention of any other personality who has ever lived. His very name (pbuh) means "the praised one" and is the most common name for males the world over. Believers are encouraged to send their salutations and invocations of peace and blessings upon their noble Prophet (pbuh) as per a set of prescribed supplications taught to us by the Prophet (pbuh) himself. Believers are encouraged to repeat these invocations as frequently as possible, because of the great blessings and rewards associated with them. A common saying, often displayed on posters and bumper stickers across the Muslim world is: "Have you sent your peace and blessings upon the Prophet Muhammad today?" In this way, Muslims remind each other of their duty toward the most beloved of all creation, the one who was sent with the truth, the one who was chosen to lead people from darkness into the light, *Al-Sadiq, Al-Amin*, ('the truthful, the trustworthy', a double epithet given to the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) before he (pbuh) was honored with prophethood). All praise be to God, Lord of the Worlds. And may God extol and send the choicest blessings and peace upon our Leader and Prophet, Prophet Muhammad and upon his family, his companions, and upon all those who follow them. Amen.

Islamic Solutions

Unruly children

Unruly children:

I am no expert on childrearing, but I do have five children of my own. Experience has shown that children generally lash out and cause problems when they have not been raised properly, or given enough love and attention. Children need a loving, caring environment in order to thrive and feel good about themselves. Their souls must be nurtured, as well as their bodies. They need support from their family, and above all, they need guidance. Many of our children were not raised according to their natural inclination, or *fitrah*. Therefore, they do not possess the tools necessary to see the world, and their place in it, in their correct light.

Most of us were raised in opposition to our natural inclination, or *fitrah*, and so we have all suffered the consequences. Some children take their frustrations out by turning inward, by beating themselves up, whether through physical harm- cutting, for instance, or through mental torture; i.e., blaming themselves for everything, being overly critical of themselves, and developing a precariously low self image. Others may lash out at other people by becoming physically aggressive, not following orders, disrespecting parents and other authority figures, etc. But the underlying cause for many of these erratic behaviors is almost always the same- these children were not raised properly, nor given the correct guidance. Their little hearts called out for it, but their pleas fell on deaf ears. Our children are suffering and we are largely to blame. I do not claim that teaching them about Islam will produce perfect little angels- that is in God's hands. But if our children had this core belief in place- the belief in one God, and the belief in a merciful, loving, and forgiving God- as well as a firm conviction that this life is not where it ends- it would drastically change the game. We would be doing them, and everyone around them, an immeasurable favor.

Children are seen as a blessing in Islam. They are cited as one of the two most valuable commodities, or "adornments", of life. When a child knows that s/he means the world to his or her parents, this can do wonders for developing proper self-esteem. Now let us consider the other side of the coin. Let us consider the possibilities when a child is not raised to feel this way. What if s/he was conceived by 'accident', or born into a family who did not really want another child/ children- so instead of recognizing this child as a blessing, the parents see him or her more as an unwelcome intrusion? This scenario is more likely to occur if stepparents enter the equation. And what if the parents actually made their feelings known to this child, in countless unspoken ways? And what if this person happened to be immersed in a culture which does not recognize the inherent worth of the individual, but rather assigns people worth based on some arbitrary, superficial quality or qualities they may or may not possess...? And so this poor soul is made to feel even more useless, more dejected, more outcast, more insecure, more blinded to reality and more desperate for a cure with each passing day.

What do you think the state of mind of this person might be, at around age 10, 15, or 20? What if this person actually had a lot of promise, and much to offer, but these qualities were never detected, as this person's light was never able to shine? Do you think a trained specialist, such as a psychologist or psychiatrist, would be able to put the pieces of the puzzle together, as to what might be troubling this child, if s/he were to go looking for help? Well, in my case they had no clue.

Growing up in the West, as I mentioned, I was never given a satisfactory answer to the question: Why Was I Created? Had I been apprised of the truth, it could have averted a score of other problems. Perhaps the harrowing circumstances I found myself in actually worked like a blessing in disguise. Perhaps never feeling loved or wanted by my own family was simply a catalyst, which propelled me into action sooner than I might have otherwise. If only my parents, and all parents, knew as I discovered through Islam, what precious cargo our young ones are... and that with just the right mix of love, attention, and correct guidance- they could soar to heights never imagined by us. Ironically, the song that was popular, and played over and over again, while I was in my darkest hour, by late singer Whitney Houston, was none other than this:

"I believe the children are our future. Teach them well and let them lead the way. Show them all the beauty they possess inside. Give them a sense of pride, to make it easier. Let the children's laughter remind us how we used to be."

How poignant her words were then, and still remain. Yes, if only our children knew of all the beauty they possessed inside... and if only we could help them to discover this.

The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was especially fond of children. He (pbuh) had seven of them in his lifetime. He (pbuh) had a way of making everyone he met- not just children- feel special. He (pbuh) taught us to treat our children with mercy and respect. He (pbuh) would let children climb on his back while he (pbuh) was bowing in prostration, and would not startle or shake them off until they had had their fun and got down. Once a man boasted that he had ten children, and he had never kissed any of them. The Prophet (pbuh) remarked, "What can I do if mercy has been torn from his heart?"

The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said the best thing we can teach our child is good manners. Where better to start than from the source? Teach them about the patience of Job (raa), the honor of Joseph (raa), the honesty of Jonah (raa), the piety of Noah (raa), the submissiveness of Abraham (raa). These are all revered prophets in Islam. Children are naturally interested in stories, and these stories teach invaluable lessons they can use throughout life.

In Islam, children should be taught how to pray at seven, and we are to use physical coercion if they are not praying by ten. At this age, they can appreciate the purpose for which they were created, and should start thanking and praising their Lord. They should be prompted to say "*bismillah*" before eating and drinking and doing other routine actions. They can begin reciting from the holy book, the Qur'an, as soon as they are able to speak. Learning a portion of the Qur'an is one of the rights of a child in Islam.

Although children do not have to begin the practice of fasting until they have reached the age of puberty, most are eager to engage in the Ramadan rituals of their families, which include abstaining from food and drink the whole month, from dawn until sunset. Most children display an uncanny ability to resist temptation and conform to the rules (such as the prohibition of food and drink during the days of Ramadan) when they are doing it for a higher good. They should be taught the other basics of their religion as well. These steps, combined with a loving atmosphere of mutual care and respect, in which the children are actually made to feel like the blessing they are, will go a long way toward curbing any wayward tendencies.

The takeaway: There is a certain component, if it is missing in the life of an individual, it will spell disaster. And that component is faith.

Islamic Solutions

Dangers of unabated technological 'advance'

Dangers of unabated technological 'advance'

This section would not be complete without addressing one of the greatest threats, and impediments to our future as a human race, if the danger is not kept in check. The phenomenal advances in technology that we have witnessed over the last hundred years or so, from cinema, to television, to the satellite dish, to the Internet, to smartphones have not been true 'advances' in every sense of the word. While they have entertained us, informed us, educated us- we cannot even imagine our lives without them any more- they have also brought with them a host of negative repercussions. Overall, they have the potential to hurt and hinder us, and future generations, more than they actually help us, if the dangers are not kept in check.

The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) foretold that a certain type of trial or affliction would enter into every home. I wonder if it is not television, the satellite dish, the Internet, or the like.

While they do have their plusses... they provide us with ideas and information we would otherwise have no clue about, they facilitate our lives in a way never previously imagined. They open up doors, and opportunities, and even open our eyes to what is happening on the other side of the world... the drawbacks still tend to outweigh. It all lay in how we use and/ or misuse them.

Similar to a double edged sword, new technology can either be used for our benefit, as well as to our detriment. Unfortunately, through overuse and unwise management, these so-called technological strides have managed to do inordinate damage to our psyches, and to our overall well-being, pulling us backward rather than forward. They numb us, entertain us, yes, and they leave us spiritually dry and empty. Many people are hooked on the Internet, and have developed insatiable addictions to its contents, whether in the realm of social media, gambling, porn, or whatever else...These addictions have caused many problems for these people, and for those around them, whether it be financial, social, psychological, or physical... Many of our children grow up so attached to their electronic devices that they simply want to do nothing else but stare blankly at a screen all day. These children are becoming developmentally delayed in all areas, not least of all in their ability to socialize and interact with others. Is this what we really want for our young ones?

We have seen an unprecedented increase in childhood obesity over the years. Instead of playing one-on-one with Dad in the backyard, as their parents used to do, today's generation of kids prefers to remain plugged into a wall. How many of our children actually go out and play in the great outdoors any more, going for long bike rides, or to parks and recreation centers, or go camping, horseback riding, hiking, and all the other fun stuff?

The other main problem with these innovations- if we could control their overuse and addictive nature- is with the content. Most of the content streaming through our airwaves, and reaching us by way of our latest gadget, is mostly of the irreligious, unethical, life- is- short- so- live- it- up, type. Religion and religious values are nowhere to be found, except only sparsely. The upcoming generation of children, already unsure of themselves and confused, already overwhelmed by the inundation of information they receive on a daily basis, are set to remain even more astray, and become even more overwhelmed, and socially and psychologically impaired well into the foreseeable future unless something is done to stop the current trend. Each one of us should pull the reins, and ideally come up with our own plan to fight this battle in our own home. Meanwhile, I would like to personally praise and commend the few tv/ satellite channels, the few websites, and the few apps, which do not further numb and confound us, but are dedicated to truly trying to make the world a better place, those which inform people of their purpose in life. May they continue to shine like much-needed rays of sunshine amidst all the darkness and chaos. Amen.

Islamic Solutions

A message to the youth

A message to the youth:

Youth, especially in the West, are faced with enormous challenges and obstacles. They must contend with a myriad of issues all at once. And it seems as if a new set of grueling challenges crops up with each new generation. Our youth are left feeling lost and forsaken, and quite unable to navigate through life on their own. It is up to those of us who have been blessed with knowledge to help them out. Perhaps the best place to start discussing the issues and problems facing our youth is to start with my own children. I have two daughters and three sons. By the grace of God, all of them have willingly adopted Islam as their religion and way of life. My children are proof positive that when you raise children according to the correct 'syllabus' described above, they cannot help but shine.

I elected to raise them in a Muslim-majority country, where Arabic would be their mother tongue. As the language of the inimitable Qur'an, Arabic has a very special place in the heart of all devout Muslims. I had one main fear that made me averse to raising my future children in my homeland, the US. I feared that, despite my best efforts, and after all my long, hard work, one of them (or all of them, for that matter) would come home one day, and ask that dreaded question, "Mom, how can you and Dad be right, you know about Islam, and everyone else be wrong?"

In other words, I did not want them to entertain any doubts about the true creed, knowing how impressionable and easily influenced young children are by the people and places around them.

So I transferred my young family to the Middle East, where they would grow up among people of a similar mindset, a place where they would not feel like black sheep, but rather would be among the majority. I wanted them to grow up in a place conducive to their spiritual development and emotional well-being, a place where God's laws prevailed and religion was likely to play a central role in their lives. I did this because I wanted the best for them; I wanted their personalities to be strong and solid, not weak and fragmented. I wanted them to grow up with a sense of purpose and direction. I wanted them to hear the call to prayer five times a day, beckoning the faithful to *el-falah*, or success, for I believe true success is success in the spiritual sense.

So what has been the result, a quarter of a century on?

My children have never questioned their faith, by the grace of God. Nor do they follow it blindly. They have accepted and acquiesced to the truth simply because they recognize it as such.

They never had to grapple with the challenges most youth face in these countries (such as the challenges I faced, while growing up in the US). They were never exposed to the mixed messages sent by different fringes of society, particularly those who think it is okay and quite liberating to live an amoral, godless existence. They never, throughout the years, ever considered homosexuality as an option, for example, because they instinctively know that it is not how God intended things to be. It is against a human being's *fitrah*, or God-given nature, to look to someone of the same sex for the fulfillment of one's sexual urges. My children never considered the option of having pre-marital sexual relations* either and for similar reasons. They understand and accept that God, in His infinite wisdom, has prohibited illicit and premature sex for good reason. Furthermore, as another random example, my children were never made to second-guess the gender they were born into. And why should they? Males, we believe, were created by God to act and behave as males. Females were created by God to act and behave as females. God created Adam for Eve, and He created Eve for Adam. Only in the last generation or so have people begun to seriously question and challenge this most basic facet of our existence.

*(footnote: Admittedly, this is as far as I know. But I do know that while pre-marital relations do occur, as they do everywhere else, there is such a stigma attached to it among Muslims that it is extremely rare in Muslim-majority countries. If it does happen, it often results in major negative consequences for all parties involved, as well as deep ramifications into the 'couple's' future lives.)

My children, by the grace of God, were never overwhelmed by the pressure to fit in and conform to society's erratic and ever-changing norms, because the norms were different where they grew up, and because their friends mostly led clean lives, just like they did. Moreover, the temptations which lead so many astray were simply not available to them. My children actually remind me of how American teenagers were some generations ago, before they had lost their innocence, before the pull of Satan came charging at them full force, rendering each generation more morally and spiritually bereft than the previous one. In a word, my attempt to save them from all of that could not have proven any better for them.

While my children may not be enjoying the same amenities as friends and family back in the States, they are enjoying an aura of mutual love, care and respect so rarely found among family members these days. I personally have never seen siblings who are so conscientious and helpful toward one another as my children are. And I have none other than my Lord to thank for that.

My personal advice to our precious youth, the leaders of tomorrow, is this:

Live a life with your feet firmly planted on the ground, and your gaze firmly fixed on the Heavens above. And may God make it easy for you. Amen.

Islamic advice aimed at the youth, in particular:

Youth is a special, unmatched period of one's life, all the more so if one is aware of this, and therefore utilizes it in the correct way. We have all heard expressions such as, "What a shame youth is wasted on the young." Most people do not perceive the value of their youth while they still have it. It is only later in life, when a person looks back with some perspective, are they able to appreciate it. People in their youth have huge potential; it is a time when they are generally free from obligations, have an abundance of free time, are full of energy and vigor, and usually possess very high aspirations and ideals. Young people, as a whole, are among those who still retain hope that this world can be a whole lot better than it is. And it can, but only with the correct understanding and the right attitude. If enough of our youth came realize what an amazing opportunity they have before them, and used their time, energy and other resources in more beneficial ways, they could avail themselves of countless blessings and huge rewards.

Some *ahadith* aimed at the youth:

"One of the seven types of people who will be under God's shade, on the Day there will be no shade but His... is a youth who grew up in the worship of God, the Mighty and Majestic."

Addressing the youth, the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) once said, "Oh young people, Whoever among you has the means to marry (i.e, physical,/ financial), should marry."

"Take advantage of five before five, i.e., "your youth before your old age."

I hope these examples make it abundantly clear how much humanity, the young and the old, all of us- need guidance.



CHAPTER THREE

We were created...



We Were Created...

to be strict monotheists

We were created...

The following section contains thoughts on why God created us. Were we created for a lofty purpose? Were we created for no purpose at all? What do you think?

We were created.... to be strict monotheists.

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are referred to as the Three Great Monotheistic religions, which they are. However, many Christians have forsaken monotheism, and no longer uphold the tenets of their own religion. Nearly all present-day Christians are polytheists, believing Jesus to be the begotten son of God.

Islam teaches us that God Almighty has no partners or equals. It is blasphemous to hold anything as equal to God. God alone created the heavens and the earth. He alone established Himself on the throne. He alone existed before anything or anyone else. He alone will dominate after all has perished. He alone deserves our worship and our gratitude.

He created human beings to know and to worship Him. All human beings were created from a male and a female, with the exception of three: Adam, having no mother or father, Eve, having no human mother and emanating from Adam's rib, and Jesus, having no human father. This makes their creation unique, indeed miraculous, but does not raise them to the status of gods, demi-gods, superhuman, or partners with the one true God.

Jesus (raa) was endowed with the ability to perform miracles, by the leave of God, as were other Prophets before and after him. God always strengthens His chosen few with the ability to perform the supernatural so as to offer proof of their veracity. Jesus (raa) was no exception. His very birth to a virgin mother was extraordinary. His ability to speak in infancy was miraculous. His supposed death on the cross, and his being raised to the heavens by God, was unprecedented. These all point to the wisdom and power and decree of His Creator. Jesus (raa) was a strict monotheist. He was sent by God to teach monotheism to the people, never claiming to be a god or the son of God. He will be asked on the Day of Judgment:

< O Jesus, son of Mary, Did you say to men: worship me and my mother as two gods besides God? He will say: Glorified are you! It was not for me to say what I had no right (to say). Had I said such a thing, You would surely have known it. You know what is in my inner-self though I do not know what is in Yours... Never did I say to them aught except what You did command me to say: Worship God, my Lord and your Lord. And I was a witness over them while I dwelt amongst them, but when You took me up*, You were the Watcher over them, and You are a Witness to all things. > 5: 116, 117

*(footnote: The fact that Jesus (raa) was raised up to the heavens by God, is a belief shared by both, Muslims and Christians alike.)

From the Qur'an, on the Oneness of God (*tawheed*):

< Surely, they have disbelieved who say God is the Messiah. But the Messiah said, O Children of Israel! Worship God, my Lord and your Lord. Verily whoever sets up partners (in worship) with God, then God has forbidden Paradise to him, and the fire will be his abode. And for the wrongdoers there are no helpers. > 5: 72

< Surely, disbelievers are those who said: "God is the third of the three (in a Trinity). But there is no god but one God. And if they cease not from what they say, verily a painful torment will befall the disbelievers among them. > 5: 73

< Will they not turn in repentance to God and ask His forgiveness? For God is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful. > 5: 74

< The Messiah was no more than a Messenger. Many were the Messengers that passed away before him. His mother was a truthful one. They both used to eat food (as any human being does, while God does not). Look how We make the signs clear to them, yet look how they are deluded away (from the truth). > 5: 75

God created us to be strict monotheists. The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) spent the first thirteen years of his call instilling in his followers the belief in only one God; they had previously been polytheists and pagans. Only after the concept was firmly ingrained in their hearts and minds did he (pbuh) begin to legislate- send laws and commandments. True to a prophecy he (pbuh) once made, his followers have remained strict monotheists ever since. He (pbuh) once said:

"I do not fear my *Ummah* will fall into polytheism, or *shirk* (as the followers of Jesus [raa] did by elevating him to divinity). But I am afraid you will fight each other for the worldly things."

He (pbuh) also gave a strict warning to Jews and Christians, who are referred to as the 'people of the book':

"By Him in Whose Hand Muhammad's soul is, there is none from among the Jews and the Christians (of these present nations) who hears about me and then dies without believing in the Message with which I have been sent but he will be from the dwellers of the Hell-fire."

Clearly, there is no option or excuse, after the advent of Islam, to adhere to any previously revealed messages. Judaism and Christianity, which were divinely revealed religions and were valid and true in their respective times, and to their respective peoples, were rendered obsolete with the coming of God's final Prophet and Messenger, Muhammad (pbuh).

From Qur'an: *< Say (O Muhammad): Verily I am only a man like yourselves, but revelation has been revealed to me that the One whom you should worship is only One Deity. And whoever hopes to meet his Lord, let him do righteous actions; and in the worship of your Lord, do not associate anyone along with Him. > 18:110*

< God bears witness that there is no god but He, and so do the angels and those who possess knowledge, upholding justice; there is no god but He, the Almighty, the All-Wise. Indeed! The only religion with God is Islam. > 3-18, 19

God is one. And God's religion is Islam. Muslims are told to supplicate, in the morning and the evening: "I am pleased with God as my Lord, and with Islam as my religion, and with Muhammad (pbuh) as my Prophet."

The first chapter children are taught from the Qur'an is the chapter of purity of faith, or monotheism: *< Say, "He is God, the One. God, the Self-Sufficient Master. He begets not, nor was He begotten. And there is none co-equal or comparable to Him." > 112: 1-3*

Note: The only unforgivable sin in Islam is *shirk* (the joining of partners with the One true God) and if you die with this sin, you will never be forgiven as indicated in the following verse.

< Surely, God will not forgive the ascribing of partners to Him. He forgives whoever He will for anything other than that. Whoever ascribes partners to God has strayed far indeed. > 4:116

We Were Created...

to be God's deputies, or vicegerents on earth.

We were created... to be God's deputies, or vicegerents on earth.

< And it is He who has appointed you vicegerents, replacing each other on the earth. > 6: 165

The human being is the apex of all of God's creatures. This is a great honor bestowed upon man. And along with great honor comes great responsibility. At the beginning of creation, God offered the trust (*el-amana*) to the mountains, and to the heavens and also to the earth. However, they refused to bear it, fearing the consequences. It is said that man in his haste accepted to bear the trust out of ignorance, not knowing what it entailed. In reference to this, the Qur'an describes man as "unjust and foolish". Man agreed to commit himself to the task because he was unaware of the enormity of the undertaking.

Before the creation of Adam (raa), God informed the angels that He was going to create a special being. This special creature- the human being- was unique in that he was not bound to worship his Lord, as the angels were, but rather would be free to worship Him out of his own free will. The angels wondered,

< Will you place therein those who will make mischief therein and shed blood, while we glorify You with praises and thanks and sanctify You? > 2: 30

To this, God replied, "I know that which you do not know."

In this verse, we learn there is a specific reason and purpose behind God's creation of man which is known only to Him. Perhaps this reason will be made manifest to us all, in due time.

So, what is expected of man, as a bearer of the trust? God created His special creation to be His vicegerent on earth. A vicegerent, or *khalifa* in Arabic, means successor. It also carries the meaning of deputy. It refers to successive generations of people who will inhabit the earth and inherit its resources, with the implicit responsibility of implementing God's will upon earth. Man's primal duty and responsibility is toward his Lord: to worship Him and Him alone. If he worships God in the correct way, according to the rules He has legislated, then he has realized his ultimate purpose in life. He is rewarded for his faith and compliance during his life, and a most excellent reward awaits him in the life to come.

As vicegerents, or deputies of God, we are supposed to live a life pleasing to our Creator, in conformity with divine revelation. A true servant, or vicegerent, of God does His bidding on earth. He extends the mercy of the All-Merciful to his fellow creatures. He does not exploit other people- whom he considers to be his brethren in humanity- but rather looks out for them and their best interests. He does not see another's loss as his gain, but rather sees their loss as a communal loss and their gain as a communal gain. He does not seek to compete, but rather to cooperate with his comrades for the common good. He calls others to the obedience of God. Just as he fears for himself the consequences of his actions before the coming of a Mighty Day, he fears the same for the rest of his brothers and sisters in humanity. It becomes the duty of every faithful vicegerent on earth to fulfill the trust, and remind others to do the same.

Accountability:

A human being, or child of Adam, becomes accountable for his or her actions and is answerable to God, at or around the age of puberty. By age fifteen, every person is responsible for his or her actions (their deeds of commission and omission) in the sight of God, except in three instances.

A Prophetic narration says that "the pen is lifted from three: From a person sleeping until he wakes up, from a child until he reaches the age of puberty and from an insane person until he regains sanity."

By the time a person reaches the age of majority, they are expected to have acknowledged their true purpose in life. Whereas children born into Muslim families are ideally taught about their purpose in life from the start, children born into other faiths, or born to parents with no faith at all, are mostly left to their own devices concerning those Big Questions in life. By the time we reach adolescence, those of us who grow up knowing nothing- or knowing close to nothing, or who possess wrong information- about God, religion, and an afterlife start to feel a hollow, a deep emptiness inside. We start to feel estranged from ourselves. This wide gaping hole and sense of estrangement widens over time, and is only filled by correct belief in God. All the disillusionment and desolation we feel, albeit some more than others, does not subside unless the vacuum is filled- filled with faith. It is out of God's wisdom and mercy that He causes this to be. This explains why the onset of adolescence represents such a devastating and traumatic blow for a great many young people. This is when we start to feel the pangs of our conscience alerting us to the fact that we are here for a reason.

< Does man think he would be left to wander aimlessly, without a goal or a purpose? > 75: 36

This is a question posed to us in the noble Qur'an. In my humble opinion, I believe most of us feel, in our heart of hearts, that we are here for a reason. But exactly what that reason is still eludes many of us. Unless we are provided with an answer, and with the correct answer, we will continue to entertain doubts and have an uneasiness about life, and our place in it. This will not cease until we come to know and acquiesce to the truth.

We arrive at the truth by re-evaluating our position, re-evaluating our priorities in life, and hopefully returning to the pristine and true path that God wants for us. I remember how painful life had become, come early adolescence. I had no peace of mind. I knew something was way, way off track... but what was it? I had no idea what was going on.

I ask now, with the benefit of hindsight, what was really going on? I had yet to solve the enigma, the enigma called: Why Was I Created?

< And verily, We will make them taste of the near torment prior to the supreme torment in order that they may return. > 32: 21

The near torment refers to a punishment in this life, such as depression, anxiety, worry, feelings of hopelessness, emptiness, despair etc. while the supreme torment refers to a more severe, everlasting punishment in the hereafter in case one is not awakened to the truth. May God guide us all to what pleases Him. Amen.

Important note: There is a certain category of people, namely those whose lives were taken in the interim, after they had reached the age of majority, but before they had established firm religious beliefs, whose case is yet to be decided. For example, a person dies before he was made aware of the true religion, and thus neither accepted it nor rejected it. For this individual, there is reference in Islam to some sort of test they will be made to take, which will ascertain if they would have eventually accepted faith (*iman*) or persisted in disbelief (*kufur*).

We Were Created...

to fear God.

We were created... to fear God.

Muslims are ideally supposed to fear their Lord, Most High. This does not connote fear in the sense of terror, but fear of overstepping the limits and arousing God's anger. Having a high level of *taqwa*, or fear of God, is an intrinsic quality of a true believer. God loves those who fear Him. *Taqwa* is what holds people back, restrains them, and makes them think hundreds of times before engaging in sin or committing an infraction. Without *taqwa*, the world would be a veritable jungle. *Taqwa* can be likened to one's conscience- and it is situated in the heart. It must be filled with awe and fear of God. God wants us to fear Him, and only Him. He wants us to be mindful of Him, and never stray from His Straight Path. He wants us to be righteous and pious, never falling prey to the temptations all around us. He wants us to be among the God-fearing, or *el-muttaqeen*.

The word *el-muttaqeen* is repeatedly used in the Qur'an to refer to the people who possess this noble attribute of *taqwa*. They fear God, respect His limits, adhere to His commandments, and even love and hate for His sake. The love of those who fear their Lord is the only love that abides. Theirs is true love, as it is not based on some interest, or some transient, superficial quality- rather they love from the heart, and they love selflessly.

God only accepts the actions of the God-fearing people. Even if one were to do the most righteous deed ever, it would never be accepted of him/ her unless it was done out of one's piety and fear of God, with an eye to gaining His pleasure. Good deeds, however grandiose they may be, carry no weight unless the motivation behind them is 'otherworldly', so to speak.

Note on intention, or *niyya*, as a term in Islam: Actions are judged by the intentions behind them. Any praiseworthy act we do must meet two conditions, in order to be eligible for reward: it was done solely for the sake and pleasure of God and it was done in accordance with the Qur'an and *sunnah* of Islam. The mere intention to do a good deed is recorded for that individual as an actual good deed- even if the person is ultimately unable to carry it out. If, on the other hand, the intention behind an action is ignoble or lacks sincerity, or is done to seek favor, or done to show off, or to please other than God, then the deed is not only rendered futile, but becomes blameworthy and rejected. Thus, only the deeds of pious and God-fearing believers are acceptable and rewarded by God-Almighty.)

A person who fears God in this life will not be made to fear Him in the next. The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) revealed that God will not combine two fears on His servants. Those who feared Him in this worldly life will be made safe and secure in the next.

In a *hadith qudsi*, related from his Lord, glorified and exalted be He:

"By My might, I shall not combine in My servant two fears and two securities, for, if he fears Me in this world, I shall make him secure on the Day of Resurrection; and if he feels secure about Me (does not fear Me) in this world, I shall terrify him on the Day of Resurrection."

This *hadith* serves as a stark warning to those who flout God's commands, having no fear of the consequences of their actions. At the same time, it serves as an immense comfort and relief for those who have a potent fear God's wrath and punishment here on earth. If you are mindful of God and take your precautions here and now, you will have no cause to fear Him later.

From the Qur'an:

< Whoever fulfills his pledge and fears God much, then verily God loves those who are al-muttaqeen (fearful of Him) > 3: 76

< Al-Birr (piety, righteousness) is (the quality of) the one who believes in God, the Last Day, the angels, the Book, the Prophets and gives wealth, in spite of love for it, to the kinfolk, to the orphans, and to the needy, and to the wayfarer, and to those who ask, and to set slaves free, and performs prayers, and gives the obligatory alms (zakat), and who fulfill their covenant when they make it, and who are patient in extreme poverty and ailment and at the time of fighting (during battle). Such are the people of the truth and they are the muttaqun (God-fearing ones). > 2: 177

< And the life of this world is nothing but play and amusement. But far better is the house in the hereafter for those who are al-muttaqun (the pious, God-fearing ones). Will you not then understand? > 6: 32

We Were Created...

to be tested.

We were created... to be tested.

People will go through tests. Tests reveal a person's true character. The fact that people will be tested is made explicit in several verses:

< Blessed is He... Who created death and life that He may test you (as to) which of you is best in deed. > 67: 1-2

God tests us, sometimes with the good and sometimes with the bad. If life were grand, and everything was rosy all the time, it would be easy to remain satisfied, calm, content, patient, grateful, and all the rest. Why would anyone bother going out and looking for a Creator, in that case? Who would care who has been providing for them all along? Who would ever get depressed and disillusioned with life, so depressed they fall down on their knees in humble supplication, begging their Lord for guidance? As we know, life is not a bowl of cherries... So when is a person's true nature exposed? It is when the going gets tough. And the going is bound to get tough, as elucidated in the following verse:

< Do people think that they would be left alone because they say, "We believe," and will not be tested? > 29:1

Believers will be tried and tested by God. Tests reveal who the person really is, deep down. They weed out the fakers from those who are genuinely good. We are tested in order to prove our sincerity, or lack thereof. The next verse tells us: **< And God will certainly make it known those who are true, and will certainly make it known those who are liars.> 29: 2** Although God already knows this- we are tested anyway. Simply knowing that one is going through a test goes a long way toward accepting one's fate, or *qadar*. Believers know they will be scrutinized, and will have to prove themselves, and will have to strive hard for what they believe in. A believer's life is rarely a life of ease and plenty, especially for those nearest and dearest to God.*

*(footnote: A *hadith* tells us: "The people most severely tested are the Prophets, then the righteous, then the next best and the next best. A man will be tested in accordance with the degree of his religious commitment: the stronger his religious commitment, the harder his test.")

We are comforted in the following 'amazing' *hadith* that our suffering is not in vain, and in fact, is a boon to us. It says:

"Amazing is the affair of the believer, verily all of his affairs are good, and this is not for anyone except the believer. If something of good befalls him he is grateful and that is good for him. If something of harm befalls him he is patient and that is good for him."

In this *hadith*, we learn that throughout life, in all situations, believers emerge victorious, either achieving Paradise points by expressing gratitude to God at times of ease and comfort, or earning Paradise points in lieu of their patience and fortitude by remaining calm and composed when tragedy strikes. During tough times, the believer is recommended to remain 'patient'* (see below for further explanation), a comprehensive term in Islamic religious discourse which entails acceptance of whatever befalls a person, hoping to win the rewards of the hereafter in recompense. Our suffering is not in vain. Believers are compensated for every single ounce.

The Prophet (pbuh) once said, "No fatigue, nor 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 God expiates some of his sins for that."

Note: The term *sabr*, or patience, and its derivatives are mentioned in the Qur'an no less than fifty times. Practicing patience is a common thread throughout the religion of Islam; it is highly recommended to try to remain patient and resolute in the face of life's challenges and hardships. God loves those who display patience, and rewards tremendously for this. Loosely translated into English as 'patience', for lack of a better term, *sabr* also entails accepting one's lot, acceding to whatever God has decreed, not showing hostility or objection, remaining dutiful and thankful to one's Lord, etc. Having patience also denotes performing the acts of worship required of believers even if one is unwell, lazy, unmotivated, disinterested, etc.

Some scholars have described *sabr*, or patience, as having the determination and self-control to obey God in all respects: i.e., in refraining from the unlawful, and in performing the lawful. A scholar once said: "Having *sabr* means that one's common sense and religious motives are stronger than one's whims and desires. People are naturally inclined towards their own whims and desires, but common sense and religious motives come into play and curb that inclination. The two forces are at war: sometimes reason and religion win, and sometimes whims and desires prevail. The battlefield is the heart of man."

The trials and tribulations we all go through are not necessarily to be construed as a sign of God's wrath or indignation. Quite the opposite- when God wishes well for someone, that is when the tests likely come on. When a person is put to the test, they may start to re-evaluate their priorities in life, perhaps turning to God for guidance and direction. For those who are pious, calamities offer a chance to be 'cleansed' of sins, and granted forgiveness. One *hadith* informs us, "When a believer gets sick or feverish, it is like metal when put on fire, the bad is gone and the good remains." Another *hadith* tells us "Indeed, God tests a servant through sickness until that sickness wipes out all his sins." With this in mind, we can approach our pain and suffering in a whole new light.

Perhaps we are being put to the test because God wants us to attain a high rank in Paradise, a rank we would not otherwise have attained by virtue of our paltry good deeds alone. Or perhaps, due to a certain calamity or affliction, we begin to see things in a new light and are guided to Islam as a result. Only God knows. His wisdom and meticulous planning work in wondrous ways. But clearly, adversity sometimes brings about an inordinate amount of good. One benefit is that we can never truly appreciate ease and comfort unless we have experienced the opposite. We do not know the value of health, for example, unless we are visited by illness. We cannot properly assess the value of a good night's sleep unless we have been deprived of one, we cannot appreciate the blessing of a child except if we have been tried with infertility, and we cannot truly appreciate the light of Islam unless we have experienced true darkness.

Our suffering can ultimately teach us valuable lessons, put us in touch with reality, make us more appreciative for the blessings we have, and increase our awe and faith in God, Who has set the whole system into motion. Once, at the time of the Prophet (pbuh), a woman complained to him (pbuh) that her husband was never afflicted with any sort of calamity, whether financial, physical, family, religious, etc. She suspected he might be a hypocrite (*munafiq*).

*(footnote: *Munafiq*, commonly translated into English as 'hypocrite', has a special meaning as a term in Islam. It is a very serious breach of faith. It refers to someone who shows an outer facade of piety, but whose heart is averse to Islam, hates true believers, and causes strife among people. True hypocrites will be thrown in the deepest depths of Hell-fire)

because she knows a believer goes through pain, trials, tribulations and suffering. While her suspicions may or may not be warranted (God knows best), one lesson is clear: a person should be more concerned with an absence of hardships than with their presence. A famous companion of the Prophet (pbuh), Abu Dharr el-Ghifari, upon realizing the reality of the situation, went so far as to say: "Poverty is dearer to me than affluence, sickness is dearer to me than health, and death is dearer to me than life." May God bless his soul.

On the virtue of patience:

"Whoever seeks chastity, God will make him chaste, and whoever seeks help from none but God, He will help him, and whoever is patient, He will make it easy for him, and no one has ever been given anything better than patience."

From the Qur'an: *< You shall be tried and tested in your wealth and properties, and in yourselves, and you shall certainly hear from those of the earlier scripture and from those who associate others with God, much that will grieve you, but if you persevere patiently, and become muttaqeen (pious and God-fearing) then verily, that will be a determining factor in all affairs. > 3: 186*

< We will surely test you with something of fear and hunger and a loss of wealth and lives and fruits, but give good tidings to those who are patient, who, when afflicted with calamity say, "Truly! To God we belong, and truly, to Him we shall return. > 2:155

< Indeed, those who are patient will be given their reward without account. > 39: 10

< By time, indeed, humankind is in loss, except for those who have believed and done righteous deeds, and advised each other to truth and advised each other to patience. > 103: 1-3

< Those will be awarded the chamber [in Paradise] for what they patiently endured. > 25: 75

God has ordained Hell-fire to be surrounded by lusts and desires. Heaven is surrounded by trials and hardships. Heaven is the final home of those who are grateful, and patient with their lot.

The story of how God tested three men:

God sometimes tests us through adversity, and sometimes through ease and plenty. Can ease and plenty actually be a test? This is the story of the leper, the blind man, and the bald-headed man.

God wanted to test three Israelites. They were a leper, a blind man, and a bald-headed man. So He sent them an angel who came to the leper and asked him what he would like most. The leper replied: Good color and good skin, for people have a strong aversion to me. The angel touched him and his illness was cured, and he was given good color and beautiful skin. The angel then asked him what kind of property he liked best. The leper replied: Camels (or cows). (The narrator is in doubt, for either the leper or the bald-headed man wanted camels and the other wanted cows). So the leper was given a pregnant she-camel and the angel said to him: May God bless you by it.

The angel then went to the bald-headed man and asked him what he would like most. He replied: I would like good hair, and wish to be cured of this disease (of baldness), for people feel repulsion toward me. The angel touched him and his illness was cured, and he was given good hair. The angel then asked him what kind of property he liked. He replied: Cows. The angel gave him a pregnant cow and said: May God bless you by it. The angel then went to the blind man and asked him what he would like best. He replied: I would like that God may restore my eyesight to me so that I may see people. The angel touched his eyes and God restored his eyesight. The angel then asked him what kind of property he liked best. He replied: Sheep. The angel gave him a pregnant sheep and said to him: May God bless you by it.

Afterwards, all three pregnant animals gave birth to young ones, and multiplied, and brought forth so much that one of the men had a herd of camels filling a valley, and one had a herd of cows filling a valley, and one had a flock of sheep filling a valley.

Then the angel, disguised in the shape and appearance of a leper, went to the leper and said: I am a poor man who has lost all means of livelihood while on a journey, so none shall satisfy my needs except God, then you. In the name of He Who had given you such nice color and beautiful skin, and so much property, I ask you to give me a camel so that I may reach my destination. The man replied: I have many obligations (so I cannot give you one).

The angel said: I think I know you; were you not a leper to whom people had a strong aversion? Weren't you a poor man and then God gave you (all this property)? The man replied: That is not so. I got this property through inheritance from my forefathers. The angel said: If you are telling a lie, then may God make you as you were before. Then the angel, disguised in the shape and appearance of a bald man, went to the bald man and said to him the same as he told the first one, and he too answered the same as the first one did. The angel said: If you are telling a lie, then may God make you as you were before. Then the angel, disguised as a blind man, went to the blind man and said: I am a poor man and a traveler whose means of livelihood have been exhausted while on a journey. I have no one to help me except God, and after Him, you yourself. I ask you in the name of He who has given you your eyesight, and much property, to give me a sheep, so that with its help, I can complete my journey. The man said: No doubt, I was once blind and God gave me back my eyesight. I was poor and God made me rich, so take anything you wish of my property. By God, I will not stop you from taking anything (you need) of my property, which you may take for God's sake. The angel then said: Keep your property. You all (three men) have been tested, and God is pleased with you and is angry with your two companions.

This is an example of how God tests people, both with good and with bad. When we are given a blessing from God, it should make us humble and more appreciative, and cause our hearts to soften toward others. If it makes us haughty and defiant, then it is really no blessing at all. God loves that we share and offer our sympathy to those less fortunate. After all, we never know what state we could find our selves in tomorrow. We should never forget where our blessings come from, and that it is God who gives, as well as takes.

We Were Created...

to ponder the wonders of creation.

We were created.... to ponder the wonders of creation.

< 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- those who remember God standing, sitting, and lying down on their sides, and think deeply about the creation of the heavens and the earth (saying) "Our Lord! You have not created all of this without purpose, glory to You!... >

3: 190, 191

Have you ever gone out, looked around, and wondered who created this vast universe? Who set the entire system into motion? This is also a piece I wrote after being inspired by the religion of Islam:

People tend to turn a blind eye to religion, perhaps because it involves too many aspects of the unseen (called *ghaib* in Arabic, referring to things we cannot see, but are known to exist: such as angels and devils, Heaven and Hell...) We were tacitly informed, from a very young age, growing up in the US, to regard with suspicion anything we cannot observe with our senses. The unspoken motto of the West is: Science Rules.

But does it not go against science itself to believe that everything came about, in its present order, by sheer chance? Since when do order and structure come about spontaneously, from chaos? Doesn't the Law of Chaos, a known scientific law, dictate that when left to their own devices, things will never re-organize, or re-assemble and come back into any semblance of order again after their disarray?

So what happened after the so-called Big Bang? How did everything wind up in its present, impeccable form? Not only is there perfect order and balance apparent in nature, from the farthest reaches of the universe right down to the smallest, most miniscule cells in our bodies, but there seems to be nothing superfluous, nothing missing. And everything seems to be in exactly the right place, in its ideal shape, size and form for optimal use. If there were no rhyme or reason behind it all, you would have expected things to have happened haphazardly. But they didn't. You would be hard-pressed to find a better position for your nose, for example, or your eyes. A lot of good they would have done if they had been on top of your head, or had been anywhere else on your body.

You would be equally hard-pressed to find a more sublime design for each and every body part. Could anyone come up with a hand or foot design that is better than our hands and feet, or better suited to our daily needs? What if our feet had been placed at the end of our arms and our hands grew out of the bottoms of our legs? What if our arms and legs did not have any joints in the middle- those handy elbows and knees- so we could neither use them to walk, nor to feed ourselves? What if people had been born without hands or feet in the first place? How 'inconvenient' that would have been- or without teeth, or hair, or any other body part... The more one ponders the wonders of Creation, the more one should be convinced that things could not have happened on their own, purely 'by chance'.

The Law of Probability, another well-known, established scientific law precludes the possibility. According to the Laws of Probability and Statistics, chances are absolutely nil that things would have turned out as they did, flawlessly, and seamlessly, every single time. We would have found at least one anomaly, one glitch, one inconsistency, something extra or missing, or outside of its present and perfect location. The bottom line: While belief in God and an afterlife may seem to defy logic, to claim the opposite, that Mother Nature in all her invisible glory did it all, definitely defies logic.

< We will show them Our Signs in the universe, and in their own selves, until it becomes manifest to them that this (the Qur'an) is the truth. > 41: 53

We Were Created...

to love.

We were created.... to love*.

*(footnote: There are various types of love: the love of your Creator, love for your daughter, love for your brother, etc. Here, I mean romantic love, in particular.)

Is love real? Does it exist?

I wrote this piece after being inspired by the religion of Islam:

As young children we believed in true love- that of Romeo and Juliet, Cinderella and her prince, Tony and Maria,... As we grew up, however, we resigned ourselves to the sad, but true, fact that love only exists in fairy tales. Does true love exist? Let us reflect for a while.

Love is one of the most powerful emotions, or drives, in human beings. It is one of our main motivators, behind many of our actions and pursuits. Consider all the songs that revolve around the theme of love..., and all the novels..., and all the plays..., and all the films... Everyone wants to love and be loved, and respected, and appreciated, and cared about. Conversely, we hate rejection, criticism, insults, name-calling, and the like. As children, we crave love and attention. Studies have proven that infants who do not receive adequate attention and loving care as newborns suffer dire consequences, perhaps even leading to death. How can science alone explain that?

As for attention, it has been said that babies cry for it, and men die for it. Everyone wants to be noticed and admired. As we grow up, our desire to love and be loved does not dissipate and wither away. While we no longer cry for it, we will come up with new and ingenious ways to get it. Especially if we don't find a loving, caring environment at home, many of us will look into members of the opposite sex for a taste of 'true love' and some positive feedback. We crave genuine approval, as many of us have come to doubt ourselves and our self worth over the years. But, in our dubious quest for love, we are seeking only a short-term fix, usually with no serious intention of committing ourselves to that person.

Time and time again we are rudely awakened and sadly disappointed with the results. We certainly haven't found what we are looking for and feel all bent out of shape, exasperated, and guilty for trying. Why? It is because we were looking in the wrong place. The hard lesson is this: true love can never come from such a source. It can never emanate from a person who is in the same position as you, equally craving the same. You will be unable to fulfill your partner's needs because you are both needy yourselves. This situation is comparable to a parable in Islam.

The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) once said that a person who seeks from anyone other than God is like someone who is drowning. What do they do? They try to grab onto a similarly drowning person for help and support. What will happen then? If we want something, we turn to God. When we have some specific need, we turn to God- and God alone- for its fulfillment. We should not look to other people because they will be sadly ill-equipped to help and unable to deliver. So, again, does true love really exist?

The only true love that has ever existed between two individuals, one a male and the other a female, was that built on faith. You have to acknowledge the Source of love before you can actually love another human being, or even love yourself. Love based on faith in God, the eternal Source, is genuine, selfless love. It is not tinted by greed, lust, or any ulterior motive. It is not based on looks, wealth, caliber, class, nationality, etc. Only people of conviction can truly love one another because they can see beyond the superficial. They are not fooled by false appearances. They are not after you for your looks, or for what is in your wallet, or for any other perks or favors. Theirs is a mutually caring, unselfish, untainted love. They love your very soul- and they want nothing from you except that you are alive and well.

Loving someone 'for the sake of God' means loving a person for who they are, not for what they can do for you. True love is manifested in truly loving and wanting to be with that person, no matter what their external, physical conditions may be. Wasn't that the central theme of the famed Beauty and the Beast? Beauty was only able to see the beast's true form when she proved herself, by accepting him for who he was. For richer or poorer, for better or for worse, their love abides. True love transgresses all physical, material boundaries. You focus on the essence of the one you love- their very soul. You love their core being, so nothing else matters. Now you have found real, true, abiding love. Because it is so rare to find such selfless, unpretentious, genuine people around, true love is equally rare to find and hard to come by. It does exist, is in fact sought by all, but is only found by a select few. People have strayed from the sound teachings and advice given in the Qur'an and *sunnah* of Islam. When we return to these, then perhaps we may return to the true love the Almighty has intended for us.

A special note on love: The strongest bond that can exist between two individuals- and the only true love that exists- is when they love for God's sake. Two meet, and part, that way, with no specific interest or worldly consideration between them. This could include a man and his wife, or it could be any two selfless souls. Their love abides, and will follow them straight to the Day of Judgment, where they will be shaded on a Day there will be no shade but His. God loves that we love for His sake, and no other. The Prophet (pbuh) once related: a man was walking toward a friend's house. An angel, disguised as a man, stopped him and asked him where he was going. He replied, "I am going to visit a friend." The angel asked him if he was going for some worldly matter or to achieve some benefit. The man said, "No, I am going because I love him." The man was given the glad tidings that God Almighty loves him, as he loves another for His sake.

Another special note on love: Another necessary, but often overlooked, component with respect to loving another person is that first, you must love yourself, as alluded to above. It may sound cliché, but you must learn to love and respect yourself in order to love, or accept being loved, by someone else. If this all-important component is missing, true love will continue to elude you. It seems as if Whitney Houston was onto something when she identified the Greatest Love of All as being the love of one's self, first.

So, how does one come to love his or her own self? Is this not vanity and conceit?

It is not vanity and conceit to have a healthy, realistic, positive self- image. It is a part of our *fitrah*, or unspoiled human nature, that we have a viable sense of our own self worth, just as children do. We must discover who we are, though, in order to maintain a healthy love of self. We must embark on the path to self-discovery, and come to know our purpose in life. The One Who created us has placed within us a desire and compelling urge to seek nearness to Him. We will not feel close Him unless we deem ourselves worthy of His love. We will not feel worthy of His love unless we admit to our shortcomings, seek forgiveness for our faults, and live in a way that is pleasing to Him.

A person can only start to love him/ her self by being honest with him/ her self. We must take a good, hard look at ourselves, dig deep (a process known as introspection), and try to locate and identify our strengths as well as our weaknesses. Then, we can begin the meticulous process of seeking to enhance whatever positive traits we have, bringing them up to the forefront (beginning with an open heart that is amenable to the truth), while seeking to curb and modify the negative traits (such as pride, which blinds us to our faults, as well as to the truth). Before we retire at night, or at any other convenient time, try to take stock of everything you did on that day, both good and bad. See where you went wrong, and make a conscious effort not to repeat whatever oversights or mistakes you made. See where you could have made improvements or done better, and strive to do better the next time. Ideally, we should enlist divine aid in overcoming our faults and shortcomings, as our Maker knows best what these are. If we are firmly committed to trying to improve ourselves daily, with consistent effort and striving, and with due patience and persistence, we will eventually succeed. It all starts with being brutally honest and candid with ourselves first. In Islamic terminology, the process of ridding ourselves of negative/ undesirable traits and replacing them with positive/ affirmative ones is called *tezkiya*, or purification of the soul. (For more details on *tezkiya*, refer to a book on the subject). Then, when our characters have been sufficiently refined, and beautified... we may actually become that Mr. or Mrs. Wonderful of our true love's dreams!

We Were Created...

to be abstemious.

We were created us... be abstemious (partake little of this world).

A man came to the Prophet (pbuh) and said: "O Messenger of God; guide me to such an action that when I do it, God will love me and the people will love me." He (pbuh) said: "Be abstemious in the world, and God will love you. Abstain from what is in people's hands, and they will love you."

This interesting *hadith* tells us how to endear ourselves to our Creator, and to our fellow men. The term *zuhd*, or asceticism, is a very admirable quality. It entails shunning material comforts and riches by denying oneself some of the lawful pleasures of life, although one can afford them, for the sake of seeking nearness to God. It is almost an attitude, as if one were to say, "God, my Lord and Sustainer, please give me my provision in my hand only, not in my heart." The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was the epitome of *zuhd*. He (pbuh) would prefer giving to taking, distributing any and all wealth that came his way among the poor and needy, or using it in the propagation of his mission. When asked if he (pbuh) would rather be a Prophet-king like David or a humble servant of God, he chose the latter. He (pbuh) appealed to God to make him live among the poor, die among the poor, and be resurrected among the poor. He (pbuh) and his household would go several months without lighting the stove for a proper meal. He (pbuh) would tie stones around his belly to ward off pangs of hunger, often opting to fast because he found nothing to eat in any of his houses.

When his famous companion Omar ibn el-Khattab (raa), later to become Caliph, came to visit him (pbuh) at home and saw the bleak conditions he (pbuh) was living in, and noticed marks on the Prophet's side left by the straw mat he (pbuh) used to sleep on, he began to weep out of pity for the noble Messenger (pbuh). The following conversation ensued:

The Prophet (pbuh) asked: "Why are you weeping, Omar?" He replied: "Why should I not weep? Chosroes and Caesar (two major emperors of the time) enjoy themselves in this world, and the Messenger of God owns only what I see?" He (pbuh) responded: "O Omar does it not please you that this is the share of Chosroes and Caesar in this life, and in the hereafter this pleasure will be for us alone?" Believers have a secret. Their secret is their faith.

The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) endorsed asceticism but denounced monasticism. Asceticism differs from monasticism in several ways. The devout are not expected to give up worldly pleasures and passions completely, confining themselves to places of worship, dedicating their lives to the service of God, committing to celibacy, or a rigorous code of worship and self-denial. Monasticism of this kind is an extreme form of asceticism and it is actually forbidden in Islam.

. God tells us in the Qur'an,

< *and forget not your portion of lawful enjoyment in this world.* > 28: 77

It was narrated by Anas ibn Malik (raa): Three people came to the houses of the wives of the Prophet (pbuh) asking about the worship of the Prophet (pbuh). When they were told, it was as if they regarded it as too little (upon themselves). They said: "Who are we in comparison to the Prophet (pbuh)? God has forgiven his past and future sins". One of them said: "As for me, I will pray all night forever." Another said: "I shall fast all my life and never break my fast". Another said: "I shall keep away from women and never get married". The Messenger of God (pbuh) came and said to them: "Are you the ones who said such and such? By God, I am the one who fears God most among you and I am the most pious, but I fast and I break my fast, I pray and I sleep, and I marry women. Whoever turns away from my *sunnah* is not of me."

Believers in Islam are rather supposed to strike a figurative balance, maintaining a fair distribution between their worldly and spiritual lives. While they are not asked to give up on this life completely in favor of the next, neither are they to give inordinate preference to the life of this world. This will cause them to neglect their spiritual duties and forget the main purpose of their existence. Unfortunately, many present-day followers of Islam have succumbed to the Satanic pull towards this base, low life, or *dunya*. The following *hadith* calls us back to our senses and reminds us where our priorities should lie:

"Whoever is mainly concerned about the hereafter, God will make him feel independent of others and will make him focused and content, and his worldly affairs will fall into place."

Conversely,

"But whoever is mainly concerned with this world, God will make him feel in constant need of others and will make him distracted and unfocused, and he will get nothing out of this world except what is decreed for him."

When we give God His due, give priority to His Paradise, and partake but little of His favors, He will reward us for our piety in this very life, before what awaits us in the hereafter. He will give us self-sufficiency and contentment with our lot. True believers enjoy peace of mind and a good portion of happiness here on earth, in addition to perfect bliss in the next. Believers are ever mindful of God, never forgetting who they are or why they are here, never slacking in their duties toward their Creator, remembering death often, and what comes after, and living in constant preparation for them. A believer's main concern, as his/ her faith evolves, becomes the state of his/ her spiritual affairs- and less so their worldly affairs.

Note: It is commendable for believers in Islam to be abstemious with regard to the consumption of resources, with regard to their food and drink. and even with regard to rest. In all areas, the true believer seeks to curb his desire, or *nafs* (literally soul, but meaning the lower self, and referring to one's craving after worldly indulgences) if it is God's pleasure they are after. A woman of the past, named Rabia el-Basri, (Rabia means 'the fourth' in Arabic, as she was the last of four daughters) is a prime example of this. Born in present-day Iraq around a hundred years after the advent of Islam, she was an exceptionally pious lady. It is recorded that she devoted her whole life to the worship of God. She would spend long days and much of the night in solemn worship of her Lord. She was orphaned at a young age, then sold into slavery. Her master released her, however, upon seeing how pious and righteous she was. After being released, she moved to the desert where she worshipped in virtual solitude. Once, someone went to visit this pious lady to see her living conditions. He found she had nothing but a broken vessel she used for ablutions and drinking water, a very old straw mat, and a brick which she used as a pillow. Seeing her poor, meager state, he told her he knew of some rich folks who could help her out. At this, she replied, "Is my Provider, your Provider and the Provider of the wealthy, not the same?" The man said, "Yes." She inquired, "Has He forgotten about the needs of the poor on account of their poverty, while He remembers the needs of the wealthy?" The man said, "It is not so." She then said, "When He never forgets anyone, why should we remind Him?" She remained grateful and dutiful to her Lord her whole life, in constant praise and glorification of Him. Her piety has won her a place in history, as well as a probable place among the ranks of the elite in Heaven, may God have mercy on her soul.

Some of her more prominent quotes:

When asked, "When does a servant acquire contentment?" She replied, "When he or she is as grateful for adversity as for bounty."

She would say, in supplication to her Lord, "While in this world, all I want from this world is to remember You, and my only wish for the hereafter is to be able to see You. Other than this, do with me as You wish!"

Where are we in comparison to this?

We Were Created...

to be mindful of God.

We were created ... to be mindful of God.

< And bring your Lord to remembrance in your (very) soul in humility and remember without loudness in words in the mornings and evenings, and be not of those who are heedless. >

33: 35

God created us and all other forms of life (and even non-life) to worship and glorify Him.

< The seven heavens and the earth and all that is therein, glorify Him, and there is not a thing but glorifies His praise, but you understand not their glorification. Truly He is Ever Forbearing, Oft-Forgiving. > 17: 44

All of God's many creatures glorify their Lord in one way or another; they are in a constant state of *dhikr*, or remembrance of God. Human beings are the only exception to this rule; we may glorify Him at will. God loves that we praise Him, and loves to reward us for this. What are the specific rewards and benefits of this most blessed of all acts? First of all, *dhikr*, or remembrance of God, is such a highly esteemed and rewarded action, as mentioned earlier, that it surpasses all other acts of worship:

The Prophet (pbuh) once asked his companions: "Shall I tell you about the best of deeds, the best act of piety in the eyes of your Lord, which will elevate your status in the hereafter and which carries more virtue than the spending of gold and silver in the service of God... and slaying or being slain in the path of God?" He said it was: "The remembrance of God."

A *hadith* tells us: "No other action of a person can surpass remembrance of God the Almighty."

Related from his Lord, glorified and exalted be He:

"I am as my servants think of Me, (i.e., I come up to the expectations of My servant). I am with him when he remembers Me. When he makes mention of Me in his heart I make mention of him to Myself. When he mentions Me in a gathering, I mention him in a better gathering (of angels). And if he draws near to Me an arm's length, I draw near to him a cubit, and if he draws near to Me a cubit, I draw near to him a fathom. And if he comes to Me walking, I go to him at speed."

Worshippers draw nearer to their Lord through praising and glorifying Him. If we approach God one yard, He comes toward us a mile. God wants us to be ever-mindful of His presence. Believers are quick to remember the Almighty at all times, day and night; they are told to keep their tongues moist with the remembrance of God.

If one awakens at night, remembers their Lord, and repeats the following, his/ her sins will be forgiven, according to *hadith*, and if s/he makes ablution and performs prayer, the prayer will be accepted:

"There is none worthy of worship but God alone, Who has no partner. His is the kingdom, all praises are for Him, and He has power over all things. All praise is for God, and thanks be to God, and there is none worthy of worship other than God, and God is the Greatest, and there is neither might nor power except with God. O God, forgive me." (to be said in the original Arabic)

We are told in another *hadith*, "God has cursed everything in the world except for *dhikr* and what attends *dhikr*." In order for anything in life to be blessed, one must remember God alongside it. Believers never take that sip of their favorite drink or that morsel of food in their mouth without saying "*bismillah*" first. Now, the world is theirs to enjoy.

A verse in the noble Qur'an says:

< Unquestionably, in the remembrance of God, hearts are assured. > 13: 28

Tranquility of the heart is an ingredient all but missing in today's world. How can we attain it? It is through *dhikr*. Praising our Lord calms the heart and soul, making life a little more... heavenly. Remembrance of God is a simple, effortless way to attain the pleasure of your Creator. It has been recorded that when the denizens of Heaven reach Heaven, they will have no bigger regret than the time they didn't spend, while on earth, praising and thanking their Lord.

A woman at the time of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) once complained that after she had grown old she could no longer perform all the acts of worship she used to do. What was the advice given? It was to spend her free moments in the remembrance of God.

From the Qur'an:

< O you who believe! Remember God with much remembrance. > 33: 41

Some *adhkar*, or words of praise, are more highly rewarded than others. One of the Mothers of the Believers (an honorable title given to all the Prophets' wives), was busy in the worship of God. When the Prophet (pbuh) arrived later that day, he (pbuh) found her in the same state of worship. He (pbuh) asked her if she had been worshipping the whole time. She said yes. He (pbuh) told her of three phrases, which if she said them, would surpass all of what she did (in reward):

"How perfect God is, and I praise Him by the number of His creation, and His pleasure, and by the weight of His throne, and by the ink of His words." (to be said three times)

Similar phrases are known to be heavy on the scales as well as light on the tongue:

For whoever recites: "Glory be to God, the Almighty, and His is the praise" a date palm will be planted in Paradise.

Whoever says: "Glory be to God, and His is the praise" one hundred times a day will be forgiven all his sins, even if they were as much as the foam of the sea.

"Remember your Lord in prosperity, and He will remember you in adversity."

This *hadith* is a reminder not to wait until we are forced by necessity to call upon our Lord. Remember Him in good times so He will remember you in the bad.

Those who bring God to mind often, and praise and glorify Him in the way He deserves, will be compensated thus:

< And for men and women who engage much in God's remembrance, for these has God prepared forgiveness and a great reward. > 33: 35

From *hadith*, on the virtues of remembering and praising God:

The Messenger of God (pbuh) said: "God has some angels who look for those who remember (i.e., glorify the praises of) God on the roads and paths. And when they find some people remembering (glorifying the praises of) God they call each other, saying: "Come to the object of your pursuit." He added, "Then the angels encircle them with their wings up to the nearest Heaven". He added, "After those people remembered (glorified the praises of) God, and the angels go back to God, their Lord asks them- although He knows better than them- "What do My servants say?" The angels reply, "They say: *SubhanAllah, AllahuAkbar, and Alhamdulillah.*" God then says, "Have they seen Me?" The angels reply, "No! By God, they have not seen You." God says, "How would it have been if they had seen Me?" The angels reply, "If they had seen You, they would worship You more devoutly and remember You (glorify your praises) more fervently, and declare Your freedom from any resemblance to any thing more often. God says (to the angels), "What do they ask Me for?" The angels reply, "They ask you for Paradise." God says (to the angels), "Have they seen it?" The angels say, "No, by God, O Lord. They have not seen it." God says, "How would it have been if they had seen it?" The angels say, "If they had seen it, they would have greater covetousness for it and would seek it with greater zeal and would have greater desire for it." God says, "From what do they seek refuge?" The angels reply, "They seek refuge from the fire of Hell." God says, "Have they seen it?" The angels say, "No, by God, O Lord! They have not seen it." God says, "How would it have been if they had seen it?" The angels say, "If they had seen it, they would flee from it with extreme fleeing and would have extreme fear of it." Then God says, "I make you witness that I have forgiven them." (i.e., God has accepted their striving and admitted them to Paradise.)

We Were Created...

to live like brothers.

We were created... to live like brothers.

God created this vast universe and all it contains for the benefit of humankind. He put at our disposal the many contents of the heavens and the earth so we may live, thrive, seek out our livelihoods, utilize what may benefit us, and enjoy our limited existence here on this earth. He has honored human beings and favored us above all of His creation. He has bestowed upon us many favors and bounties, including the faculties of hearing, sight, and intellect so we may make use of His many gifts and give thanks.

< God is He Who has created the heavens and the earth and sends down water from the sky, and thereby brought forth fruits as provision to you; and He has made the ships to be of service to you, that they may sail through the sea by His command; and He has made rivers to be of service to you. And He has made the sun and the moon... to be of service to you, and He has made the night and the day, to be of service to you... and if you count the Blessings of God, never will you be able to count them. > 2: 22

God provides us with everything we have- both the tangible and hidden bounties are all from Him. For this, we should be grateful. We can never enumerate all of God's favors, even if we tried. God created human beings to know and worship Him, and to show our gratitude for all His favors. He created us to co-exist in peace and harmony, finding comfort in each other's company. He put love and mercy in our hearts toward one another. He created everything for a reason, for a wise and lofty purpose.

< O mankind! We have created you from a male and a female; and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another. Verily, the most honorable of you in the sight of God is the most pious (God-fearing) of you. > 49: 13

Ideally we, the children of Adam, are to live like brothers and to afford our brethren in humanity the same good treatment we love for our selves. A new Muslim automatically has nearly two billion new siblings around the world. But how many of these actually practice what Islam preaches? Islam teaches us how we are to treat our comrades:

"Whoever is not grateful to his fellow men is not grateful to God."

An early companion said: "I took a pledge at the hand of the Messenger of God (pbuh) to observe prayers, to pay *zakat*, and to be a sincere well-wisher of humanity."

"He who removes from a believer one of his difficulties in this world, God will remove one of his troubles on the Day of Resurrection."

"He is not a true Muslim who is not kind to those who are older and does not respect those who are younger."

"He is not a true Muslim who fills his stomach while his neighbor remains hungry."

"A Muslim is the brother of a Muslim. He does not oppress him or humiliate him or look down upon him. Piety is here (and the Prophet pointed to his chest three times). It is a serious evil for a Muslim that he should look down upon his brother Muslim. All things of a Muslim are inviolable for his brother in faith: his blood, his wealth, and his honor."

"Do not be suspicious, for suspicion is the height of falsehood, or bear a grudge or enmity against each other, or be jealous of each other, or indulge in backbiting, or dig into the secrets of one another, or try to (unreasonably) excel one another. But, O bondsmen of God, live like brothers as the Lord has commanded."

Believers are supposed to form a bond of brotherhood and sisterhood- uniting as if they were one big family. We must respect each other's God-given rights, and treat each other with all due kindness and loyalty. If we did, that much closer we would come to achieving actual Heaven on earth. Which factor do you suppose will weigh heaviest on a person's scale, come Judgment Day? It is our good manners- how well we treated our fellow human beings.

We Were Created...

to prepare for an afterlife.

We were created... to prepare for an afterlife.

When it is all said and done, and everyone has completed their term of life, God has promised retribution. He will resurrect us all on a certain Day, a Day which is alternately referred to as the Day of Judgment, Day of Standing, the Hour, Day of Reckoning, Day of Retribution, and other names. When this Day comes, everyone will meet up with all the good and evil they have ever done.

< And whoever has done an atom's weight of good shall see it, and whoever has done an atom's weight of evil shall see it. > 99: 7-8*

*(footnote: These particular verses have been cited as the most comprehensive verses of the noble Qur'an, as they encompass every single action we do.)

Our existence here on earth does not end at the time of death. The soul moves on. The physical body, the vehicle that has been housing our souls all along, dies and will perish. The soul is then brought back to its Lord.

"To God we belong and to Him we will return."

This is what a Muslim says when they hear that someone has passed away. It is also a reactionary phrase, said upon hearing any sad, disturbing, or surprising news. We all belong to God- He is the Source- and we all eventually return to Him in the end.

The deceased person has now departed from the life of this world, called *dunya*, and enters the life of the grave, also called the life of the *barzakh*, meaning barrier. A barrier exists between the life of this world and the life of the grave that cannot be transgressed. A person remains in the *barzakh*, or barrier, stage until it is time for Judgment. There are many descriptions of what life is like in the barrier stage- one's grave can either be as if a garden from the Gardens of Paradise, or as if a pit from the pits of Hell. (I take refuge in God from such a fate.)

So, how to prepare for the life that invariably comes after death?

Preparing for an afterlife is not something to be taken lightly. While the vast majority of people strives and works hard for years on end trying to improve their lot and get an even bigger piece of the pie here on earth, a believer's focus is more on the life to come. Believers know with certitude that this life is not where it ends. We will all be gathered for a Day of Reckoning. This 'Day' will go on for thousands of years. Everyone will be rewarded and/ or punished according to their deeds. No one will carry the burdens of another. No one will be wronged in the least. And no one will be absent. Everyone will get what they rightly deserve. Eternal justice will be served. Believers wonder, why direct all our thoughts and aspirations to our temporary, finite abode when we could be striving for the infinite? Now, that is the question. How does a short span of life on earth compare with an eternity in Heaven? Is there any comparison?

In order to be eligible for a final abode in Paradise, one must die as a Muslim. This means they must declare their faith in God as their Lord and in Muhammad as His Messenger by pronouncing the words of the *shahada*, meaning witnessing, or testimony of faith. The testimony of faith says:

"Ash hadu An La ilaha illa Allah, Wa ash hadu anna Muhammad abduhu wa rasuluhu."

"I bear witness there is no deity worthy of worship except God, and I bear witness that Muhammad is His servant and Messenger."

Now, one has officially entered the fold of Islam, and is considered a Muslim. This short, concise phrase ultimately separates believer from non-believer, and it is what will distinguish the blessed dwellers of Heaven from those doomed to Hell. The grave importance of this tiny phrase cannot be overemphasized.

In preparation for Judgment Day, one should make sure his/ her prayers are in order. The believer in God must establish a daily regimen of offering the five obligatory (*fard*) prayers at their proper, fixed times. The importance of establishing prayer is evident in the following:

"The first of his actions for which a servant of God will be held accountable on the Day of Resurrection will be his prayers. If they are in order then he will have prospered and succeeded; if they are found wanting then he will have failed and lost. If there is something defective in his obligatory prayers, the Lord will say: See if My servant has any supererogatory prayers which may compensate for what was defective in his obligatory prayers. Then the rest of his actions will be judged in like fashion."

In order to be in good standing with one's Lord, one should adequately fulfill the other three pillars of Islam, namely, paying the obligatory alms (*zakat*), fasting the month of Ramadan as per one's physical health, and making the pilgrimage to Mecca (*hajj*), once in a lifetime, as per one's physical/ financial capability.

One should also try to remain in a constant, vigilant state of begging forgiveness for one's faults. In this way if death approaches, one can meet God as sinless as possible. A well-known *hadith* in this regard tells us: "Every son of Adam is a wrongdoer, and the best of wrongdoers are those who constantly repent." All human beings are imperfect and have weaknesses- we all tend to stray. One should not stray too far without remembering the One Who hears, sees, knows (and records) everything. Do not wait until you are upon death's door to repent and turn back to Him. Ask God's forgiveness for any and all faults and sins you may have committed, whether knowingly or unwittingly, because you do not know if you will be given a second chance. There is a special invocation, called the Chief of Seeking Forgiveness, which is to be recited by the faithful twice daily, once in the morning and again in the evening. If one recites it with full conviction in it, and dies on that day, s/he is promised an abode in Paradise.

Chief of Seeking Forgiveness: "O God, You are my Lord. None has the right to be worshipped except You. You created me and I am Your servant and I abide by Your covenant and promise as best as I can. I take refuge in You from the evil of which I have committed. I acknowledge Your favor upon me and I acknowledge my sin, so forgive me, for verily none can forgive sin except You." (to be recited in the original Arabic)

One should try to remain in a constant state of *dhikr*, or remembering God. Set aside a time for *dhikr* every day, perhaps as soon as you wake up every morning, after each prayer, or before going to bed at night. There are certain sets of phrases the Prophet (pbuh) used to say, and taught us to say, upon completing the dawn (*fajr*) prayer, called 'morning remembrances', and another similar set of phrases to be said again after the late afternoon (*asr*) or evening (*maghrib*) prayer called 'evening remembrances'. These prescribed supplications are full of rewards and blessings. Through them, we praise and glorify God, enumerate His blessings, ask for forgiveness and protection from harm, affirm our faith, and so on. As previously mentioned, believers will regret nothing more than the time they did not spend remembering, thanking and praising their gracious Lord when they finally make it to their heavenly abode.

In what other ways can we raise our ranks, and weigh down our scales, in preparation for the final reckoning?

Pious believers are encouraged to do as many selfless good deeds as possible. These weigh heavily on the scales of final justice. Examples range from volunteering for good causes, caring for the sick, elderly, or invalid- whether related to you or not, spreading/ teaching any kind of useful knowledge, supporting orphans, widows, and the less fortunate, donating food, money, or clothing to charities, helping reconcile between people, working to promote the good (i.e., Islamic monotheism and all righteous deeds God loves) and counter the evil (i.e, worshipping other than God and all ignoble deeds God hates) among the members of your community. One *hadith* tells us that three things continue to provide reward for a person, even after the person's physical death: any kind of useful knowledge the person left behind, an ongoing charity they established or contributed to, or a righteous son or daughter who prays for them on their behalf. Leave a legacy, by leaving behind some sort of beneficial knowledge to your credit, or by contributing to an ongoing charity, or else by raising a righteous, pious son or daughter who then goes on to supplicate for us after we depart.

Make a habit of supplicating to God for anything and everything you may need or want. Ask from God, and not from others. Put your faith in God alone, and He will suffice. Remember the supplication of Abraham (raa), when he was about to be thrown in a pit of fire. He said: "God is sufficient for me, and He is the Best Disposer of affairs". The fire was thus made cool and comforting for him, by the grace of God. When we place all of our trust and hope in God, we become 'above' needing or wanting anything from anyone else, even if it is as trivial as a kind word or a small favor. Try not to seek approval, validity, praise or the like from other people. Seek only God's approval. And only expect from God. The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) told us to avoid depending or relying on others, as far as we are able. Depending on other people weakens our character and often results in disappointment. We have no guarantee that the other person can, will, or even wants, to deliver. But God always delivers. And He always delivers what is best. Ask Him for whatever you may need. Before supplicating, be sure your income is from permissible (*halal*) sources. God does not accept the supplication of a person whose income is from dubious or impermissible (*haram*) sources.

Use your health and your spare time wisely. These are two of your most precious assets. Do not waste them away in the pursuit of unproductive, frivolous, or potentially harmful activities. Give your body a boost by going to bed early, if possible, and by practicing excellent hygiene, exercising regularly, and not overindulging in food or drink. Health and free time are identified as the two blessings from God that the vast majority of people do not take proper advantage of.

Be fair and decent in dealing with others. Do not overstep the limits by treating people in a less honorable and dignified way than you like to be treated. Never cross the line by mistreating, abusing or otherwise oppressing others, lest the good you have done subsequently be stripped from you, and given to those you may have wronged or transgressed against (see *hadith*, p. 170).

Limit any and all unnecessary contact between you and members of the opposite gender- that is, between you and anyone with whom marriage is possible under Islamic law. This would include first cousins, for example, with whom marriage is permissible in Islam, although the common law of certain countries may prohibit this. It is purer and better for you and for them.

Pray, pray and pray some more. Committed believers are those who strive to pray more than the five fixed obligatory prayers that are expected of every Muslim and are considered the bare minimum. Pray to your Lord, bow down in humility and gratitude to Him, whenever you have a free moment. These 'extra' or supererogatory prayers, are greatly rewarded by God. For example, in one *hadith* we learn that the two units one prays right before the obligatory prayer at dawn (the two units of extra, supererogatory prayers before *fajr*) are reported to be worth more than the whole world, and all it contains! Wow! Try waking up a little earlier yet, and you can stand for the night standing, or *Qiyam el-layl*. Muslims are encouraged by the promise of great rewards and spiritual benefits to utilize this special time to pray and invoke their Lord. At such time, during the last third of each night, when people are usually sound asleep, supplications are answered, forgiveness is granted, and countless blessings are gained.

Establish a connection between you and God's holy book, the noble Qur'an. Each letter is rewarded ten-fold, providing a major incentive to try and read the word of God in its original Arabic. An additional reward is given to those whose native tongue is not Arabic, due to the difficulties they face when trying to read and/ or memorize the noble Qur'an.

Lastly, aspire towards the path that leads to Paradise, and to the life that starts after death. Do the deeds of righteousness which will raise your ranks there. As for this life, you only get what has been decreed for you. Then, you will meet your Lord. Everyone will stand forth with their book of deeds in hand. "Whoever has done an atom's weight of good shall see it. And whoever has done an atom's weight of evil shall see it." Every soul will wish there were a great distance between them and any evil they committed. They will all wish they had all died as Muslims, as true believers in Islam.

< How much would those who disbelieved wish they had been Muslims. > 15: 2

We Were Created...

to fulfill our purpose in life.

We were created.... to fulfill our purpose in life.

A human being's purpose in life is to declare that there is no deity worthy of worship except God, and then to adhere to the Straight Path set out for us by the religion of Islam. The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was once asked, "O Messenger of God, tell me something about Islam which I could ask of no one but you." He (pbuh) replied: "Believe in God, and then remain firm and steadfast." In short, a person is expected to have faith in God, and then back up their claim to faith with righteous, pious actions.

The phrase "those who believe, and do righteous deeds" is repeated countless times in the noble Qur'an. God continually praises and extols those who believe in Him and thereafter do good deeds. After all, what good is faith unless it translates into action? One can argue the opposite as well: Of what real value are good deeds unless they are coupled with faith, and done out of the goodness of one's heart, with an eye to seeking God's pleasure? The deeds of the faithless bear no fruit. From the Qur'an:

< The example of those who have disbelieved in their Lord is that their works are as ashes, on which the wind blows furiously on a stormy day: they shall not be able to get aught of what they have earned. That is the straying, far away (from the Straight Path). > 14: 18

Believers are true to their faith, both in word and deed. They do not merely talk the talk, but they walk the walk as well. Towards the end of each prayer, the faithful are made to invoke God's peace upon themselves as well as upon God's righteous servants, an invocation which would be quite meaningless if they themselves are not among those righteous servants. They are also made to supplicate to God to "guide us to the Straight Path" in every unit of prayer, for a minimum of seventeen times per day. It would be quite unreasonable and hypocritical for a person to ask God for guidance while praying, and then not act upon that guidance at other times. So, it follows that those who believe, establish regular prayer, and ask for guidance in their prayers, are likewise the first and foremost in the performance of righteous, praiseworthy actions.

An adherent to the faith should come to know about the different rulings, pertaining to which behaviors are permissible, those which are recommended, those which are required, and those which are strictly prohibited according to Islam. Broadly speaking, any action a person does falls into one of five categories:

1. Obligatory (*Fard*)
2. Praiseworthy/ highly recommended (*Mustahab*)
3. Permissible (*Halal*)
4. Disliked; literally, detested (*Makruh*)
5. Prohibited (*Haram*)

Please refer to a book on the subject for more information, as this subject is vast and beyond the scope of this book.

Note on how a permissible deed may become a praiseworthy deed: Permissible (*halal*) deeds are those which are neither rewarded nor punished from a religious perspective. These include activities such as eating, drinking, sleeping, doing exercise, entertaining ones self (as long as it is in an acceptable way and does not interfere with the performance of one's religious duties), etc... In Islam, these neutral deeds may be elevated to the status of praiseworthy deeds, and thus confer a reward on the one who performs them. This is done by revising one's intention, and dedicating them for a higher purpose. So, for example, we may invoke God, and ask Him to reward us for our food and drink, and for the time we spend sleeping, if our intention is such that we are doing these things so as to be more active, astute worshippers.

Knowing the rulings associated with the various actions we do is important, so as not to overstep the limits set by our Lord.

From the Qur'an:

< These are the limits ordained by God, so do not transgress them. And whoever transgresses the limits ordained by God, then such are the wrong-doers. > 2: 229

We Were Created...

to be united, not divided into sects.

We were created... to be united, not divided into sects.

Ideally, the Muslim *Ummah*, or Nation, should be one united front, and not divided into sects or along party lines. The *Ummah* of Muhammad, as it is known in Islamic terminology, should be united under one flag, one leadership and one creed. The only 'sect', or group, that will be saved come Judgment Day is the one that the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and his companions were upon. They were upon the true creed of Islam; they believe in God (Allah) as their Lord, Muhammad (pbuh) as their Prophet and follow the Prophetic way, or *sunnah*, in everything they do. There are stern warnings not to divide up into differing or opposing sects, and never to deviate from the one true sect.

The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) forewarned that his nation would divide into sects. He explained: "The Jews divided into 71 sects, and the Christians into 72, and my nation will divide into 73 sects. All of them shall be in the fire except one, and it is the united body upon the truth. It was said, "Who are they, O Messenger of God?" He (pbuh) said "that which I and my companions are upon today."

Some verses in the Qur'an warn against deviation:

< Verily, those who divide their religion and break up into sects, you have no concern with them in the least. Their affair is only with God, Who will then tell them what they used to do. >
6: 159

< And hold fast, all of you together, to the rope of God and be not divided among yourselves. >
3: 103

Muslims are one close-knit unit, bound by their firm faith in God. They adhere to the way, or *sunnah*, of their noble Messenger, Muhammad (pbuh), the Seal of the Prophets, after whom no other Prophet or Messenger will come. They do not break up into arbitrary sects or divisions, nor deviate from the one true path.

We Were Created...

to repent, and seek God's forgiveness.

We were created.... to repent, and seek God's forgiveness.

Repentance, or *tawba*, is a most beloved, blessed action of a child of Adam in the sight of his Lord. True repentance entails admitting to one's fault, feeling remorse over what one did, and vowing not to commit the same sin again. God loves those who repent and turn back to Him. He gives us chance after chance to acknowledge our mistakes, before He takes the final account.

The Almighty has said,

Related from his Lord, glorified and exalted be He:

"If you did not commit sins and turn to God, seeking His forgiveness, He would have replaced you with another people who would ask God's forgiveness, and He would forgive them."

God knows and expects that we will all transgress the limits and deviate from His Straight Path. But how many of us actually catch ourselves, admit to our weaknesses and wrongdoings, and turn back to Him in repentance? The following *hadith* encourages us in that direction:

"For the repentance of a servant, God becomes happier than a man who stopped over at a place for a rest with his camel, upon which he had his food and drink. He slept and woke up to find that his camel had wandered off: he walked long distances searching for it until he became overwhelmed with heat and thirst and decided to return to the place where he was. He then slept briefly and woke up to find his camel, laden with food and drink, beside him."

How utterly happy and relieved that man must be! God is even happier with us when we return to Him. Believers are encouraged to make *tawba*, or repentance, as often as they can, by repeating phrases like: "I seek Your forgiveness, O God and I repent unto You." or "O God. You are the Pardoner of sins, you love to pardon, so pardon me." (to be said in the original Arabic).

Phrases such as these are to be repeated over and over, again and again- even if the person is not guilty of any particular sinful act. The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) used to offer repentance, or *tawba*, at least seventy times a day, it has been recorded- and who was more upright and sinless than he? A person may say or do something innocently enough, unaware that it is odious and condemned by God. One slip of the tongue might be a major, punishable offense, as per the following *hadith* which reminds us to always choose our words wisely:

Aisha (raa), the most beloved wife of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), once said to him (pbuh) "Such-and-such should suffice for Safiya" (referring to her co-wife and indicating that she was short).

The Prophet (pbuh) responded: "You have said something, Aisha, that if it were mixed with the water of the ocean, would still pollute it."

In the sight of God, this seemingly benign remark about her co-wife being short, hardly enough to raise an eyebrow, is sufficient to deserve remonstrance and enough cause to beg God's forgiveness. What about all the other sins we commit day and night, much graver than this, without giving them a second thought?

Repentance in Islam is as easy as:

- 1.) asking forgiveness for a particular sin, by appealing directly to God
- 2.) feeling remorse over what one did
- 3.) vowing not to commit the sin again
- 4.) giving back the rights of others (if rights were usurped)

Note: if the sin committed was that of backbiting or slandering another person, recompense would be to speak well of the person when you find the opportunity to do so. You are not forced to go and tell the person you spoke ill of them and seek their forgiveness as this might cause more harm to the relationship than good.

Three types of human souls:

While all human beings are bound to sin, the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) outlined several types of souls, each with a different capacity for sinning. Among these, in loose translation, are: "soul at peace", "the ever-reproachful soul", and the "soul prone to evil and wickedness."

The "soul at peace" is a soul that takes comfort in being a true servant of God in word and deed. It enjoys a nearness to its Lord that offers it spiritual comfort and reassurance. It fears its Lord and stays away from His prohibitions. Its sins are few and far between. Its abode is Paradise. It is mentioned in the Qur'an:

< O you soul at peace, return to your Lord, well pleased and well pleasing. Enter you among My servants, And enter You into my Paradise. > 89: 27-30

Another type is the "ever-reproachful soul", or "self-blaming soul", which refers to the soul that is quick to repent. With this type of soul, the conscience is alive and well. It recognizes its own sinful behaviors as sinful, and seeks rectification. It does not stray far before turning back to God in fearful and tearful repentance. God commends this behavior and swears by this type of soul in the following:

< I swear by the resurrection, and I swear by the self-reproaching soul. Does man think that We shall not assemble his bones? Yes, We are able to put together in perfect order the tips of his fingers. Nay! Man (denies resurrection and reckoning, so he) desires to continue sinning. He asks: When will be this Day of Resurrection? > 75: 1-6

Believers should never stray far before realizing that God sees, hears, knows, and records everything. As for Resurrection, whether sooner or later, it is coming.

Lastly, there is the "soul prone to evil and wickedness". I take refuge in God the Almighty from a soul that cannot be tamed, or disciplined. This soul, just like a wild horse, takes its rider wherever it wills. It knows no boundaries. While its sins abound, it persists in evil, seemingly unaware of and unnerved by the consequences of its actions. It can no longer distinguish between truth and falsehood, nor between good and evil, often mistaking one for the other. May God guide us all to His Straight Path.

A final note on repentance: One should always have the best opinion of God, and His willingness to forgive. God tells us in the Qur'an. **< Never give up hope in God's mercy. Indeed, no one despairs of the mercy of God except the unbelieving people. > 12: 87** God forgives all sins except the sin of *shirk* (associating partners with God) and of course the sin of *kufr* (complete denial of Him). Any sin lesser than this may easily be forgiven and forgotten, and completely obliterated from one's record. Three of God's names refer to His vast capacity for forgiveness, *Al-Ghaffar*, *Al-Ghafir*, and *Al-Ghafoor*. There is no sin too large, but can be forgiven by God if one acknowledges his/ her faults, and offers sincere repentance.

We Were Created...

to be re-joined in Paradise.

We were created... to be re-joined in Paradise.

"Believers will be resurrected with those whom they used to love on earth."

In the US, a couple vows to stay married "until death do us part". Through Islam, a married couple can stay together forever. They are re-joined in Paradise, to enjoy each other's blessed company until the end of time. A woman (provided she and her husband both die as believers in God) may be married to the last husband she was married to on earth, if she so chooses. A man may stay married to all his former wives (providing they did not re-marry after him, and they all died as believers and made it to Heaven). This life is not where it ends; it is only a prelude to the next. Believers are promised to be resurrected in the company of those whom they used to love on earth. Imagine meeting up in Heaven- you, all your loved ones, and all the rest of your beloved brethren in faith... This can be a reality. Pray for their guidance as well as your own.

We Were Created...

be rewarded with Paradise, the ultimate success.

We were created to... be rewarded with Paradise, the ultimate success.

Related from his Lord, glorified and exalted be He:

"I have prepared for My righteous servants (in Heaven) what no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what has never occurred to a human heart."

Getting into Heaven sounds easy enough:

- 1.) Believe in God, ascribing no equals or partners to Him.
- 2.) Pray the prescribed daily prayers.
- 3.) Pay the obligatory alms.
- 4.) Abstain from food, drink, and intimacy during the days of Ramadan.
- 5.) Perform the *Hajj* pilgrimage at least once in a lifetime.

And lastly, be a general well-wisher of humanity, loving for your brother/ sister what you love for yourself.

Sounds simple, right? Let us take another look. In a certain *hadith* we are told:

"When God Almighty created Heaven and Hell, He asked (the angel) Gabriel to go and take a look at what He had prepared for the believers in Paradise. Gabriel went and had a look at what was there in Heaven, and then he came back and said: "By Your dignity whoever hears of this Heaven will certainly strive for it." Then it was said that the road to Heaven is littered with hardship, and Gabriel was asked to take another look at Heaven. He came back and said: By Your dignity, I am afraid that nobody will be able to enter it."

If achieving Paradise were so easy, then why do so many seem to be falling through the holes?

One, a lack of knowledge:

People literally do not know the purpose of their creation. Some have been led to believe that they were not created at all, but somehow evolved, or originated out of some soupy swamp, or in a gradual process which began with some small rodent-like animal, which then evolved into some higher species, and so on... I take refuge in God from this gross miscalculation. This gap in our knowledge can only be corrected by considering all the facts, researching the matter thoroughly, beseeching your Maker for help, and hopefully becoming enlightened by the religion of Islam as the only reasonable alternative.

< And whomsoever God wills to guide, He opens his breast to Islam > 6: 125

Two, a tendency to follow one's own base desires:

For some, just hearing about religion (reward and punishment, angels and devils, Heaven and Hell), is not enough. Many nominal Muslims profess their religion is the very truth, and they know it is deep down, but they cannot overpower their egos, nor overcome their weaknesses in order to reform themselves and behave the way they should. (think: my Palestinian ex-boyfriend and many, many others) Perhaps God will guide them while they still have the chance. Or perhaps, if they do not turn back to God, seeking His forgiveness, there will come a Day when their declaration of faith, "I bear witness there is no deity worthy of worship but God, and Muhammad is His servant and Messenger" will save them. Even so, they will have to face the wrath of God and His punishment first, and may have to go through some 'cleansing' in Hell-fire, if only temporarily.

Three, outright refusal to believe:

For some, the matter does not even deserve their attention. They don't think about it, they don't care about it, and they definitely hate to be lectured about it. If you were to show them an actual 'stairway to heaven', they would not believe. They would only say, "Our eyes have been dazzled. Nay, we are a people bewitched", as the Qur'an says. They have let their own lack of knowledge and lack of willpower take over, and have succumbed to the cunning of Satan, the accursed devil, at every turn. If you try to advise them, they will repel you, or at least despise you for it. There is no hope for them except to repent and rectify their errant ways. I take refuge in God from a life wasted, a chance for Paradise obliterated, and an eventual descent into Hell-fire.

We Were Created...

to be selfless well-wishers.

We were created... to be selfless well-wishers.

If there is one thing Islam calls for, it is to negate the self-factor, and to live in the service of others. All injunctions in Islam point in that direction. Accordingly, strong enticements are there to urge people to put others first. Negate yourself, favor the other guy, and surprisingly enough, you are the greatest beneficiary! Selflessness is a quality that God loves. God commends those who:

< were settled (in Medina) and adopted the faith before them. They love those who emigrated to them and find not any want in their breasts of what the emigrants were given but give (them) preference over themselves, even though they are in privation. And whoever is protected from the stinginess of his soul... it is those who will be the successful > 59: 9*

*(footnote: This particular verse is commemorating the *Ansar* (known as Helpers, referring to the native inhabitants of the city of Medina). When their brethren in faith (known as the *Muhajirin*, or Emigrants) were forced to flee to them from neighboring Mecca in an event known as the *hijra*, they freely gave from what little they possessed, in an unprecedented display of brotherhood and solidarity.)

Human beings have a tendency toward selfishness and greed. This is apparent in virtually all places, at all times. Not so, the early followers of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). He (pbuh) was able to cultivate a group of believers who, not undeservedly so, have been described as the best nation ever.- a group of selfless, honorable, disciplined, magnanimous men and women deserving of that title and that their stories be inscribed in everlasting tablets.

Giving was the way of the Prophet (pbuh) and his noble companions. He (pbuh) once said, "If I had gold equal to the mountain of Uhud, it would not please me that any of it should remain with me after three nights (i.e., I would spend it all for the sake of God), except what I would keep for repaying debts."

We have already discussed the austerity he (pbuh) and his family lived in. Once, his beloved wife Aisha (raa), received a large sum of money from one of her wealthy relatives. As was her custom, she began distributing it to the poor and needy. Before she knew it, she had given all the money away in charity. Her maidservant remarked, "if only you had kept just a bit, we could have afforded some meat to break your fast with." She sighed and said, "If I had remembered (read: If I had remembered my own self, and my own growling stomach), I would have done so." In her zest and fervency to be charitable to the people, she completely forgot herself and her own needs.

Once, a poor woman and her two daughters came to Aisha's door, asking for something to eat. She (raa) had nothing to give except three dates, which she readily gave to the woman. The woman, in turn gave each of her daughters a date. When the mother proceeded to eat her date, both of her daughters looked at her, longing for it. So she split the date in two, gave each one half, and remained hungry herself.

Stories abound of these selfless souls and their antics. One night, a family had only enough food in the house for their children's dinner. As it happened, a visitor arrived and the family offered him hospitality, as per the prevailing custom among Arabs. The mother started boiling some water, so as to allay the children's hunger, until they slept. Then, a lantern was switched off, so the guest would not realize that he was the only one eating. The others pretended to eat while he ate to his fill. My, oh my. What a wonderful world it would be... if everyone was like that!

Some outstanding acts of altruism:

Abu Talha (raa), the husband of the aforementioned Rumaysa (raa), had a garden that he loved, called Bayruhaa'. Upon hearing a verse in the Qur'an which says: < ***"Never will you attain the good reward until you spend (in the way of God) from that which you love."*** > 3: 92, he went straight to the Prophet (pbuh) and offered his entire garden as charity for the sake of God.

Abu Bakr el Siddiq (raa), the father of Aisha (raa) and most beloved companion and friend of the Prophet (pbuh) once donated all his money in charity to the cause of Islam. When asked what he had left for his family, he replied, "I have left them with God and His Messenger." And that, he knew, would suffice.

Once, a companion of the Prophet (pbuh) named Qays Ibn Sa'd ibn 'Ubaadah fell ill, and not one of the companions went to visit him. Rather surprised, he inquired as to their well-being (although he was the one who was sick). He was told that they were ashamed to visit him because of some debts they owed him. To this, he replied in disdain: "May God debase money that prevents brothers from paying visits." Then, he ordered someone to announce publicly that whoever was indebted to Qays ibn Sa'd ibn 'Ubaadah was off the hook. That night, his threshold literally broke due to the large number of visitors who came to see him.

In an unprecedented act of self denial and concomitant love of humanity, the fledgling new Caliph Omar ibn Abdul Aziz (raa), known as Omar II, as previously mentioned, decided to give up all of his wealth to the public treasury. Being a very wealthy man, and having lived a life of luxury up to that point, this was no small sacrifice to make. Not only did he give up all of his own wealth, but he asked the same of his wife. According to Ibn Kathir, the amount of gold given to Fatima, the wife of Omar ibn Abdul Aziz (raa), by her father on the day of her marriage had never been seen before. One day, without warning, Omar ibn Abdul Aziz (raa) informed his wife that he had decided to live a life of hardship, a life where he would prefer the needs of others over himself. He gave her an ultimatum that if she chose to do the same, she could remain with him, but if she chose to continue to live in luxury then he would have to part from her..... What do you think her immediate reaction was? (see below for answer)

Being the strong, pious woman she was, she wholeheartedly proclaimed that she would choose him over gold in the amount of the mountains of Mecca and Madinah. Now *that*, my dear friends, is what I call true love.

< And of the people is he who sells himself, seeking means to the approval of God. And God is full of kindness to His servants. > 2: 207

On the virtues of giving, from the Qur'an:

< And whatever you spend in charity, it is for your own good, when you spend not except seeking God's good pleasure. And whatever you spend of good, it will be repaid to you in full, and you shall not be deprived in the least... Those who spend (in charity) of their goods by night and by day, in secret and in public have their reward with their Lord. On them shall be no fear nor shall they grieve. > 2: 272- 274

For those who fear a decline in their wealth, the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) assured us that, "Charity does not decrease wealth." Thus, any money we give away in charity- seeking God's good pleasure- will be blessed and will come back to us in ways we may not perceive.

Charity weighs heavily on the scales of final justice. One *hadith* says: "Protect yourself from the fire of Hell, if only by half a date." Anything, if given in a spirit of self-sacrifice and good will, counts.

A *hadith qudsi*; related from his Lord, glorified and exalted be He:

"Spend (in charity), O child of Adam, and I shall spend on you."

Selfless good deeds- Do they exist?

The following is an article I wrote, after being inspired by the religion of Islam:

Psychologists have determined that only two main factors motivate people into action. They are: either, a promise of some reward or a positive, desirable outcome or else the fear of some loss or a negative or undesirable outcome. Behavioral scientists have found that people will generally act for one or both of these reasons, and virtually no other. Consider everything you have done today. Was it out of one or both of these motivating factors?

But then again you have instances where people seem to do things which do not fit either category. Why would a person give so much in charity, when he could use the money for himself? Why do people volunteer for causes they believe in, perhaps spending hours in the service of others, with seemingly no reward or payback in sight? Why would someone adopt a child with special needs when they could have a healthy one? Why would they even adopt at all, given the enormous responsibility, expense, and potential challenges involved, if it were not for that 'selfless' aspect of human beings that behavioral scientists cannot quite explain. It is enough to concede that not everyone will act in a predictable, self-serving way all the time.

Many people perform deeds which seem to defy the principles of 'logical behavior'. Are they to be labeled as fools, or people with hearts of gold who are internally motivated, out of the goodness and purity of their hearts, to do what they do? Selfless good deeds do, indeed, exist. And a person doesn't have to be 'crazy' or 'foolish' to perform them. They have simply managed to overcome their own egos, and their great love of Self. Perhaps they have come to realize that a life lived in the service of others can potentially benefit billions, whereas a life lived for one's self hardly benefits one.

In short, selfless good deeds do exist. We see this every day. And they are mostly done by altruists, good-doers, people who put others' needs above, or at least on par with, their own. These people have managed to overcome their own egos, their great attachment to Self and to this fleeting, temporary world, which is grossly inhibiting human potential and progress. If everyone lived according to the Golden Rule of Islam, which states that none truly believes unless they love for their brother or sister what they love for them self, then perhaps selfless good deeds would not seem so unusual or so few and far between.

And who is to say there is no reward or payback in sight? God Almighty has promised never to let the work of His righteous servants be lost. Believers know that all of their actions, all of the unselfish deeds they do, are being recorded and will eventually weigh heavily on the scales of final justice.

We Were Created...

to populate the land, creating ties of kinship.

We were created... to populate the land, creating ties of kinship.

The desire for children is implanted in most people's hearts. It is part of our unspoiled human nature, or *fitrah*, that as young ones, when we grow up, we wish to have children of our own. And so the world turns...

Muslims are encouraged to get married. And they are encouraged to marry as soon as they are physically and financially capable. They are also encouraged to have children. The Prophet (pbuh) has advised men to marry women who are "loving and fertile" (as far as they know), according to a *hadith*. The exact wording is: "Marry those who are loving and fertile, for I will be proud of your great numbers before the other nations."

In Islam, parents regard their children as a blessing, as a gift, and mainly as a trust. Children are referred to in the Qur'an as one of the two best "adornments" of life, the other being wealth. Ideally, believers should strive to instill the values of Islam in their children, as these are timeless values everyone recognizes as proper and correct. These include: being fair, decent, and honest, being hardworking, being punctual, praying on time, respecting one's elders- especially the parents-, treating youngsters with mercy and kindness, helping people in need, taking care of animals, taking care of the environment, using resources sparingly, giving in charity, visiting the sick, etc.

In Islam, when a couple gets married, they do not simply have children without a reason- just because everyone else does. No. Believers do not blindly follow the prevailing customs of the masses. Theirs is a different outlook- they have a set goal and purpose behind all of their actions. They hope to be blessed with believing children who will be a boon to them and to the society around them. This is a lofty goal, in fulfillment of a divine command, and parents are duly rewarded for all their sacrifices toward that end* (see footnote, next page). Children also benefit from this healthy parental mindset, as they will be raised to feel loved and wanted. They will enjoy the benefit of being raised by responsible parents who truly care about them and realize what a blessing they are. They will be treated with dignity, love, and respect. Not least of all, they will be taught about their purpose in life from the start.

*(footnote: There is a beautiful *hadith* explaining the reward a mother is given every step of the way, from conception to weaning her child from the breast. The Prophet (pbuh) said: "When a woman conceives with child she will be as a warrior who fasts during the day and keeps vigil at night praying, and striving with his soul and his wealth in the way of God. Then, when she delivers, there will be for her such a great reward with God that she does not know how magnificent it is. Thereafter, when she suckles (the child), she will have as much reward as freeing a child from Ismail's descendants for every suckle. And, when she brings the suckling to an end, an angel beside her tells her to begin the action again for she has surely been forgiven.")

Marriages create extended families, and extended family members also have rights in Islam.

The following article describes the importance of keeping close family ties:

The guidance of Islam is comprehensive; it includes not only our relationship with our Lord, but also our relationships with one another. People are joined by ties of kinship. As Muslims, we also have a special bond- that of being brothers and sisters in faith. But blood relations have closer personal ties in the decree of God. Believers are ordered to maintain ties of kinship with all their blood relatives and not cut them off for any reason.

Any relationship in Islam should be a mutually selfless alliance, devoid of seeking personal benefits or gaining an advantage. Ideally, we are to love each other 'for God's sake'. When we love someone in this altruistic way we are supposed to tell the person. This increases the love and affection we have for one another. Muslims are to uphold all ties of kinship- and also to maintain the bonds of brotherhood and sisterhood- under any and all circumstances, even in the face of active antagonism from the other party.

Many Prophetic sayings, or *ahadith*, stress the importance of maintaining close family ties- either mentioning the merits of observing this divine command, or else warning of the dire consequences of neglecting it. For instance, in a particular *hadith* we learn that the womb (which is the symbol of familial ties, and stems from the root word for mercy in Arabic) was actually given a voice and complained to God about those who would come and sever its ties. God answered the womb thus: "Is it enough that whoever keeps you, I will keep him (in My Mercy) and whoever cuts you off, I will cut him off (from My Mercy)? That is for you." God actually made this promise to the womb itself!

In a similar vein, a *hadith* warns: "There is no sin for which God will hasten the punishment of one who commits it in this world- in addition to what awaits him in the hereafter- than oppressing others and breaking the ties of kinship."

A man said, "O Messenger of God tell me of a good deed that will grant me entrance to Paradise". The Prophet (pbuh) said: "Worship God, and do not associate anything with Him, establish regular prayer, pay *zakat* and uphold the ties of kinship."

Why is maintaining the bonds of kinship of such vital importance in Islam? For one, the prospect of being cut off from God's mercy is an excruciating possibility. Think of the implications. Merely failing to ask about some of your relatives- even though you keep excellent ties with the rest- can put you into this perilous category.

As for the more theoretical aspect: Some people tend to be very selective in their social dealings. They may only contact their relatives if they need something from them. But if there is no immediate gain or advantage in sight, they may not be motivated to go pick up the phone, send them a message, or go pay them a visit. In Islam we are exhorted to ignore the benefit factor. We are required to call/ contact/ ask about/ visit our kin before we may want or need anything from them- and for no other reason except that we are (or are supposed be) genuinely concerned about them. Perhaps this is one reason- to overcome the selfishness of our souls- that God has ordained we maintain close family ties and look after our kin, including the ones we may not otherwise be too concerned about. It could also explain why it is such a major sin to sever the bonds of kinship, whether it be an intentional act of cutting certain people off, or simply through negligence, by failing to ask about your relatives on a regular basis. Family members have rights upon us too, and Islam seeks to ensure that everyone gets their due. Islamic values are timeless values that make the world a better place.

We Were Created...

to become enlightened by seeking knowledge.

We were created..... to become enlightened by seeking knowledge.

A *hadith* tells us: "Seeking knowledge is compulsory on every male and female."

God orders believers to seek knowledge. Through knowledge our spirits are uplifted, and we come to know our true purpose in life. It is through knowledge that we come to know our Creator and what He wants from us. It is through knowledge that we can glean an understanding of the vast universe around us. There is no dichotomy in Islam between science and religion. As we gain knowledge and understanding of the physical world around us, this only increases our awe and faith in God. Every scientific discovery of the recent past has either corroborated what the Qur'an has already told us about science some millennium and a half ago, or at least has not contradicted it.

The first command sent down from the heavens to the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) in the Cave of Hira was the command to "read". It was not "pray", or "submit", or "bow down". It was "read". He (pbuh) was told to read, first. What does this signify, if not the importance of knowledge and learning in Islam? "O Lord, increase me in knowledge," is the cry of the righteous. And where is knowledge usually found? In books! Incidentally, it was through a book that I, personally, came to know about the truth of Islam. Like most of us, I had no clue. Then I read a book, written back in 1932, and became utterly convinced.

What kind of knowledge is to be sought? Seeking knowledge may be construed as worldly, secular knowledge or religious knowledge. Gaining any sort of useful, beneficial knowledge is commendable. The following *hadith* highlights the importance of religious knowledge, in particular:

"People with knowledge are to the other worshippers of God as the full moon is to the other celestial bodies. The learned ones are the heirs of the Prophets- they leave knowledge as their inheritance. The one who acquires knowledge amasses a great fortune."

(And we thought acquiring a fortune was in winning the state lottery!)

We are to seek out religious knowledge first and foremost, because this is what enlightens a human being, elevates the soul, and acquaints us with our Creator. Knowledge is compared to rain in Islam- it trickles down and brings the seed of faith to life. Without knowledge, one cannot possibly reach the great heights destined for him or her. God created us to worship Him, and Him alone. How can we fulfill even the most basic requirements of our religion or fulfill our duties and responsibilities toward our friends and family members, or live out our true purpose in life, unless we know what these are? Seeking knowledge is the only way to extricate people from the confines and shackles of ignorance which hold so many back from reaching their potential.

In order for a person to be successful on any level s/he must possess knowledge. Knowledge is what sets human beings apart from other forms of God's creation. The human mind is primed to need, and therefore to seek, knowledge. We must seek out the knowledge which will benefit us, in order to attain distinction both in this life and the next. It is utterly indefensible in this age of unprecedented technological advance for so many of us to be so clueless... We must learn (both meanings intended) to overcome our ignorance.

Knowledge brings safety come Judgment Day.

On the Judgment Day, the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said in a *hadith*: "No step will a man stir until he has answered questions on five aspects of his worldly existence: his life and how he spent it, his knowledge and what he made of it, his wealth- how he acquired it and spent it, and his body and how he utilized it."

One of these five key questions is the knowledge he had and what he made of it. We are urged to seek knowledge in Islam in order to save ourselves from punishment in the hereafter. We can not claim- as intelligent, accountable beings- that we just did not know about this or that. God will ask us about the knowledge we had- did we seek it out? And He will ask us what we did with it- did we put it into practice? Our knowledge, however vast and comprehensive, is useless unless it is acted upon. This goes without saying. Many are those who possess knowledge, knowing full well what is expected of them, but fail to implement what they know. We must apply the knowledge that we have in order for it to bring about any good. Otherwise it will only incriminate us.

The following *ahadith* serve as an incentive to seek useful knowledge:

"Whoever follows a path in the pursuit of knowledge, God will make a path to Paradise easy for him."

"He who goes forth for knowledge is in the way of God until he returns."

Here is some of what I learned about my Lord, through my knowledge of Islam:

God-Almighty has named Himself with ninety-nine names, each name representing a divine attribute. Some names denote qualities exclusive to Him, such as 'the Creator', 'the Originator', 'the Sublime', the Giver of death, the Giver of life, the All-Seeing, the All-Knowing, the All-Wise, the Compeller, and the Proud. And other names represent qualities that human beings can seek to emulate, such as forbearance, i.e., 'the Forbearing', generosity, i.e., "The Generous", patience, i.e., 'the Patient', mercy, i.e., 'the Merciful', and love, i.e., 'the Loving'. A believer should strive to possess these latter qualities, as they are divine attributes, worthy of emulation. Knowledge of God is what enlightens us and brings us closer to Him. As we learn more about His divine names and attributes, we come to appreciate the magnificence of our Lord and the great purpose for which we were created. Some of the many names and attributes of God are as follows:

The Most Merciful:

God has named Himself *Al-Rahman*, the Most Merciful. This word also stems from the same root as the word for womb, called *al-rahem*. He is the epitome of mercy, the absolute merciful, the most merciful of all those who show mercy. He has inscribed the words: "My mercy outweighs My anger" on His noble throne. He has commanded us to be merciful as well. A *hadith qudsi* says:

Related from his Lord, glorified and exalted be He,

"Be merciful to those on earth and the One in the heavens will have mercy upon you."

Knowing we have a merciful Lord is of great relief and comfort. He created us, fashioned us, nourishes us, and gives us everything we have. He cares about us and wants us to succeed like no one else does. He gives and gives and gives, and expects nothing in return, except obedience, which is His right.

Note on the right of God: On the authority of Mu'adh ibn Jabal, who related, The Prophet (pbuh) said: "Do you know what right God has upon His servants?" I said: "God and His Messenger know best." The Prophet (pbuh) said: "Verily the right of God over His servants is that they should worship Him, not associating anything with Him." The Prophet (pbuh) said: "Do you know what rights His servants have upon Him in case they do it (i. e. worship God without associating anything with Him)?" I replied: "God and His Messenger know best." Upon this, he (pbuh) said: "That He would not torment them (with the fire of Hell)."

He is more merciful to you than your own parents, more merciful to you than any human being on this earth. Out of His mercy He sends guidance through prophets and messengers to teach us how to live our lives. But there is one catch. In order to enjoy the full fruits of His mercy, you have to submit to His will. He is, to the believers only, especially kind and merciful.

The Wise:

Your Lord is *Al-Hakim*, the most Wise. Knowing your Lord is the Most Wise reassures a person that they are in good hands. God created you for a wise and lofty purpose. He has a plan for you that is continuously executed day and night. Nothing escapes His cognizance, and nothing happens without His will. You only get what has been written for you. Whatever has hit you was never going to miss you. Whatever has passed you by was not meant for you. So you can relax and trust that He will take care of things. His meticulous and wise planning may reveal itself from time to time. You can try to decipher the message when a particular hardship or calamity strikes. Knowing you are in the hands of the Most Wise gives you patience in dealing with the worst of ordeals- you can be sure it is part of a wise and prudent plan from a wise and prudent Planner.

The One Most Acquainted with all things:

Your Lord is *Al-Khabeer*, the One most intimately aware of things. Who knows you better than He? He created your very soul, fashioned you in your mother's womb, gave you the faculties of speech, sight, and hearing, and gave you a heart and an intellect. And only He knows exactly what is in it. He knows what you feel, what you want, what you need, and what you most yearn for. He knows your innermost thoughts, your dreams, and even your worst fears. When you pray to Him, or call out to Him in times of despair, He knows exactly what is going on without you having to explain. He knows and comprehends your situation better than you do. Call out to Him any time. He is the most intimately aware of everything.

The All-Knowing:

In close connection with His being the One Most Acquainted, God is furthermore the All-Knowing, *Al-Aleem*. God knows everything that was, everything that is, and everything that will be. In His infinite knowledge, a leaf does not fall except that He knows it. He knows what you are thinking before you say a word. He knew you before you were born, and knows where you will end up. No one can encompass aught of His knowledge, except if He wills. This is part of the famous "verse of the chair", verse 2: 255 of the Qur'an, the most quoted verse of the Qur'an, after the seven verses of the Opening chapter, or *Fatiha*, repeated by the faithful in every unit of prayer.

Verse of the Chair:

< God! None has the right to be worshipped but He, The Ever-Living, The One Who sustains all that exists. No slumber can seize Him, nor sleep. To Him belongs whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on earth. Who is he that can intercede with Him, except with His permission? He knows what happens to them (His creatures) in this world, and what will happen to them in the hereafter. And they will never encompass anything of His knowledge, except that which He wills. His chair extends over the heavens and the earth, and He feels no fatigue in guarding and preserving them. And He is the Most High, the Most Great. > 2: 255

This particular verse has many blessings associated with it. It should, ideally, be memorized in its original Arabic and recited by the faithful at least after every prayer and before going to bed at night (to keep Satan at a safe distance, as mentioned).

Because God knows everything, and we humans do not, it only makes sense that we give up the reins and relinquish all control to Him, and let His rules prevail. When your Maker tells you to "do this" or "stay away from that", as part of His divine revelation to the noble Messenger (pbuh), know that there is inherent wisdom in such commands. We should apply them unconditionally. Come Judgment Day, people will regret their every misdeed, and every opportunity they were given, but did not spend, in His obedience, worship, or praise. Praise be to God, Lord of the Worlds.

From the Qur'an, on the virtues of knowledge:

< God will exalt in degree those of you who believe and have been granted knowledge. And God is well-acquainted with all you do. > 58: 11

< It is only those who have knowledge among His servants that fear God... > 35: 28

< Is one who is obedient to God, worshipping devoutly during the hours of the night, prostrating himself or standing (in adoration), who takes heed of the Hereafter, and who places his hope in the Mercy of his Lord- (like one who does not)? Say: 'Are those equal, those who know and those who do not know?' It is those who are endowed with understanding that receive admonition. > 39: 9

< He it is Who sent among the unlettered ones a Messenger from among themselves, reciting to them His verses, purifying them, and teaching them the book and wisdom. And verily, they had been before in manifest error... That is the grace of God, which He bestows upon whom He wills, and God is the Owner of Mighty Grace. > 62: 2-4

Knowledge is granted to us by the grace of God. Therefore, we should all seek it.

From *hadith*, on the virtues of seeking knowledge in congregation:

"No people gather together in one of the houses of God, reciting the book of God, and studying it among themselves, except that tranquility descends upon them, mercy covers them, the angels surround them, and God makes mention of them among those who are in His presence."

From *hadith*, on the virtues of seeking knowledge by one's self:

"Welcome, O Seeker of knowledge! Truly the angels surround the seeker of knowledge with their wings, gathering round him (or her) in ranks, one above the other, until they reach the first heaven, out of love for (that) which he (or she) seeks."

We Were Created...

to depend on God.

We were created... to depend on God.

A believer is not alone in this universe. S/he has the most powerful help in the world- God's help. God is present, and has always been, but most of us have been out of touch with this reality. The One Who created us orders us to ask of Him.

Related from his Lord, glorified and exalted be He:

"O My servants, all of you are astray except for those whom I have guided, so seek guidance of Me and I shall guide you. O My servants, all of you are hungry except for those whom I have fed, so seek food of Me and I shall feed you. O My servants all of you are naked except for those whom I have clothed, so seek clothing of Me and I shall clothe you."

The One Who created us did not forsake us, nor leave us to fend for ourselves. He directs us call upon Him, and implore Him for our needs. Call upon your Lord and He responds. God is near to you, not far away; He is nearer than your jugular vein. We may have mistakenly thought that God was some distant God, uninvolved with His creation, or perhaps non-existent... We may have mistakenly thought that we somehow provide for ourselves. The breadwinner of the family procures its basic needs, right? No, actually, God does. When we need anything, we ask of Him, when we want anything, we ask of Him. He is our real Provider. Ask of Him, and He responds. Another *hadith qudsi* states,

Related from his Lord, glorified and exalted be He:

"The Lord descends every night to the lowest heaven when one-third of the night remains and says: 'Who will call upon Me, that I may answer Him? Who will ask of Me, that I may give him? Who will seek My forgiveness, that I may forgive him?'"

Believers constantly beseech their Lord for their every need. At this special time, deep into the night, when everyone else is asleep, believers are summoned to invoke their Lord (although this can be done at any other time as well).

It has been related that a certain class of people, numbering in the hundreds of thousands, will actually make it to Heaven without any reckoning or judgment- they will be spared the horrors of the Day which will last some fifty thousand years. The sun will be right above our heads, only a mile away, and people will sweat profusely, according to the severity of their deeds. Some will sweat until the ankles, some to the knees, some to the waist, some to the shoulders, etc. It will be a horrible, agonizing reality. Just waiting for reckoning to start will take an extraordinarily long time, and people will be unable to bear it.

Sweltering in the intense heat, immersed in their own sweat and grief, they will be terribly frightened of what is still to come. The horrors of that Promised Day have been recorded for all to hear about. The only thing that will save you on that Day is faith and good deeds.

Who is that special class of people who will be spared the agony of that grueling Day? It is those who used to rely on their Lord- proper and due reliance.

Note on the meaning of *tawwakul*, or reliance on God: Intertwined throughout the religion of Islam is the concept of *tawakkul*. Believers accept God as their "Wakeel", or Disposer of affairs. They constantly turn to Him, beseech Him, and solicit His divine aid. Whenever a person sets out on a journey, leaves the house, or goes anywhere at all, s/he invokes his/ her Lord by saying: "In the name of God, I place my trust and reliance on God, there is no might or power except with God." We have henceforth entrusted our affairs to God. We can now rest assured; He is our ultimate Provider and Protector.

The rest of the above-mentioned *hadith qudsi* in its entirety:

< "O My servants, you sin by night and by day, and I forgive all sins, so seek forgiveness of Me and I shall forgive you. O My servants, you will not attain harming Me so as to harm Me, and will not attain benefiting Me so as to benefit Me. O My servants, were the first of you and the last of you, the human of you and the *jinn* of you to be as pious as the most pious heart of any one man of you, that would not increase My kingdom in anything. O My servants, were the first of you and the last of you, the human of you and the *jinn* of you to be as wicked as the most wicked heart of any one man of you, that would not decrease My kingdom in anything. O My servants, were the first of you and the last of you, the human of you and the *jinn* of you to rise up in one place and make a request of Me, and were I to give everyone what he requested, that would not decrease what I have, any more that a needle decreases the sea if put into it. O My servants, it is but your deeds that I reckon up for you and then recompense you for, so let him who finds good, praise God, and let him who finds other than that, blame no one but himself." >

A *hadith* on the merits of relying on God:

"If you had all relied on God as you should rely on Him, then He would have provided for you as He provides for the birds, who wake up hungry in the morning and return with full stomachs at dusk."

This *hadith* confirms it. If you put your full trust in God, your real Provider, He will not let you down.

From the Qur'an:

< If God helps you, none can overcome you; and if He forsakes you, who is there after Him that can help you? And in God (Alone) let believers put their trust. > 3: 160

We Were Created...

*to promote peace by enjoining
goodness and forbidding evil.*

We were created... to promote peace by enjoining goodness and forbidding evil.

True believers are people of conscience. They are not passive onlookers, watching the world crumble before their very eyes. They have a crucial role to play- in the rectification of their society- by enjoining what is good and forbidding what is evil, and bringing people back to the true way of life. If it is not kept in check, any society will start to erode, and stray from the pristine and correct way of life intended for it by God, the Almighty. People will inevitably deviate from the moral guidelines laid out for them by religion. When this happens, and even before it happens, it becomes the duty of every person of conscience, every committed believer, to step up, speak out, and remind people of their purpose in life. It is interesting to note that the word for human being in the Arabic language is *insan*, which stems from the root word 'to forget'. People tend to forget (which implies that they already know). They simply need to be reminded.

From the Qur'an, referring to the excellence of the nation (*Ummah*) of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh):

< You are the best nation to be raised up from mankind. You enjoin what is right (Islamic monotheism and all good deeds leading to the pleasure of God), and forbid what is evil (polytheism, false beliefs, and all deeds that lead to the wrath of God), and you believe in God. > 3: 110

If someone sees an evil action committed in front of them, they are not to react passively, and walk on by, as if they had not seen it. The following *hadith* expounds:

"Whoever among you sees an evil deed, let him change it with his hand. If he is unable to do so, then let him change it with his tongue. If he is unable to do so, then (let him acknowledge the evil) with his heart, and that is the weakest level of faith."

Believers are not apathetic onlookers. They do not bear witness to senseless acts of cruelty or oppression without trying to change the situation if they can, either by their hand or by their tongue. They do not sit back and let lawlessness proliferate in the society around them. They are active, even proactive, members of their community and in the fight against injustice. Some *ahadith* in this regard:

A man asked the Messenger of God, "What is the most virtuous struggle"? (see note below on *jihad*) The Prophet said, "A word of truth in front of a tyrannical ruler."

Anas ibn Malik reported: The Messenger of God, peace and blessings be upon him, said, "Help your brother, whether he is an oppressor or is oppressed." It was said, "O Messenger of God, we can help the oppressed one, but how do we help an oppressor?" The Prophet said, "By restraining him or preventing him from committing injustice, for that is how you support him."

According to this *hadith*, Muslims are not supposed to witness acts of aggression or injustice without taking a stand. When such an incident occurs, it becomes a Muslim's duty to intervene. And what if they do not...?

"When the people see an oppressor but they do not try to stop him, soon God will cause all of them to suffer punishment because of him."

There is always a consequence for not doing what is expected of us in Islam.

Note on *jihad*, or struggle, as a term in Islam: This term has acquired a negative connotation among non-Muslims, mostly because it is taken out of context by people who do not understand its true meaning or what it entails. *Jihad* comes from the root (*ja ha da*) which means to exert oneself. Muslims are called upon to exert themselves in the struggle against forces of evil, whether within themselves, (called inner *jihad*, or greater *jihad*), or in the wider community (which is referred to as the lesser *jihad*). Any step a Muslim takes to purify him/ her self, or community at large, from the filth of sin, corruption and disobedience to God could be considered a personal *jihad*. *Jihad*, in the context of open warfare can also be waged, but has strict regulations regarding it. It is only to be declared by the ruling authority, not by individual Muslims. Muslims are never to instigate the fighting, so the call to *jihad* is to be employed almost exclusively in self-defense. Muslims are ordered to stop the aggression when the other party does the same. Reaching a peaceful solution is always more desirable than resorting to war. But if it cannot be avoided, the option of *jihad* is there- if only to restore peace and order.

An interesting story about *jihad*:

There is a third type of *jihad*, called *jihad el fath* (opening Islamic borders). This was employed by Muslims early in Islamic history, in order to spread the glorious teachings of Islam to neighboring lands, ideally in a peaceful and tolerant, not exploitative, manner. A representative was chosen to go to a new land where Islam was to be established. He would offer the inhabitants of that land three options:

1. Either to accept Islam (based on a detailed explanation of what Islam entails)
2. Refuse to accept Islam, but agree to pay a small tax called a *jizya*, which offered protection against any external threat. The people could then retain their own beliefs, as long as they agree to co-exist peacefully with Muslims in newly established Muslim lands.
3. Go to war, if they refuse the above two options.

In one instance, it so happened that a representative to one of these lands failed to inform its people of the first two options, going straight in with force. The victims of the onslaught sent someone to complain to the ruling Caliph about what happened. The just Caliph ruled that the people of that land be given back their land, and offered an apology. Amends were made to the people to compensate for their losses. The victims were then presented with the three options above. Which do you think they chose? A great multitude opted to accept Islam, after seeing living proof of the fairness and egalitarianism of its teachings!

We Were Created...

to strive for excellence.

We were created..... to strive for excellence.

Believers are not to settle for second best. They are constantly striving and struggling to be the best they can be. After all, how can they win the 'race' spoken of in the Qur'an if they are all slackers? We were created to worship God, furthermore so *< that He may test you, which of you is best in deed. > 67: 2* Therefore, we must strive for excellence in all our endeavors. There is a *hadith* which says when you do anything at all, do it to the best of your ability. If you are driving, for instance, you should pay attention to the road, and not preoccupy yourself with anything else, such as a cell phone device. If you are praying, you should pay attention to the prayer being said, and not let your mind wander, causing you to lose concentration and miss out on the full reward. Prayer done hastily or without due attentiveness may not be accepted or rewarded at all. One should try to relax, stay focused, and concentrate on the task at hand, giving due attention to detail, however menial a task one is performing. We should try to perfect our actions, particularly our acts of worship, with firm knowledge and conviction that our Lord is watching us all the while. Once, the angel Gabriel came and sat down next to the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), putting his hands on the Prophet's thighs, the latter not knowing who he was. It was related by Omar ibn el-Khattab (raa)...

"One day while we were sitting with the Messenger of God (pbuh) there appeared before us a man whose clothes were exceedingly white and whose hair was exceedingly black; no signs of journeying were to be seen on him and none of us knew him. He walked up and sat down by the Prophet (pbuh). Resting his knees against his and placing the palms of his hands on his thighs, he said: O Mohammad, tell me about 'Islam'. The Messenger of God (pbuh) said: Islam is to testify that there is no deity but God and Mohammad is the Messenger of God, to perform the prayers, to pay the *zakat*, to fast in Ramadan and to make the pilgrimage to the House (i.e., the *Kaaba*) if you are able to do so. He said: You have spoken rightly, and we were amazed at him for asking him and saying that he had spoken rightly. He said: Then tell me about *iman* (faith). He said: It is to believe in God, His angels, His books, His messengers, and the Last Day, and to believe in divine destiny, both the good and evil thereof. He said: You have spoken rightly. He said: Then tell me about *ihsan* (perfection in worship). He said: It is to worship God as though you see Him, and while you see Him not yet truly He sees you... Then he took off and I stayed for a time. Then the Prophet (pbuh) said: "O Omar, do you know who the questioner was?" I said: "God and His Messenger know best." He said: "It was Gabriel, who came to teach you your religion."

This lengthy *hadith* brings to light the importance of perfecting one's acts of worship, endeavoring to make them acceptable to the Almighty. Reaching a higher and higher level of *ihsan* is the unspoken goal of every dutiful, pious Muslim. Muslims should also try to perfect their manners in their dealings with others, knowing that God is watching all the while. The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) once said, as mentioned, "I have not come except to perfect good manners." He was the pinnacle of every good, virtuous quality there is. Believers should try to follow in the footsteps of this excellent role model for humanity, seeking to emulate his noble, refined character. Who can compare with his compassion, his generosity, his patience, his tolerance, his abstemiousness, his satisfaction with little, his honesty, his integrity, his humbleness, his steadfastness, his intrepidity, his genuine goodness... just to name a few? People have strayed far from the values he strove to inculcate in his followers, and in humanity at large. I wish to see humanity flourish once more, under his guidance- the guidance of Islam. Adhering to Islam is the only way forward. Only Islam can bring about goodness and success, both here and in Heaven. One's piety in this life leads one straight to Paradise in the next, and is a boon to him or her self and to everyone else. The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) advised that when wishing for Paradise, wish for the highest level therein, called *Firdous el Aala*. Why settle for less, when you can attain the very best?

We Were Created...

make the world a better place.

We were created to... make the world a better place.

Another song that was popular when I was in the deep throes of my depressive state was the hit by late singer/ songwriter Michael Jackson, Heal the world. What a noble calling it is, joining forces to help rid the world of its woes. God knows we need His peacemakers, now more than ever.

Pious, practicing believers in Islam are those peacemakers who make the world a better place. They follow their instinct, do what is right, and live by the rules we are all supposed to follow. Back in my college days, when I used to ponder incessantly over the meaning of life, I would come up with sayings, or quotes, that I believed expressed eternal truths. Of these random quotes, one that I still remember is this:

"Truly great people are those who come and go, leaving the world a better place."

This quote of mine which at the time, I assumed, may have applied to anyone but me, has only been reinforced and confirmed by my strong religious convictions. Any one, I later discovered, who adopts Islam as their way of life invariably makes the world a better place. Truly great people are those who bow down to their Lord in humble submissiveness, leaving their pride and their hesitation behind. Truly great people are those who live a life pleasing to their Creator. Truly great people bring joy, not misery, to those around them. Truly great people do come, and go, leaving the world a better place.

Another quote of mine that has stuck with me through the years is: "If we only spoke words springing from the heart, then by speaking less, we say much more."

We Were Created...

respond to the call.

We were created to... respond to the call

God, out of His mercy, wisdom, and grace, sent His Prophets and Messengers to warn us of impending doom, in this life before the next. If we do not comply with the rules and accept guidance. Those who respond to the call are guaranteed success, here and hereafter. Truly great people are also those who heed the call of guidance when it comes.

< Whenever there comes to you guidance from Me, and whoever follows My Guidance, there shall be no fear on them, nor shall they grieve. > 2: 38

Truly great people listen to the call of their conscience, calling them to do what is right. They admit to clear and undeniable facts. They do not argue, or seek to refute the irrefutable. Man is characterized, or rather criticized, in the noble Qur'an as being, of all things, most contentious. Man is forever offering his or her opinion on this and that, conjecturing about ultimate truths, seeking to convince people that his/ her ideas or beliefs are the correct ones. What if this person speaks out of sheer ignorance, has not been truly guided, and is merely a mouthpiece for Satan, the accursed?

Truly great people are not defensive, haughty, or defiant when presented with the truth, but rather are submissive. They readily acknowledge the right of God upon themselves, which is to worship Him. Any pre-conceived notions they may have are cast aside, as they concede to what is manifest, close their case, and find nothing to say but, "We hear, and we obey." These are the ones destined for an abode of delight. These are the truly guided, the truly blessed ones.

< We have indeed sent down manifest signs (proofs, evidences). And God guides whom He wills to a Straight Path. > 24: 46

< O People! Respond to God's caller (the Prophet Muhammad) and believe in Him. He will forgive you of your sins, and will save you from a painful torment. And whosoever does not respond to God's caller, he cannot escape on the earth, and there will be no helper (supporter, protector) for him besides God. Those are in manifest error. > 46: 31, 32

< And if My servants ask you about Me, surely I am near. I answer the prayer of he who calls on Me, so let them respond to My call and believe in Me, that they may be rightly guided. >

We Were Created...

to find our way home.

We were created to.... find our way home.

In a previous book, I wrote about what Islam had to do with the classic film, the Wizard of Oz. I suggested that the Scarecrow, the Tin Man, and the Cowardly Lion were symbolic of the self-impose shackles of ignorance, apathy/ disconnectedness, and fear which hold people back from reaching their full potential. While I cannot repeat what I have already said, I can add this:

Towards the end of the film, when Dorothy's hopes have been dashed as she finds out her Wizard is a sham, she starts to despair. Suddenly, out of nowhere, the Good Witch of the North appears and tells her about the ruby slippers. She is told to click her heels together three times, as she had the power (to reach home) all along.

"There's no place like home" she is told to repeat, as she is swept away and magically granted her wish to be brought back home to her family, safe and sound, at long last. In reality, we all have the power to come back home, and we can do this with or without the help of a pair of ruby slippers.



APPENDIX

Here and Now!



Appendix

Here and now

Here and now:

One of the most intriguing things about Islam, which inspires believers to be sure, is the fact that God's help and reward are not far away, and are within reach in this very life. We find promises, for instance, that for certain categories of people, if they do certain things, or abide by certain rules, the reward is incumbent on them in this life, before the next. Knowing about these commendable acts of worship, and what the rewards are, will make one eager to comply. From the Qur'an and *sunnah (ahadith)*:

< Whoever works righteousness- whether male of female- and is a true believer, verily to him (or her) we will give a good life in this world, and We shall reward such according to the best of their deeds. > 16: 97

This fortunate soul may have to face trial and adversity first, but an eventual pleasant existence is promised to such a one, here before the hereafter.

< Those who believe and do righteous good deeds, and believe in that which is sent down to Muhammad- for it is the truth from their Lord- He will expiate from them their sins, and will make good their state. > 47: 2

Again, such a person will find him/ her self in a good state, and be granted forgiveness for any previously committed sins. While they will be subject to trials and adversity, they have their faith and their Lord to rely on, making it that much easier.

< And whosoever fears God and keeps his duty to Him, He will find him a way out (from every difficulty). And He will grant him provision from where he never expected. And whosoever puts His trust in God, then He will suffice him. > 65: 2-3

Be conscious of and dutiful to God. In return, He will fend for you, remove obstacles, and give you more and more of His blessed treasures.

From *hadith*: The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said, "Whoever would like to have his provision increased or his lifespan extended, let him uphold the ties of kinship."

Who would not want more of God's goodies and an extension on life? There is a simple, mutually beneficial way to achieve these things. Go call your Aunt Martha today, or better yet, go visit her in person.

“Whoever relieves his brother of a hardship from the hardships of this world, God shall relieve him of a hardship from the hardships of the Day of Judgment. He who finds relief for a hard-pressed person, God will make things easy for him in this world and the next. And whoever conceals (the faults of) a Muslim, God will conceal him in this world and the next. God is forever aiding a servant so long as he is in the aid of his brother.”

Who wouldn't want things to be made easy for him, have his faults covered up, and be helped and supported throughout life- divinely supported, that is. These are easily attainable. Just be there for your brother/ sister in need. A friend in need is a friend, indeed.

A beautiful *hadith*:

"My servant draws not near to Me with anything more beloved to Me than the religious duties I have enjoined upon him, and My servant continues to draw near to Me with supererogatory works until I love him. When I love Him, I am his sense of hearing with which he hears, his sense of sight with which he sees, his hand with which he strikes, and his foot with which he walks. Were he to ask (something) of Me, I would surely give it to him, and were he to ask Me for refuge, I would surely grant it to him."

Draw nearer to God, and see what bounties lay in store for you.

"If God wants to do good for somebody, He makes him comprehend the religion (Islam).“

Attain the satisfaction of your Lord, and you may receive this very special gift.

From a *hadith*, as previously mentioned:

"Whoever is mainly concerned about the hereafter, God will make him feel independent of others and will make him focused and content, and his worldly affairs will fall into place. But whoever is mainly concerned with this world, God will make him feel in constant need of others and will make him distracted and unfocused, and he will get nothing out of this world except what is decreed for him."

Who wouldn't pay out of their own pocket to feel independent of others, focused and content, and have their affairs just fall into place? Well, in Islam, it is free.

Appendix

Did you know...?

Did you know...?

Did you know... that the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was considered to be the most influential man in history? This is according to a book by Michael Hart, called *The 100: A Ranking of the Most Influential Persons in History*. I couldn't agree more.

Did you know... that the elderly will not enter Paradise???... But do not misunderstand- it is because they will enter it in the prime of their youth!

Did you know... that the Prophet Moses (raa) is the Prophet most frequently mentioned in the Qur'an? His mention is made over 135 times.

Did you know... that the second coming of Christ (raa) is a reality? Islam confirms it, too.

Did you know... that there are angels positioned on your right and left shoulders- recording angels- who write down your every deed?

Did you know... a person is rewarded by God for the mere intention to do a good deed, even if they are unable to carry it out?

Did you know... the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said that, towards the end of time, time will feel like it is passing more quickly? No wonder time seems to be zipping by. "The Hour will not begin until time passes quickly, so a year will be like a month, and a month will be like a week, and a week will be like a day, and a day will be like an hour, and an hour will be like the burning of a braid of palm leaves."

Did you know... a woman was condemned to Hell for mistreating a cat, neither feeding it, nor letting it loose to find food, until it perished?

Did you know... that the lightest punishment of the people of Hell-fire will be that a person will be made to stand on hot coals, and the heat from these coals will be sufficient enough to cause the brains to boil? This is the punishment that will be meted out to Abu Talib the uncle of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), who, at his nephew's vehement behest, refused to testify to the truth, while stubbornly clinging to the faith of his forefathers. Perhaps what is more astounding, however, is that although he will be receiving the least punishment, he will feel as though he is receiving the most severe. May God protect us all... Amen.

Did you know... the first to be martyred for her belief in Islam was a woman? Her name was Sumaya, the mother of Ammar bin Yasir. One of the fiercest enemies of Islam, Abu Jahl (meaning father of ignorance, an apt title) stabbed her repeatedly in her private parts until she bled to death. Her only crime was her belief in God.

Did you know... that early Muslims were severely persecuted for their faith? Some were forced to flee to present-day Ethiopia. They found safe haven with an honorable king there named Negus, who upon being invited to Islam, recognized the truth and accepted it.

Did you know... Islam was never spread by the sword, as some say. Islam stems from peace, and literally means peaceful submission to one's Creator. How can peace be spread through violence? Moreover, God will never accept the *shahada*, or testimony of faith, from anyone unless it is said with presence of mind and sincerity of the heart. Can you gain access to a person's heart and force them to be sincere? Any violence perpetrated by Muslims is done in clear contradiction of their faith- unless it is an act of self-defense.

Did you know... that the moon was once split into two halves, and then rejoined?

Did you know... at least four little babes were made to talk in their infancy? The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) related to us their miraculous stories.

Did you know... that the story of Jonah in the belly of the whale- and the story of Noah's Ark- can be found in the Qur'an?

Did you know... that once, the Prophet's wives scrambled to see whose arms were the longest, after hearing the Prophet (pbuh) say that the one with the longest arms would be the first to join him (pbuh) in Paradise. Upon closer inspection, they came to learn the phrase 'longest arms' actually meant the one who was the most charitable to the poor. At this, they began to chuckle.

Did you know... the miraculous well of *zamzam* found in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, has been quenching the thirst of hot, worn out pilgrims for thousands of years, and has never run dry?

Did you know... believers will be identified come the Day of Judgment by the traces of *wudu*, or ablution, on their bodies? The parts that were washed will shine brightly.

Did you know... that the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) once effectively answered a question by asking another question? The question was: 'When will the Hour (i.e., Day of Resurrection) come to pass?' to which he (pbuh) replied: "What have you done in preparation for it?" Knowing its exact timing is not nearly as important as preparing for it.

Did you know... that you existed before you existed? God once gathered all human beings- Adam and all of his offspring- and we were all made to testify to the existence and oneness of God. This is so we cannot come on the Day of Judgment and claim we did not know. (Your own evidence will incriminate you!):

< And mention when your Lord took from the children of Adam- from their loins- their descendents and made them testify of themselves [saying to them]: Am I not your Lord? They said: Yes, we have testified. [This] – lest you should say on the Day of Resurrection: Indeed, we were of this unaware. > 7: 172

Did you know.... that the human heart actually has cognitive functions, independent of the brain? With this important discovery, came the relatively new field of neurocardiology. Only now, some 1500 years after its revelation, can we properly understand and marvel at verses of the Qur'an such as: *< they have hearts which comprehend not. > 7: 179*

Did you know... that nothing in this world is made easy, unless God makes it so? You could not even take a breath of air or a sip of water without His aid and facilitation. When asking for ease at difficult times, we are told to supplicate, "O God, nothing is made easy, except what You make easy. Make this difficulty of mine (and mention whatever difficulty you are facing), by Your Will, easy."

Did you know.... that disbelievers will be resurrected blind on the Day of Judgment? When he asks why he was raised up blind, he will be told, *< Like this: Our signs came to you, but you disregarded them, and so this Day, you will be neglected. > 20: 124-125*

Appendix

The Real Thing

The Real Thing:

What is stinginess?

The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) taught us what real stinginess is. Real stinginess is to not respond with "may peace be upon him", or an equally honorable epithet upon hearing, or mentioning, his (pbuh) blessed name.

Stinginess is also to withhold knowledge, which is a most valuable commodity in Islam, and not share it with others. This is gleaned from the statement of the Prophet (pbuh): "Knowledge that is not spoken of, is like a treasure that is not spent in the way of God."

What is a tragedy?

The Prophet (pbuh) taught us what a real tragedy is. A real tragedy is anything that strikes at or endangers your religious commitment. Any other untoward occurrence, as long as it does not jeopardize your religious commitment, is only a minor setback in comparison. A believer should repeatedly invoke God to keep his/ her spiritual affairs safe and in order. Any upset could spell disaster. The following *hadith* illustrates:

"Two hungry wolves left alone among sheep will not cause more harm to them than a person's craving after wealth and status will cause to his religion."

Excess love of *dunya*, that insidious disease of the heart, rips and tears at a person's religious commitment, reducing it to shreds. Now, *that* is a real disaster.

What is strength?

The Prophet (pbuh) taught us what real strength is. Real strength does not lay in one's ability to conquer the enemy in the battlefield, lift the most weights, or knock down the most people in a boxing ring...

Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) once inquired of his companions, "Do you know who the strong person is?" His companions guessed and said "the one who can defeat someone else in a wrestling contest?" The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said, "No. But the strong person is the one who controls himself in a fit of rage."

Real strength lay in the ability to restrain one's anger and contain it, not take it out on others.

What is bankruptcy?

The Prophet (pbuh) taught us what real bankruptcy is. And it is not what you might think. Bankruptcy is coming on the Day of Judgment with the pillars of Islam intact, and other good deeds to boot, but something went wrong...:

The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) asked a group of his companions, “Do you know who the bankrupt person is?”

They said, “A bankrupt person amongst us is the one who has neither money nor property.”

The Prophet (pbuh) said, “The bankrupt person of my nation is he who would come on the Day of Resurrection with prayer and fasting and giving great amounts in charity. And at the same time, he would come having abused this one, and slandered that one, and consumed the wealth of the other unlawfully, and shed the blood of yet others and having beaten others. Then any person whom he has wronged will be given from his good deeds on that Day. And if his good deeds are exhausted until he clears the account concerning all of the people he has oppressed, the sins of those people whom he has wronged will be thrown unto his account and after that, he will be thrown into the fire of Hell.”

Come Judgment Day, your real assets are your storage of good deeds.

What is blindness? What is deafness?

The Prophet (pbuh) taught us what real blindness is. Real blindness is blindness of the heart, not the eyes. It is refusal to admit to plain and obvious facts. It seriously debilitates, even kills, and can consign its victims to the worst possible fate. Real deafness is when your ears are blocked, not from hearing sounds, but from hearing the truth.

From the Qur'an, on those who are destined for Hell:

< They have hearts wherewith they understand not, and they have eyes wherewith they see not, and they have ears wherewith they hear not. They are like cattle, nay even more astray: Those! They are the heedless ones. > 7: 179

< And if you call them to guidance, they hear not and you will see them looking at you, yet they see not. > 7: 198

What is wealth? What is poverty?

The Prophet (pbuh) taught us what real wealth and poverty are. Real wealth is the wealth of the soul- it is how good you feel on the inside, notwithstanding your external conditions. It is manifested in the quality of your day-to-day life. How rich are you? How rich do you feel? That is how rich you are.

If this is the correct standard to measure wealth, then the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) must be placed on top of that list- on the Forbes list that never was, of the 500 wealthiest-feeling people who ever lived (although he died without a penny to his name, never ate to his fill, and disseminated all the riches that came his way to those even more in need). Through all this austerity, he (pbuh) once remarked: "If the kings knew how happy we as Muslims were, they would have fought us for it."

Real poverty, conversely, is destitution of the soul. It is feeling weighed down, uninspired, and miserable. The soul feels empty and devoid of any purpose or hope. This condition has dire consequences and has only one known cure: submitting in truth to one's Creator.

What is real life and death?

The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) taught us what real life and death are. He said, "The difference between those who remember their Lord and those who do not is like the difference between the living and the dead."

What is the heart?

Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) taught us about the heart, aside from being an organ that pumps blood through the body. He (pbuh) said: "it is a morsel of flesh that if it is sound, the whole body is sound and if it is corrupted the whole body is corrupted. Indeed, it is the heart."

May God Almighty, Creator, Sustainer, and Cherisher of the whole universe, purify our hearts, cure our blindness, restore our hearing, eradicate our poverty, and make it easy for us to see the glorious truth. Amen

Appendix

From Darkness into the Light, a personal take

From darkness into the light: A personal account on life before and after embracing Islam.

Can there be any comparison between the life of a person groping in darkness, unable to see, unable to feel, unable to enjoy even a moment's calm, walking like a zombie through a senseless jungle, not knowing who put us here or why, wasting away one's days in idle pursuits which give no pleasure or peace, wishing the agony would subside, if only for a while...? Is there any comparison between this kind of person, and a person who has found their way, who stands firm in their faith- a person who comprehends their purpose in life, and goes about fulfilling it? Certainly, there is no comparison.

< Is then one who walks headlong, with his face groveling, better guided or one who walks evenly on a Straight Way? > 67: 22

Before Islam, I had no direction, no hope, no real reason to live. There was no light coming through the endless tunnel of despair which my life had become. Once a vivacious, carefree child, full of life and joy, I had become someone unrecognizable, even to myself. Needless to say, I did not know what was wrong with me, or what to do about it...so I mostly suffered in silence. I would schedule meetings with local social workers, life coaches, clinical psychologists and psychiatrists, people who were supposed to make you feel better. But this was to no avail. They just could not penetrate the dark veneer of guilt, shame, and mental anguish that had enveloped my entire being.

They would prescribe medications, recommend various therapies, and try to talk me through my misery, but at the end of the day, nothing got better. Then at age 19, I discovered Islam. And it could not have come any sooner. It was the panacea I had been waiting for. Instead of spiraling further out of control, the curve finally started heading in the opposite direction- toward recovery, at last! I had identified the crux of the problem, all glory be to God, and it was that my poor little heart had been devoid of faith all those long, painful years. Faith is what could have saved me. Faith could have saved me from all the ignominy, from all the self-inflicted torture, and from the evil designs of others. People around me, at the time, would say and do things that would push me right over the edge. However, I had no recourse, or way to fend off the devastating blows. So I would only sink further into depression, anxiety, and self-loathing. But after faith- i.e., the ultimate truth- had become clear and apparent to me- I now possessed the weapons I needed to fight back, if only to protect myself on an emotional front. That auspicious day, when I finally recognized Islam as the very truth, my life would take a 180 degree turn for the better. On that day I readily acknowledged, to myself anyway, that I had known nothing up until that point. And so began the process of re-learning, learning about life through the lens of Islam. What a challenge, yet what a relief it was, to finally see things in their true light.

I learned what kind of behaviors were appropriate and inappropriate- and this was according to our Maker, not according to us, as fallible human beings. I learned where my priorities should and should not lie. I realized that I should be more concerned with spiritual affairs than with the material.

I learned that things were not what they seemed to be, on the surface. We always assumed that the rich and famous- the glamorous, the upper classes, the elite few- were those who 'had made it'. Now, however, I began to weigh things on a whole different scale. I learned to value and respect people for who they were, for their piety and genuine goodness, and not according to the false material standards we have come to adopt. I learned all about happiness and where it stems from. It stems from the heart- from a pure, sincere heart that is deeply rooted in faith, devoted to its Lord.

I learned to approach sickness, hardship, and other setbacks, in a whole new light. Suddenly, they became golden opportunities to gain reward, raise my rank in Paradise, expiate my sins, and bring me closer to my Lord. Even my suffering was now a boon to me, to my surprise and delight... and I would no longer suffer in silence. That dark cloud that was looming above had been lifted at long last, and I began feeling a peace and comfort that once characterized my early years. I began calling upon the One Who hears all, and knows all. As I supplicated to the Almighty in the depths of the night, I knew that my heartfelt pleas were being heard. I knew that God hears, and that He responds. Life was getting better by the day, after having tasted the 'sweetness of faith.' I learned that when God is pleased with someone, He guides them to the truth of Islam. So even if everyone around me called me crazy, treated me with contempt and showed me no mercy, I knew I had found safe haven with my Lord. I knew that I had been honored and was loved by the most Merciful of all, God-Almighty. And what, in the grand scheme of things, could be better than that?

< God has promised the believing men and believing women gardens beneath which rivers flow, wherein they abide eternally, and pleasant dwellings in gardens of perpetual residence; but approval from God is greater. It is that which is the great attainment. > 9: 72



CONCLUSION



Conclusion

I finally found out!

Coming of age in the 80's in the US, I often wondered what all the hype around that song A Brand New Day, by Luther Vandross was about. Why was everyone getting so excited and worked up? This question would loom in my head for ages. Upon accepting Islam, I finally found out. That day, I actually found a reason to rejoice- after years of being on the verge of suicide. It was indeed the coming of a brand new day- one that I never, ever expected to happen and have never, ever regretted since- and it is freedom- from the shackles of servitude to fashion, technology, and the mighty dollar, to the freedom of servitude to God. I finally found my reason for being, the purpose of my existence. I discovered **WHY I WAS CREATED**, after all those long, lonely years! Every day I thank Him in the Heavens for the gift of Islam. You, too, might want to try bowing down to your Lord, and becoming a humble servant of His. It is the only type of slavery where you actually *gain* your freedom when you submit.

< And what is the matter with you that you believe not in God! While the Messenger invites you to believe in your Lord... It is He Who sends down manifest signs to His servant that He may bring you out from darkness into light. And verily, God is to you full of kindness, Most Merciful. > 57: 9, 10



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Index of Arabic terms used in this book:

- Abd:** Servant (of God)
- Adhan:** The call to prayer
- Adhkar:** (plural of dhikr) Words of praise and adoration of one's Lord
- Ahadith:** (plural of hadith, with the stress on the third syllable) Sayings authentically attributed to the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh)
- Al- Aleem:** The All-Knowing, a name of God
- Allah:** The One true Lord, Creator, and Sustainer of all that exists
- Al-Amana:** The trust, referring to the responsibility bestowed upon man at the beginning of time. Man accepted the bear the trust out of injustice and ignorance,
- Ansar:** Lit. the Helpers, referring to the native inhabitants of the city of Medina
- Asr:** The late afternoon prayer
- Audhu billahi min el-Shaytan el-rajeem:** I take refuge in God from Satan, the accursed
- Barzakh:** Barrier (between this world and the next)
- Batil:** Falsehood
- Bismillah:** In the name of God
- Deen:** Religion, way of life
- Dhalim:** Oppressor

Dhikr:	Remembrance, in praise and adoration of one's Lord
Dhulm:	Oppression
Dinar:	Currency used by Arabs
Dirham:	Currency used by Arabs
Du'a:	Supplication to God Almighty
Dunya:	This temporal, worldly life
Fajr:	The dawn prayer
Al-Falah:	True success; success in the spiritual sense
Fard:	Obligatory
Fasiq:	Liar, evil person
Al- Fatiha:	Lit. The Opening, the opening chapter of the noble Qur'an
Firdous Al- Aala:	The highest level in Paradise
Fitrah:	The natural disposition of human beings
Al-Ghaffar:	A name of God Almighty. denoting His vast capacity for forgiveness
Al-Ghafoor:	A name of God Almighty, denoting His vast capacity for forgiveness
Al-Ghafir:	A name of God Almighty, denoting His vast capacity for forgiveness
Ghaib:	A realm that is unseen, but known to exist, such as the realm of God, His angels, jinn, Heaven, Hell, etc.
Hadd:	Prescribed punishment for a certain crime under Islamic law
Hadith:	A saying authentically attributed to the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). A hadith must meet certain rigid criteria in order for it to be classified as authentic. The stress is on the second syllable, ha deeth'

Hajj:	Pilgrimage to Mecca, to be undertaken at least once in a lifetime
Al- Hakim:	The Wise, a name of God Almighty
Haqq:	Truth
Haram:	Forbidden, under Islamic law. The stress is on the second syllable ha ram'.
Hasad:	Envy
Hasana:	Reward for a praiseworthy deed (Paradise point)
Hasanat:	(plural of hasana)
Haya':	(with the stress on the second syllable) Modesty, shyness
Hijra:	Forced migration of Muslims from Mecca to Medina, in the thirteenth year of the Prophet's mission, a major event marking the start of the Muslim calendar. Presently, we are in the year 1442 A.H., i.e., After Hijra.
Ihsan:	Perfection in worship
Iman:	Faith
Insan:	Human being
Insha'Allah:	God-willing. A believer must say this when speaking of some future event; see verses 23, 24, chapter 18, of the noble Qur'an
Isha:	Late evening prayer
Jahiliya:	Ignorance, referring to the period before the advent of Islam, when widespread ignorance prevailed
Jihad:	Struggle, to exert effort in the way of God, to purify one's self
Jihad el fath:	A type of jihad (see above) used in the early days of Islam to secure new lands and spread Islamic teachings in a conciliatory, not exploitative, manner.

Jilbaab:	Long cloak worn by Arabs
Jinn:	A class of creatures who, like the angels, are unseen to us human beings
Jizya:	Tax imposed upon non-Muslims living in Muslim controlled territory
Kaaba:	The House of God, built by Abraham (raa), in the city of Mecca.
Al-Khabeer:	The One Most Acquainted with everything, a name of God Almighty
Kibr:	Pride/ arrogance
Kufr:	The denial of God, lit., to cover up the truth. It is one of the major sins in Islam
Maghrib:	The evening prayer
Makruh:	Lit. detested. An act which is hated or detested in Islam
Miswak:	Tooth stick, used for cleaning the teeth, taken from a certain kind of tree. It is a sunnah, or established tradition, that one use a miswak to clean one's teeth before prayer.
Muhajirin:	Lit., the Emigrants, referring to those who migrated from Mecca to Medina.
Munafiq:	Hypocrite; a non-believer who professes belief in Islam, but his/ her heart is averse to it.
Mustahab:	Lit., loved. A praiseworthy or commendable act in Islam
Muttaqeen:	Those who fear God
Nafs:	Soul, seat of inner desires
Niqab:	Face veil
Nisab:	The threshold, for determining who must pay zakat. If one possesses more than the nisab (85 grams of gold or its equivalent) then zakat is due upon one's wealth

Niyya:	Intention, one's inner motive for doing any action
Qadar:	Predestination
Qiyam el-layl:	Lit. night standing, and referring to prayers which are offered in the depth of the night
Qur'an:	The holy book revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) through the angel Gabriel
Al- Rahman:	The Most Merciful, a name of God
Rizq:	Provision, sustenance
Al-Shaytan:	Satan, the devil
Sabr:	Patience
Sadaqa:	A charitable, or praiseworthy deed; money given in charity, other than the obligatory alms
Salah:	Formal prayer, performed five times a day
Salatul Istikhara:	Special prayer for enlisting God's help in making a decision
Shirk:	To associate anyone or anything with the One true deity worthy of our worship
Siratul mustaqeem:	The Straight Path, In this life, it refers to a figurative path that Muslims are supposed to follow in order to attain God's good pleasure and be admitted to Paradise. In the hereafter, it is a literal path, or bridge, that one must cross in order to make it to Heaven. It crosses over Hell-fire. It is said to be as thin as a hair and as sharp as a sword. Some will cross it swiftly, in the blink of an eye, while others will not make it to the other side <i>wa audhu billah</i> (I take refuge in God)
Sunnah:	The practice and collected sayings of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) that together with the Qur'an form the basis of Islamic law

Taqwa:	Fear of God
Tawba:	Repentance
Tawakkul:	Reliance on God Almighty
Tezkiya:	Purification of the soul
Tawheed:	Monotheism, the concept of the Oneness of God
Ummah:	The nation of Muslims, i.e., all Muslims, the world over
Al-Wakeel:	Disposer of affairs, a name of God
Wali:	Guardian
Waswasa:	Satanic whispering
Wudu:	Ablution
Zakat:	Mandatory alms
Zuhd:	Asceticism, self-denial