

## AN ONGOING JOURNEY

WHAT JOYOUS twists and turns are planned for us, despite what we have planned for ourselves! Having lived a life immersed in physical sciences, I now find myself drawn by an irresistible appeal to the mystical shorelines of the hidden sea. I have often asked myself if it is that all knowledge is a pointer and all pointers lead to the same Sea. One answer came from Rumi, reminding me that our new turns are merely an old “edict that HE wrote in the eternal past” and knowledge is bewilderment found at the shorelines of the Sea:

*Thou hopest for a means of livelihood in tailoring, so that by working as a tailor thou mayst earn money all thy life; HE causes thy daily bread to come to thee in the goldsmith’s craft—a means of gain that was far from entering thy imagination.*

*Wherefore, then were thy hopes set on tailoring, when HE did not intend to let thy daily reach thee from that side?*

*‘Twas by reason of a marvelous providence in the knowledge of God—  
an edict that HE wrote in the eternal past;*

*And also to the end that thy thoughts should be bewildered, so that  
bewilderment should be thy whole occupation.<sup>1</sup>*

As a young man busy with trying to be the best tailor, my first spate of attempts to undertake an independent and meaningful study of the Quran started with a translation of it into English by Mohammad Marmaduke Pickthall. It was rather short-lived. I didn’t get far. I don’t think I moved past the second of 114 chapters. It didn’t help that the second chapter is the longest and amongst the densest in terms of the ideas, edicts, spiritual concepts, exhortations, and warnings—all packed into one. For someone used to digesting only thematically organized books, this was something entirely new. Neither did I know that the Quran cannot be rushed, as one tends

1 R. A. Nicholson, *The Mathnawi of Jalaluddin Rumi VI*, 4197

to do with other texts. In hindsight, I was turned away so that I could return with the meld of an eager mind and a needy heart. Split strands cannot pass through the eye of a needle. How can an ignoramus on a full stomach ever become a seeker? I was sent to reassess the meaning of worth and worthiness. I was no different from the men in the caravan who drew Joseph from the well and were quite pleased to sell him for a few paltry coins. Yes there is a sea of knowledge that is kept *hidden* from us but there is another sea lost to us by our own apathy and ambivalence. This is the sea of inner knowledge, visible only to a *seeking* inner eye.

Then came a time of spiritual *need*—the time when one is staring at a dead end. Oh, how dead ends make us earnest! When our approach to HIM is earnest, God covers the distance (of our own creation) between us and HIM. Doors start unlocking with keys coming in many forms. Muhammad Asad’s scholarly translation of the Quran with interpolations and footnotes, Thomas Cleary’s contemporary version and Pickthall’s classic—all seemed so complementary! Rumi’s *Mathnawi*, translated by R.A. Nicholson, bore a key and so did the many precious books from Martin Lings. Lex Hixon’s heart-felt *meditations* (as opposed to *translations*) in his *Heart of the Quran* were heart openers. Everywhere he turned, it seemed, he saw the Face of God.

I was now ready to tune out the noise and *listen*. *Listening* to the Arabic recitation of the Quran stills the heart so it can start *receiving*. With the Arabic recitation readily available in the form of an MP3, one can now read English translations while listening to the recitation. Try it, and give Mishary Rashed Al-Afasy’s recitation a chance. It took a little practice to synchronize the reading of the translation with the recitation in Arabic playing in the background. Soon enough Arabic classes found me. And then the moon of *Ramadan* showed up in the sky, heralding the month of spiritual sustenance {*rizq*}. By the end of *Ramadan* I was in a daze. The final key to the Quran is the Quran itself.

Looking back, I would say that I felt somewhat like a clump of raw ore that journeys on a miner’s conveyor belt as it is being stripped of

its gangue. It is washed, chipped, chopped, pulverized, rinsed, sifted, and pressure-rinsed, until just a tiny fraction remains; somewhat like how a pilgrim feels after being shorn of his hair at the conclusion of his journey, having had his pride crushed through the scrubbing by the multitudes. Downsizing—after riddance of the gangue of false-pride, dogma, ignorance, and denial—is both *refreshing and liberating!* I needed this *Ramadan*-cleansing and I will continue to need it every year.

My experience with the Quran suggests to me that one who studies the Quran is also necessarily studying himself. Without my knowing it, I was being led to look inside of me. The believer and the non-believer, the sincere and the hypocrite, Moses and Pharaoh, good and evil—they all lived within me! Any warning in the Quran, if it was for another, it was also for me. I realized how well the voice in the Quran knew me—better than I knew myself. Denial stood no chance. I understood what the Indian mystic Kabir meant when he said:

*I set out to look for evil in another, I found none  
I set my sight inwards and found no other worse than me.*

I am aware that I have only just begun. The road is long with no end in sight, but the sheer joy of the journey, offers the distance as a blessing! I pray that this journey be earnest until surrender becomes the sweetness of peace.

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا اتَّقُوا اللَّهَ حَقَّ تَقَاتِهِ وَلَا تَمُوتُنَّ إِلَّا وَأَنتُمْ مُسْلِمُونَ (١٠٢)

*O you who believe, be conscious of God, with the earnest consciousness due to HIM and do not die except as those who surrendered to HIM  
(Al Quran 3:102)*

I should make another note. The Quran has taught me that the words “muslim” and “islam” are not proper nouns, though the grammar-checker will disagree. Islam is a word that simply means “submission,” and a “muslim” is one who “submits” (to God). Yes, because the Quran categorically reminds us that judgment (of submission) is God’s affair and not man’s, a Muslim awaits judgment

before he can be called a muslim. Until then, we Muslims must remember that we may be perceived by others as ambassadors of the Quran. We must also remember that our poor ambassadorship may disinvite others to the Quran when it is offered by our One God as the key to *all seekers'* inner doors!

مَا كَانَ إِبْرَاهِيمُ يَهُودِيًّا وَلَا نَصْرَانِيًّا وَلَكِنْ كَانَ حَنِيفًا مُسْلِمًا وَمَا كَانَ مِنَ الْمُشْرِكِينَ (٦٧)

*Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian; he was true to his Creator, and submitted his will to HIM. He was not of those who seek another or others besides HIM. (Al Quran 3:67)*

The Quran is not a book that one reads to add to one's "have read" list. One either comes to the Quran for a reason, or one comes to the Quran because one has been *called* to it. I can point to two examples. I think that Umar-bin-Khattab was *called* to it and Muhammad Asad came to it through an earnest quest. I don't have a problem if you say that in the end everyone is called to it. But the point that I am trying to make is that anyone who comes to the Quran in *earnestness* will come to stay; he or she will find no exit, just more entry ways. But the bigger point I want to make is that the Quran, because of its unambiguous and immaculate form, is God's *approachable* gift of revelation to *us*. We *must* open our *hearts* to it so it may speak to us directly. Though a conscientious and unceasing scholarship will be required of us, we do not need to be formal scholars to approach it. Yes, the work of others is a valuable learning aid but we should not let scholarly work by others foreclose the joy of our own discovery of the Quran. A scholar must not be allowed to come between a man's heart and God. If we are *sincere* and *obedient* we need not feel alone or afraid because *God promises to be our Guide*. As Rumi says: *What you seek is seeking you!*<sup>2</sup> A journey and its experience await us all.

Spirituality is our inner dimension, one that gets suppressed and obscured by our passionate pursuit of worldly gains. The Quran restores this dimension and its voice within us—the voice of the

heart—the dimension of our inner intellect. We carry within us the seas of two intellects—the native intellect of the heart and the learned intellect of the mind. Both are needed to be whole. The Quran speaks to and engages *both intellects*—{*Tadabbur*} and {*Tafakkur*}. Let me explain what I mean with an example of a beautiful verse in which Noah instructs his fold:

وَقَالَ ارْكَبُوا فِيهَا بِسْمِ اللَّهِ مَجْرَاهَا وَمُرْسَاهَا إِنَّ رَبِّي لَغَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ (٤١)

*So he [Noah] said [unto his fold]: “Embark on this [ship]! In the name of God be its course and its anchor! Behold, my Sustainer is indeed forgiving, most merciful!” (Al Quran 11:41)*

There isn't much factual detail in this verse about the journey of Noah, and perhaps that is not its purpose. It does however remind the heart of its own journey through the tumultuous currents of life. Adrift, it too seeks a plank to remain afloat and find anchor. An awoken heart would find the tenor of the verse to be spiritually affective and intimately reassuring. The prayer of Noah is our prayer too and we need not be on a boat or a plane to invoke it:

وَقُلْ رَبِّ أَنْزِلْنِي مُنْزَلًا مُبَارَكًا وَأَنْتَ خَيْرُ الْمُنْزِلِينَ (٢٩)

*Say: “O my Sustainer! Deliver me to a blessed destination; YOU are the best to assign destinations.” (Al Quran 23:29)*

The heart seeks faith and the mind seeks authenticity. The Quran offers both on its own mystical terms. It invites us through discovery towards a new way of thinking and being. The Quran has commands, edicts, warnings, and hope but above all, it has a spirit. The spirit of the Quran is God HIMSELF, revealed through HIS attributes. One comes to the Quran seeking God, *and it is God who offers guidance*. The quest for God demands sincerity, earnestness, discipline and humility—both moral and physical. After all what light could come into a mind that is closed to the heart? What good could come to a seeker without the thirst? What gems could one unearth without digging deep? What new doors could open to a man sprawled in the intoxication of intellectual arrogance? God demands of Moses,

when He calls him in the valley of Tuwa, that Moses should remove his sandals and with them the muddy legacy of his worldly journey. When a prophet must remove his shoes, what layers of dust and rust, grime and dirt, dogma and falsehood, must we scrub and peel before we are to approach HIS speech in the Quran?

*By reason of irreverence the sun was eclipsed and insolence caused an Azazil<sup>3</sup> to be turned back from the door.<sup>4</sup>*

The Quran, having been conscientiously delivered by the Messenger, is now a revelation upon us. But unlike the Messenger, chosen because he was already worthy, our primary mission is to move towards worthiness. Though many if not most passages have a historical context, they do *not* thereby lose their relevance to us. We must find this connection. Furthermore, and importantly so, one cannot shrug off the references to non-believers and idolaters and the stern warnings associated with their behavior, as only applicable to others. The message is quite relevant to the recalcitrant non-believer and idolater *within us*. It is instructive here to note that the Arabic nouns “*kufr*” (non-belief) or “*shirk*” (believing in others than THE ONE) are not proper nouns. They are called verbal nouns because they define the action of the verb. We are all therefore in a state of belief or rejection by our aspirations and actions at any given point in time. There are no permanent labels on the spiritual path, only changing states. Within two consecutive verses of the Quran(5:30-31), the son of Adam who kills his brother, is amongst the {*khasireen*} for his moral bankruptcy through his act of murder and among the {*naadimeen*} for being remorseful. The change that we can bring is the reason for Guidance, and together they are proof of divine Mercy.

This book is an attempt to share a continuing personal journey into the Quran. Putting the finishing touches to my debut book, *A perspective on the Signs of Al Quran: through the prism of the heart*, I was moved to write:

Man outside of Faith is like Noah’s son, outside of the Ark, lost in

<sup>3</sup> The angelic name of Iblees, Shaytan (Satan), before his fall from grace.

<sup>4</sup> R. A. Nicholson, *The Mathnawi of Jalaluddin Rumi* 1,91

the turbulence of his own ego and the falsity of his self-sufficiency. God wants the returning soul to return to His Presence in the Abode of Peace<sup>5</sup> {*Dar es Salaam*}. The Ark is the Quran. Likewise, Pharaoh and Moses are not merely historical figures. They represent the active opposing forces within our souls. The soul unanchored in the troubled and turbid tide that is civilization, like Noah, needs faith and perseverance to reach the highlands of safety. Man cannot live outside of, or away from God because God is Truth.

فَذَلِكُمْ اللَّهُ رَبُّكُمُ الْحَقُّ فَمَاذَا بَعَدَ الْحَقِّ إِلَّا الضَّلَالُ فَأَنَّى تُصِرُّونَ (٣٢)

*So that is God for you: your Sustainer, the Truth. And what is there after Truth but error? Then why are you alienated? (Al Quran 10:32)*

This journey has its surprises. One big one is the surprise of companionship. The “journeyed” is the companion. I was drawn by my companion to its eighteenth chapter for the wonderful and deeply mystical story of Moses and Khidr. It has that and much much more! This book is an attempt to share a joy, steering clear of the trappings of religion. Our pulpits in synagogues, churches and mosques have become seats and symbols of temporal acclaim, far removed from the ideals they were meant to espouse. This is not new, but words of a contemporary religious man are poignant for the earnestness with which most dying men speak. The onetime archbishop of Milan, and a contender for the papacy, Carlo Maria Martini, in his last goodbye interview just before his death in 2012, lamented, that “our churches are big and empty and the church bureaucracy rises up; our rituals and our cassocks are pompous.”<sup>6</sup> Dogmas and the religious hierarchies that champion them assume that Faith is reachable only by a select few. It is clearly not. God *alone* is the unerring Judge of a soul’s spiritual earnestness.

It is not possible to adapt or summarize the Quran for the simple reason that its message grows on you. Any interpretation {*tafsir*} is merely a snapshot in time and a reflection of the interpreter’s evolving

5 Al Quran 6:127

6 *NY Times*, Sept 1st 2012

experience and spiritual intellect. My perspective, is therefore, merely one transitory perspective on the infinite. To unshackle us from worldly bondage and to tether us to the Divine, the Quran breaks us to remake us, empties us to fill us, humbles us to elevate us, and humanizes us to immortalize us.

I find it so propitious for the seeker that the Arabic Quran is as available to the scholar as it is to the layman; as available to the holy man as to the sinner. A mystical journey is on offer on eternally unchanged terms. This journey is to be experienced not analyzed; its purpose is to awaken the heart to the intimate bond that exists primordially between each soul and its Creator. In love there are no words or sounds worth heeding than those of the Beloved.

The Quran is much more than its manuscript. The *formless* Quran carries the scent of the Beloved. I would like to think that I understand what Rumi means when he challenges us with some impatience:

*Will you just admire the Jug or will you now drink the water?*

*Saeed Malik*

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