

The Prophet of Islam

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“Is she crying?” I said to myself. I looked harder...and yes, tears were definitely streaming down her cheeks. I don't think anyone else had noticed. She was sitting in the back corner of the classroom whose desks were arranged in a U-shape and I had a clear view of her from across the room. She was trying to hide her face but she was definitely wiping away her tears.

The twenty other students in the class were transfixed on the dynamic individual who was instructing us on the do's and don'ts of interfaith community organizing.

Although none of us had done anything wrong, in his enthusiasm the instructor was practically shouting at us, “The power analysis must be done so that you can determine who in your community has leverage over others in your community! Who is the mayor beholden to? What interests influence your city council members to vote one way over another? Who makes the school board act? Although the chief of police technically works for the Mayor, who has the de facto authority over him or her?”

Through all this, my new friend Mona, one of the two women who journeyed to Cleveland with me to this training, sat in the back corner of the room silently wiping tears from her face.

Mona was a Muslim woman originally from Egypt who was now living in Pittsburgh – a young mother of two and a practicing physician. Other than her face, she was covered from head to toe.

As I was sitting next to the door, as class ended I remained seated. I waited for her to come to me. Although she had managed to pull herself together, in the hallway, when I asked her how she was doing she again burst into tears. “How can you do this to one another? How can you treat people this way? It’s so sad. In my culture and as a Muslim, we treat all people as people first – with equal respect; from the richest to the poorest. But here, everyone is a pawn to be manipulated so that you can get what you want. It’s awful.” We sat down and talked.

“And I feel so sorry for the women in your culture.” Tears were flowing off and on. “As a Muslim, I cover myself. A man must love me for my mind – for me as a living, thinking person and that’s all. There is nothing else for him. But here, in this culture, all the women are forced to compete in their physical appearance and It makes me so very sad for them. Being covered makes me free.”

I spent a full week at this training with Mona and her Muslim friend. They were perhaps the holiest and most devout people I have ever met.

“Do you pray five times a day as you are required?” I asked.

“Much more than that,” they replied. Each morning they’d meet one another in the dorm lobby and pray that they, and all of us, might have safe passage to the breakfast dining hall. The dining hall was perhaps 50 feet from the dorm – connected by a paved walkway. Prayer – before venturing forth from the dorm to the dining hall; from the dining hall to the class, from the class back to the dorm, from the dorm to the convenience store, etc.

Mona and her friend were the first Muslim women I had ever met. And I had the most wonderful opportunity to spend an entire week with them. They prompted me to think more deeply about faith and culture and how they interact.

What is the source of patriarchy? What can result when people live for decades under authoritarian regimes – often puppet authoritarian regimes propped up by western democracies? Does Islam condone terrorism? Is this jihad? Islam means submission yet it also can mean peace. What does this mean? How did all this start?

Muhammad was born in Mecca, Saudi Arabia in the year 570 C.E. According to the Islamic calendar, many Muslims, and a Muslim is simply one who practices Islam, celebrate the birth of the prophet Muhammad (Eid Milad ul-Nabi) on Dec 1.

Both his parents had died by the time he was eight. He was raised by his uncle. As a young man, Muhammad became a shrewd businessman who worked for a wealthy widow named Khadijah who was 15 years his elder. In 595 CE at age 25, Muhammad and Khadijah were married.

In 610 CE, at age 40, during one of his many prayer vigils in a Meccan cave, in what is now called the Night of Power, the angel Gabriel appeared to Muhammad and told him to recite the words, “Proclaim! (And read aloud!) in the Name of the Lord and Cherisher, Who created – Created man, out of a mere clot of thickened blood (Sura 96: 1-2).” This was the first of many revelations that would continue for the remainder of his life.

Although he had doubts, he began to preach about that which was revealed to him. Khadijah encouraged him to preach and she is now considered to be the first convert to Islam. Although his preaching disrupted the stability of Meccan society, he was protected by his uncle who was the clan leader who also had significant business

connections. With his preaching, Muhammad began to attract many followers and societal divisions became increasingly prevalent.

In 619, after 24 years of marriage, Khadijah passed away. In a culture of polygamy, Muhammad took no other wife while married to Khadija. That same year, Muhammad's uncle and protectorate also passed away.

Then, on a night in 621, Muhammad experienced a miraculous Night Journey from the Sacred Mosque (Mecca) to the Farthest Mosque (Al Aqsa in Jerusalem) which at the time also included the area of the Temple Mount and today's Dome of the Rock, marking the spot where Abraham was to have attempted to sacrifice his son Isaac.

On that evening the angel Gabriel appeared to Muhammad and provided him with a mythical winged steed named Buraq. One source describes Buraq as follows:

Then [Gabriel] brought the Buraq, handsome-faced and bridled, a tall, white beast, bigger than the donkey but smaller than the mule. He could place his hooves at the farthest boundary of his gaze. He had long ears. Whenever he faced a mountain his hind legs would extend, and whenever he went downhill his front legs would extend. He had two wings on his thighs which lent strength to his legs.

He bucked when Muhammad came to mount him. Then Gabriel put his hand on his mane and said: "Are you not ashamed, O Buraq? By Allah, no-one has ridden you in all creation more dear to Allah than he is." Hearing this he was so ashamed that he sweated until he became soaked, and he stood still so that the Prophet mounted him. (Muhammad al-Alawi al-Maliki, *al-Anwar al Bahiyya min Isra wa l-Mi'raj Khayr al-Bariyyah*)

When at the Farthest Mosque in Jerusalem, Muhammad then ascended to heaven where he met Adam, Joseph, Moses, John the Baptist, Jesus, Abraham and other prophets. Muhammad then met God who instructed him as to how he and his followers should pray.

In 622, with his and his 200 followers' safety continually threatened in Mecca, they moved about 200 miles to the north to the city of Medina. This migration, called the hijra, marks the commencement of the Islamic calendar and the formation of the first Islamic community within a multi-religious Islamic state.

The Quran was completed shortly after Muhammad's death in 632. The Quran, along with the hadith, the accounts of the sayings and deeds of Muhammad, are Islam's holiest scriptures.

The Five Pillars of Islam are transmitted in the hadith.

- There is no god but God, and Muhammad is his prophet. (To become a Muslim, one need only to make this proclamation or confession of faith)
- Prayer (Salat): Pray/worship 5 times a day. (daybreak, noon, midafternoon, sunset, evening)
- Zakat: (literally means purification) almsgiving to the poor 2.5%. (Not charity but an obligation; wealth is a gift from God; paid during Ramadan; individual and communal charity left to the conscience of individuals)
- The fasting during Ramadan. (The ninth month of the of the Islamic lunar calendar in which the first revelation of the Quran came to Muhammad; fasting is not to punish but to focus attention towards religion & spiritual path & reflection)
- Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca. (At least once during one's lifetime.)

The Arabian region in which this first Islamic community took shape was characterized by warfare – warfare between rival clans; warfare brought about by migratory traders and roving marauders. Despite moving to Medina, the Muslim community there continually had to defend itself against the raiding Meccans as well as most traders who sided with the Meccans for economic reasons.

It was within this hostile environment from which the concept of jihad partly took shape. (Keep in mind that the Catholic Church has just war doctrines. Just war ethics were also written about in ancient Hindu scriptures of the Mahabharata. The Hebrew Bible also has numerous passages regarding how to carry out war and conquest.) Jihad literally means to strive or struggle but to think about it as nothing but “Holy War,” as portrayed in today’s soundbite media misses the point. Jihad permits the community to defend itself against those that threaten the community and yes, it is and has been misinterpreted/co-opted by many to justify their selfish aims. The Quran itself says, “But aggress not, God loves not the aggressors (Koran 2:190).” The larger, more transcendent struggle of jihad is internal. Jihad most directly alludes to the internal struggle the believer undertakes in order to live their life according to God’s will. Jihad is the internal struggle one undertakes to lead a virtuous life.

Upon returning home from battle Muhammad is purported to have said to his followers, “We return from the lesser jihad [“warfare”] to the greater jihad.” The greater jihad is internal. It is your own internal struggle against your own ego – your own selfishness and greed.

Although the greater jihad is internal, the lesser jihad of warfare was also undertaken in order for survival of the Islamic community. The final years of Muhammad’s life involved jihad on the battlefield. After defeating the Meccans in several battles, the Muslims under Muhammad took control of Mecca itself in 630. Muhammad then repulsed and

defeated other Arabian attackers and at the time of his death in 632, the entire Arabian peninsula was under Muslim control.

Islam: submission to the will of God. We might say submission to the Wheel of Life. Surrender to the will of God. We might say surrender to the Wheel of Life. Submission and surrender - we associate these with weakness and loss yet might the significance of these words to Islam be lost in translation?

Might we allow ourselves to re-conceptualize these? If the five stages of grief are denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance; which stage might offer us the greatest potential for peace and hope? Acceptance of God's will? Acceptance of the Wheel of Life? Might denial, anger, bargaining and depression represent our struggle for peace – that internal jihad, that greater jihad?

Submission and surrender: Can we view these terms as being active rather than passive? Might submission and surrender offer us creative possibilities of peace and hope within a framework of accepted circumstance?creative possibilities, creative opportunities that would pass us by, of which we'd be unaware, if we spent our time in confused denial, anger, bargaining and depression? (I know this is easier said than done.)

It has been years since I last spoke with my Muslim friends in Pittsburgh. We've all gone our separate ways. No doubt they're still praying for me and for all of us. That is nice to know. I believe her words and her tears have helped me be more aware of how we treat one another...and that we can do better. They were great ambassadors of their faith.

We're now making new friends however with those at the Roswell Community Masjid and Hamza Masjid. They too are great ambassadors of their faith. Maybe our continued work with one another, side by side, will offer us better understanding of one

another...and ourselves. And may it carry us into a future characterized not by the fear of violence, but by the promise of peace. Bismillah.... In the name of God.