

He watches us being destroyed by the absence of answers. How often have I not screamed at Allah: 'Do something!' (And as Nader, citing an anonymous source, tells me: 'I once heard a young man screaming at God for letting young children starve until he realized the starving children were God screaming at him for letting it happen.')

You have said: 'These are the days that we interspersed in between (the lives) of humankind that Allah may know those who [truly] believe and those among you who take witnesses [besides Him]' (Q. 3:140). OK, so now you have caught me out as 'one who takes witnesses besides you'. Oh no, I never bowed in front of an idol but there are many other gods – academic ladders, sex, power, prestige. 'So, here I am in front of you, I, a lousy hypocrite; so do something! Don't just leave me like this!' How often have I not stood in Medina at the grave of Muhammad, our shepherd and, like a lost sheep, begged to be found and returned to the flock?

Here follows my narration of one such encounter with Allah, who, at that time, appeared to be the Supremely Indifferent. It was in Mecca, the 'Mother of Cities' and the place that houses the Ka'bah, the small black cloth-covered cube-shaped construction referred to in the Qur'an as the 'first house determined for humankind' (Q. 3:96). For Muslims, a visit to Mecca is often the fulfilment of a lifelong dream. For some, as my story shows, the rewarding consequences and fulfilment coming from such a visit are often obscured and delayed.

#### Pepsi Shows the Way<sup>4</sup>

Mecca is referred to in the Qur'an as the *ma'ad*, the place of return (Q. 28:85). I had undertaken my first journey there some years ago and it was meant to be a journey 'home' before the ultimate journey 'home' (the Qur'an also describes all of life as part of this return to Allah, e.g., Q. 2:285; 3:38). For Muslims, a journey to Mecca is also an encounter with our roots; genealogical, religious and spiritual. It is in some ways a return to our genealogical roots because Adam and Eve (Peace be upon them) dwelt on the plains of the Mountain of 'Arafah, located there, after their departure from Paradise. It is a return to our religious roots because the Cave of Hira', where the Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him) encountered his first revelation, is the physical point of

the beginning of Islam as a religion. Lastly, it is a return to our spiritual roots, because the Ka'bah is the symbol of the presence of Allah, the House of Allah.

I approached Mecca with a mixture of feelings. Social conditioning: the many tales of experiences of 'hearts overflowing' told by returning pilgrims compelling me to just 'feel the greatness of the moment'; my secular disposition militating against this and beckoning me to be calm; the *nafs al-lawwamah* (berating self) mockingly chiding: 'Are you not ashamed of defiling the sacred soil of Mecca with your footprints?' Anyway, the journey had cost a good few hundred dollars and no taunts from a berating self were going to make me turn back.

One actually descends into the *haram* (sacred area) from the barren surrounding hills. And here the Ka'bah rose in its full majesty and glory. If only I, too, I thought, could descend into a seemingly barren self and cause a new being to come forth from a desolate soul. As Muhammad Iqbal, the Pakistani poet, said: 'Re-chisel then your ancient

frame and build up a new being – such being, being real being, or else your ego is a mere ring of smoke.' I hoped again for the first time in many years. If this land in its barrenness can become the spring where so much of humankind come to be nourished, then there must be hope.

A spring can yet flow from my existence of seeming nothingness and allow me to drink from it, so that I may become fully human and fully Muslim.

Clad in *ihram*, the simple two-piece cotton wrapping worn by all pilgrims, a money bag tied to my waist, my soul tied to the travellers' cheques and my physical body to my passport therein, I joined the multitude in approaching the *beit al-atiq* (ancient house). I became lost in the crowd. Is there then just no limit to the times that one can get lost? Getting lost to intellectual jargon, hobbies, organizations, causes, one's family, even to one's self? Will I ever be found and returned to 'its rightful owner'? Just this once – answer me! I won't ask any more questions after this! (Silence.)

Clinging to my booklet of *du'as* (prayers) I hurriedly completed the seven *tawafs* (circumambulations) around the Ka'bah, dutifully reciting the prescribed *du'a* for each particular round. However desperately needed, there was still no self-expression or erratic, even frenzied, crying from a mutilated self. Was my soul the victim of a conspiracy

between the 'ulama (clergy) and that book vendor who sold me this collection of prescribed litanies? Was the written word again going to be the separating wall between me and my Sustainer? Was the eternal alliance between religion and capitalism being replayed here, destroying the innocent and vulnerable?

I was desperate to get the preliminaries over before reaching the Hajar-al-Aswad (Black Stone), a stone reportedly from heaven and placed in that spot by Muhammad, and then ultimately the *multazam*, the door of the Ka'bah. Before I knew it, my first set of circumambulations around the Ka'bah was complete – the first part of an emptying process, a burning out while rotating around the candle before being consumed by the flame. (Was I also following the advice of Jalal al-Din Rumi, who said: 'die before you die', even as I was returning to my place of return, Mecca, before my ultimate return to my Lord?)

I elbowed my way to the Black Stone, fervently hoping that it might absorb my blackness (this was long before I wondered about the equation of sin with blackness), my burdensome title, power games, politico-religious position, eloquence and mess-ups. And then, still clinging to my book of litanies, money bag and passport, I reached the door. Somewhere, something arose from deep within me to destroy the conspiracy between the book vendor and the clergy which demanded that I respond from a prescribed text, and between the modernists and capitalists which demanded that I 'control my emotions'. Temporarily liberated, I lowered my small book and my orderly litanies gave way to uncontrolled weeping. And I remembered the anecdotes of returning South African pilgrims: 'Oh, you should have seen how the poor Pakistanis clung to the cloth of the Ka'bah; it was a sight for sore eyes.' I sobbed and only remember choking in a single expression: 'humiliated in Your presence'. For once, I was happy to be a 'poor Pakistani'.

There were others, too, who sobbed, but this was one time when a person wrapped up in him or herself didn't make a nasty little bundle; I was at His door. I wept bitterly, for my past, present and future. I wept for what I believed was an existence in mud and actually hoped that someone would come from inside the door. For a Muslim, there is no physical point, 'defiled' as he or she may be, beyond that door and there I had reached. The burden of that moment was shattering.

As if that wasn't enough . . . The silence that greeted me was deafening in its loudness. There was no glimmer of the emergence of a new being after being consumed by the flame. I sat there, drained and frightened, after what appeared to be hours of choking in 'humiliated in Your presence'. With my emptiness and nothingness complete, I stumbled away, repeating to myself: 'What did He have in mind to subject me to this apparently divine indifference?'

Much later, a body returned to complete the obligatory two *raka'at* (prayer units) at the Maqam al-Mahmud, the place where Abraham (Peace be upon him) is said to have prayed (Q. 2:125). A body went to drink from the sacred Zam Zam well, a body went to run between the hills of Saffa and Marwah in imitation of Hagar (Peace be upon her), the Black wife of Abraham, a body went to the hotel, a body returned to the *haram* five times a day for three days and a body got on to a bus which dropped it at the foot of the Mount of Light.

It was on this mountain that the Prophet Muhammad's anguished heart found solace through revelation, after being shattered. And who knows? I can always take a try. Anyway, I had nothing to lose. Being in the heart of summer, and midday at that, there were no other bodies or souls around. Seven-year-old Musa looked at me quizzically for a few seconds before venturing to ask: 'Are you sure you don't want to wait till it is cooler?' 'Musa! Unlike your namesake in the Qur'an, I am not looking for a match or wood or fire. There is no flock awaiting me. I am alone and this journey is a matter of life and death for me. I want the mountain to be abandoned when I make my discovery. Musa, surely you understand all about these mountain trips?' The poor kid looked at me as if I was potty. (Not that he was very far off the mark, mind you.) I paid him for my bottle of spring water and started the ascent to the Cave of Hirah.

The Saudi regime, being very 'puritanical' and vehemently opposed to any form of 'unorthodox' veneration, does not encourage visits to any of the traditional sacred places. There are, thus, no official signs showing the path to the Cave of Hirah. You've got to follow the people. And if there are none around? Follow the Pepsi cans! Thousands and thousands of them, all along the route right up to the mouth of the cave, a few even littering its interior. What a sad spectacle! Along comes this 'follower' of Muhammad, his soul tied to Cook's American

Dollar travellers' cheques, following a Pepsi-littered path and he says he is searching for Truth! Why don't you try another one, 'follower' of Muhammad?

Let me not be unfair to attempts by Muslims to outline the path for themselves. There were a few shoddily painted arrows pointing in the same direction as the Pepsi cans. Whatever little use these attempts to 'outline the path' may have been, was neutralized by the fact that there, in the same paint, in the same shoddy manner, were arrows pointing to exactly opposite directions! As if my agony at having to exorcize a thousand devils was not enough! As if having sheets of plastic ripped off the heads of our people at five o'clock on a cold winter morning in apartheid South Africa was not enough! As if having to mix sand with flour and feeding our children with it was not enough!<sup>15</sup> As if two billion people going to bed on the floor or straw or dust at night, on empty stomachs, was not enough! As if . . . And now, arrows pointing in opposite directions!

I continued following the Pepsi cans.

The path was steep and the journey agonizing. Along the way I noticed another guy with a Palestinian scarf next to him, fast asleep. He, too, I said to myself, is a searcher. Let him also be. ('Also be? And since when did it dawn upon you to be?') I eventually reached the cave, where I offered a lame two prayer units and studied the graffiti: the many 'Galeema and Fatima was here - 1967' and the numerous public declarations of love. I chuckled at the banality of it all and felt that perhaps there was nothing more to life than this.

So I have arrived and, well, if this is 'it' then so be it. Why not call it quits? The one side of the Mount of Light is rather steep and I looked down contemplating the time duration of my 'calling it quits'. In those few seconds my existence flashed in front of me. Just before doing what I wanted to do, I heard the voice of my fellow searcher, whom I thought I had long since left behind. '*Bhai jan! Ap ki; tasvir khenci?* Sirf *bis riyal hai?*' (My brother, can I take your photo? It will cost you only twenty riyals) – as he smilingly uncovered his Kodak Instamatic from the Palestinian scarf. He was in search of suckers.

I died my second death in as many days.

Some Sufis refer to 'the night of the spirit'. This was the culmination of my darkest night. I had been desperate to make sense of Islam

and my relationship with Allah and now, for the first time, everything seemed so perfectly pointless. Upon my return to South Africa a curious even if seemingly unremarkable thing happened. The extent of my spiritual crisis was so severe that I simply had to reach out to others, even if only to ensure my physical survival. I met on a regular basis with three other close friends, Adli, Shamil and Ebrahim, to discuss the question of our own spiritual emptiness and struggles to lead lives of submission to the will of Allah in a racially divided and economically exploited society. From that support and discussion group grew the Call of Islam, a movement that was to play a very significant role in ensuring that Muslims were an integral, even if often unwilling, part of the struggle for non-racialism and non-sexism in South Africa. For a number of years I found this movement and, more specifically, the founding group, deeply supportive in my wrestling with Allah and self. Through them I developed a new appreciation of the verse in the Qur'an: 'Those who struggle in Us [Our path], unto them We shall show them Our ways' (Q. 29:69).

And so it appears as if Allah does have ideas for us, but that He does not panic when we do . . . and that His ways are often so roundabout as to drive one around the bend . . . and sometimes nearly over the cliff.

#### BETWEEN ALLAH AND A NEUROTIC SELF

Like most writers and speakers, I usually discuss those issues wherein I am reasonably competent; in so doing, I do not run the risk of being hypocritical. For me, this means that I sincerely believe in the ideas that I espouse and that I am actually engaged in a serious attempt to live alongside them. This is perhaps why I tend to avoid what are commonly regarded as 'more spiritual matters' in my talks and writing. For someone who is also concerned about a comprehensive Islam this is not something that can be avoided indefinitely, however. Much of the Qur'an talks about the quest for the pleasure of Allah, the remembrance of Allah, the importance of the formal prayers (*salat*), self-purification, the journeying unto Allah, and a host of 'spiritual' matters which cannot be reduced to appendages of socio-religious activism.

Why, then, my reluctance to deal with these themes?