

Guidance in Boarding School

Allah guided me to Islam when I was 14 years old. My initial readiness to accept Islam and my reversion to *din al-fitrah* (the religion that conforms to human nature) at such an age seems to imply that I was all but a Muslim already. But if we were to examine it as a cause and effect relationship, we must first start with the conversion of my friend Nabil in the summer of 1992. Nabil was born in Africa to Isma'ili Shiite parents of Indian descent, but he spent his childhood in Canada. The only contact he had with anything even remotely Islamic was his infrequent visits to the Isma'ili *Jamaat Khana* with his parents. Essentially, he knew nothing about Islam. In the summer before he was to attend a Protestant boarding school in Massachusetts, Nabil visited India as a tourist with his cousins. The majority of the trip was spent in idle pursuits; however three days before he was scheduled to return to Canada, Nabil went to the market of Delhi to buy gifts for his family. While shopping, members of a *da'wah* (Islamic missionary) group from South Africa, who were in Delhi for a four-month stint, approached him and asked him his name. When he replied, "Nabil," an apparently Muslim name, one of the brothers replied with the Islamic greeting of *as-salamu 'alaikum* (peace be upon you). Nabil, though ignorant of even the correct response to such a greeting, was nonetheless intrigued by the genial group of men, and accepted an invitation to join them the next day at the Islamic *da'wah* center in Nizamuddin, a small city just outside Delhi. They told him to be there at 5:00. He learned from his cousins later that evening that this meant 5:00 a.m.

With the God-given ability to do anything commendable, Nabil made the hour-long journey to the center long before sunrise. He witnessed thousands of worshippers perform the dawn prayer in perfect unison — an astounding spectacle to him. Afterward, he listened to a motivational talk by the renowned Indian Sheikh, Molana 'Umar Palanpourri, which was translated by a member of the South African group that he had met the previous day. Based on a paradigm that was completely foreign to Nabil, the essence of the speech lay slightly beyond his grasp, but the boy listened patiently and attentively. Afterwards, he was invited downstairs to partake in breakfast with the foreign *da'wah* groups. By the Will of Allah, Nabil sat next to a group from Egypt. The head of the group, an elderly soft-spoken gentleman, glanced compassionately at the boy who was eating

anybody touched the strange sacred book that he kept in a mother-of-pearl jewelry box on top of his bureau.

One day Nabil, in a moment of spiritual zeal, burst into my room, where I was sitting with another student, and without establishing the customary rapport, blurted out, “I’m going to tell you guys something that if you say it, one day you will be happier than you can imagine, and you will wish that you had said it more than you did.”

Intrigued, we pressed Nabil to tell us, to which he replied, “*La ilaha illa Allah; Muhammadu rasulu Allah.*” We repeated the words after him and he corrected our pronunciation, promising to tell us the meaning later. Though the strange language meant nothing to me, I took it upon myself to write down the transliteration of the words. I read the sentence to myself repeatedly that week, and within a few days, I had memorized it. Allah was meanwhile opening my heart to its meaning without my knowledge.

Dave from Texas was a notoriously racist student. Every black student at St. Mark’s hated him. He had been beaten bloody earlier that year by the token Native American student because of his particularly skewed racial outlook on society, which had already landed him in the dean’s office three times within the first six months of school. When he first learned that Nabil was Muslim, Dave remarked in his affected southern twang, “Yea, well I saw that movie *Not Without My Daughter*, and ya’ll worship the devil as far as I see it.” Perhaps it was not a deep-rooted hatred in Dave that produced such comments, but rather his love of confrontation as a product of his own insecurities. Nabil sensed this, and bore Dave’s bigotry with patience and sympathy for the troubled boy. Eventually he managed to explain the true message of Islam to the Texan, and he accepted it at once. By the second half of freshman year, Dave was waking Nabil up daily to perform the dawn prayer.

In the meantime, Nabil was conducting intensive late-night Islamic talks with another young student named Hammer, who had recently become disenchanted with Christianity. On an average Saturday night, Nabil would answer Hammer’s questions and his objections until 2 a.m., after which he would come talk to me, either continuing with the religious discourse or delving into the worldly. He explained the meaning of the foreign words that I had previously memorized and used

this as a launching point to explain the greater purpose to human existence, namely the knowledge and worship of One God, as had been generally explained to him by the Egyptian Sheikh that previous summer.

I found the teachings logical; I knew God to be one already, and the role of Jesus (peace be upon him) as a prophet and not the son of God cleared my head of the problematic tenets of faith that I had encountered in Christianity. But to consider my eventual conversion to Islam a logical journey, particularly at the age of fourteen, is erroneous. In retrospect, I believe that due to my age, I was close enough to the natural predilection (*fitrah*) toward belief in One God with which we are all born. The memorization and repeated recitation of the Islamic credo, *La ilaha illa Allah; Muhammadu rasulu Allah* (There is none worthy of worship except Allah, and Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah), opened my heart to the reality of this natural predilection and facilitated my submission to what it required of me.

One late evening, after a particularly exhausting religious discourse, I abruptly interrupted my companion's thought and said, "Nabil, I'm ready."

"Ready for what?"

"I'm ready."

I looked at him in the eyes with the recalcitrant stoicism of a man who knows, with certainty, of the thunder that he is calling down upon himself with the choice he is about to make. Nabil narrowed his eyes, reading my resolution. He smiled and slapped my palm.

Nabil took Hammer and me to the mosque for the first time on a Thursday night in May of 1993. Referring to a visit to St. Mark's earlier that year by a Muslim man named Issa from Providence, Hammer confided in me on the way to Boston that night, "The moment it clicked for me was when Issa was speaking to us. He was saying, 'A car's purpose is to take its owner from place to place, and if it breaks down and isn't able to fulfill its purpose, the owner has no use for it. Likewise, if we don't fulfill the purpose for which the Creator and Owner of all created us, then He has no use for us.' I figured we owe it to Allah to find out what our purpose is, and then to do it, or else we're useless and ungrateful."

After the evening prayers and an informal talk to a medium-sized audience at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology mosque that night, the Sheikh of the mosque, Abdul Badia', explained to Hammer and me the basic pillars of Islamic belief, the pillars of worship, and a few the things we must not do. He spoke with a certainty and wisdom that I had never encountered in a religious figure before him, as if the unseen Truths were as manifest as those of the seen world. He asked us if we accepted these principles, to which we replied in the affirmative. We recited the *shahadah* before the Muslim audience, made *du'a'* (supplication) in a group, and then braced for the deluge of congratulatory hugs and handshakes from our new brothers in Islam. I later learned that Allah had guided over five thousand people to Islam at the hands of Sheikh Abdul Badia'.

Hammer and I returned to St. Mark's the next day as new people. There were only few weeks left in the school year before summer vacation, but we managed to establish the five daily prayers among the Muslim students. Another student, Marshall, began to join the prayers by his own impetus, and he would come back the next school year as an official Muslim. Nabil would take time daily to teach us verses of the Qur'an and the method of prayer, ritual ablution, and Islamic purification. The school year soon ended, and each student went home for the summer.

My parents at first dismissed my conversion as merely a passing phase, but with time they realized that I was committed to my new beliefs. Nevertheless, they never opposed my decision once, and through the years they have taken great pains to help me fulfill the obligations of my religion — buying me *halal* (Islamically slaughtered) meat, delaying dinner for prayer times, paying for my trips around the world to study Islam, even helping me to wake up for the pre-dawn meal during [Ramadan](#). Thank Allah for American relativist noncommittal liberalism! Marshall experienced a similar reaction from his parents, while Hammer bore through several years of hostility from his.

The next year, our small band of Muslims braved a series of trials. Reverend H. W., the school's official (female) minister, warned our parents of the evils of our conversion, and even lobbied the school's administration to have Nabil expelled from school. The next year she was fired for her Bible-thumping fundamentalism. Another Armenian Christian teacher derided our religious beliefs at every opportunity and openly voiced his animosity towards Islam and the Prophet

Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him). Allah, Who has promised the believers an egress from where they could never have imagined, disgraced him by exposing his molestation of a female student, for which he was fired that spring.

Our group has been through several ups and downs throughout the ten years in Islam.

Nevertheless, we have held together and, by the Mercy and Guidance of Allah, have maintained our religious observance. As I have experienced firsthand, Allah increases the faith of those who are steadfast and patient in the face of hardship. I pray that Allah uses my story to increase the faith of those who read it.

By Matthew C. Ingalls