

— I ALMOST —

Left Islam

HOW I RECLAIMED
MY FAITH



UMM ZAKIYYAH

I Almost Left Islam

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I Almost Left Islam: How I Reclaimed My Faith

By Umm Zakiyyah

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Glossary of Arabic Terms

adab: Islamic etiquette or manners

alhamdulillah: “All praise belongs to God”

Allah: the Arabic word for “God”

awliyaa’: believers whose *emaan* and *taqwaa* grant them the honor of Allah calling them His beloved “friends” (singular: *wali* or *walee*)

ayah: a part of Qur’an or sign from God

ayaat: plural of *ayah*

bid’ah: religious innovation

bi’idhnillaah: “with the help or permission of Allah”

da’wah: teaching about Islam; inviting others to Islam

deen: a person’s way of life rooted in beliefs about the ultimate purpose of life and the concepts of right and wrong

dhikr: remembrance of Allah, a prescribed in the Qur’an and Sunnah

du’aa: prayerful supplication or informal prayer

emaan: faith or authentic spiritual belief

fatwa: religious “ruling” by a scholar

fitnah: severe trial or temptation

ghusl: ritual bath

haraam: prohibited or forbidden; any act that has the possibility of punishment in the Hereafter

hijrah: migration from one place to another for the sake of one’s soul

ijmaa’: complete scholarly consensus in Islam dating back to the Companions of the Prophet (peace be upon him)

ikhtilaaf: scholarly disagreement

insha’Allah: “God-willing” or “if God wills”

Istikhaarah: supplication and voluntary prayer made when making a decision regarding something

kaafir: disbeliever

kuffaar: plural of *kaafir*

kufr: disbelief

Laa ilaaha illa Allah: the Muslim testimony of faith; “nothing has the right to be worshipped except God alone”

madhhab: official school of thought

mahram: close family member or relative

naseehah: sincere religious advice

niqaab: face veil

qadr: divine decree or predestination

riyaa: insincerity; showing off; doing anything to seek the admiration or approval of creation instead of Allah

sahneh: authentic (the highest form of authenticity for a hadith)

Salaah: obligatory prayer performed five times each day: *Fajr*, *Dhuhr*, *Asr*, *Maghrib*, and *Ishaa*

sallallaahu’alayhi wa sallam: “May peace and blessings be upon him”

Shaytaan: Satan or the Devil

shirk: assigning divine attributes to creation or creation's attributes to Allah; giving to creation any rights that are solely for Allah; worshipping anything or anyone along with or instead of Allah; paganism or idol worship

sihr: often translated as "black magic"; humans voluntarily working with jinn to bring benefit or harm to their own lives or that of others

tafseer: explanation of the meanings of Qur'an

tajweed: rules of reciting the Qur'an

taqleed: blind following

taqwaa: sincerely guarding oneself from the punishment of Allah

tasweer: images

tawakkul: complete trust in Allah

Tawheed: Oneness of Allah; Islamic monotheism

'ulamaa: scholars or people of knowledge

ummah: Muslim community

waswas: whisperings of *Shaytaan* that incite toxic self-doubt

wudhoo': ablution

zakaah: obligatory charity paid on one's wealth

zeenah: beautification or adornment

zina: fornication or adultery

*For those still holding on, even if only barely,
but don't want to let go.*

“Islam is submission, yes. But it is more than that. It is a relentless fight till death—against oneself—to save one’s soul.”
— from the journal of Umm Zakiyyah



“For some of us, the only way we’ll get our spiritual priorities straight is having our entire world collapse...until the only thing that allows us to stand is the bare minimum we need to survive—the pillars of life and faith. Then and only then will we truly understand Laa ilaaha illa Allah, and the necessity to leave everything else alone, except what contradicts this.”
—from the journal of Umm Zakiyyah

A Burdened Soul



This isn't a story I am proud of, and it's not one I ever planned on writing. It's not even one I planned on living. When I was younger, I imagined that leaving Islam was a logical process, one arrived at through careful analysis of Islamic beliefs and finding in them something inherently contradictory or something that one disagreed with. Thus, I never really comprehended it, and it consistently confounded me. How could a person go from believing in only God and worshipping Him alone to disbelieving in Him and worshipping creation instead of Him? It just didn't make any sense.

I remember being deeply intrigued by the story of a famous NFL player who had left Islam and converted to Christianity. I was never a football fan, but as a youth, I had been a fan of his, mainly because he was both a star player and a practicing Muslim. When I'd heard that he had converted to Christianity, I dismissed it as an absurd rumor, it was so unbelievable. The media was in the habit of taking sensational stories and making them front-page "news" with little to no regard for authenticity or credibility. I'd assumed this was what had happened with the football player. Or at least I was hoping so—because the alternative was too difficult to fathom.

In my young mind, it was impossible to go from being a "devout Muslim" to worshipping one of Allah's prophets and declaring this *shirk* as the only way to Heaven. Some months before, I had read a magazine feature about the NFL player in which he explained Islam to the readers and discussed the significance of the five daily prayers. I remember the piece really touching my heart. So it was difficult to reconcile this inspirational image with someone leaving Islam.

Months later, I was watching television and happened upon a Christian talk show in which the host said that today's guest would be the NFL player telling the story of why he'd left Islam. Naturally, this caught my attention, and I waited to see if the athlete would really be there. Eventually, he came on to the set, and the first thing I noticed about him was how visibly uncomfortable and fidgety he was. I watched as he kept glancing over his shoulder as if he expected someone to walk in and "catch him" there, though I'm sure he was fully aware that he was on national television.

When the host asked what inspired his decision to leave Islam for Christianity, the NFL player said, "When I was Muslim, I always felt guilty when I sinned. Now that I'm Christian, I don't feel guilty anymore because I know Jesus died for my sins."

I was only a teenager at the time, but I felt like it was the stupidest thing I'd ever heard. I nearly laughed out loud for how ridiculous this man's reasoning

was. *So you want to get drunk and sleep with multiple women without the guilty conscience?* I shook my head in humored disbelief.

But at least his decision made sense to me now. I had been waiting for some profound reflection on how he'd happened upon some groundbreaking "evidence" that God was now a man in flesh and part of a Trinity instead of the Creator who was completely separate from His creation and who shared no kinship to them. I couldn't imagine what that "evidence" would entail, but at the time, it was the only logical reason my mind could accept for leaving the worship of God alone.

However, after hearing the NFL player's explanation, I understood his soul's desperate longing to live life without the burden of regret, self-correction, or personal accountability for his wrongs. Nevertheless, though I myself still had a lot to learn about life, I knew that even many devout Christians would find the man's reasoning problematic. Till today, I find the reasoning problematic myself.

But the man's story no longer confounds me.

It terrifies me.

Because I know how close I myself came to allowing my own soul to become "unburdened" by giving up on myself and my Lord.

I still haven't found all the words to explain exactly what was happening to me during this time. But in this book, along with the video series *I Almost Gave Up*, I pinpoint ten spiritual struggles that I faced during that time, along with ten solutions that I implemented to weather the most tumultuous spiritual storm of my life.

2

Why Am I Muslim?



Our Agreement.

*The agreement was
I was to accept the blows
And accept them quietly.
I was to show hurt
To ensure my shame
And to deny hurt
To protect their name
If they lied
I was to believe them
If they slandered me
I was to repent
If there was pain
(And there always was)
I was to cry in silence
And smile in front of the world
If I needed help
Love
Compassion
Or relief
I was to confide in the ones who hurt me
Or risk
Suffering beyond belief.*

I wrote this poem while in a state of melancholy as I reflected on what I'd experienced in my life thus far as a result of taking to heart what I'd been taught about not having the right to exist. In my sincere ignorance and spiritual zeal, I had allowed myself to be mistreated and abused by those who claimed to love and care for me, and who claimed to have so much religious knowledge that I was obligated to do everything they said.

As I withstood the slander, emotional manipulation, and spiritual abuse, I was continuously reminded—often by the abusers themselves—of the rights these people had over me, as commanded by Allah Himself. Yet ironically, the

reason I was continuously slandered and abused was that I consistently made exceptions to fulfilling the demands and desires of these people **whenever I genuinely believed that doing so would displease Allah or harm my life and soul.**

On many occasions, I would try to explain myself to them and give detailed, heartfelt explanations (and apologies) so that they wouldn't be offended by my life choices. But it was to no avail. I would be consistently asked, "Who do you think you are?"

So Why Am I Muslim?

It makes no sense to question one's spiritual path based on mistreatment by those who claim the same path. However, due to the combination of my spiritual exhaustion and emotional trauma, I began to question why I was Muslim. I don't have a detailed analysis of why this question weighed so heavily on me for so long, but it did. As I grappled desperately for an answer, I felt the dark waters of disbelief pulling me in, and I had no idea if I could keep my head above the water.

How I Reclaimed My Faith

"The people will see a time of patience in which someone adhering to his religion will be as if he were grasping a hot coal."

—Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him
(Sunan al-Tirmidhī 2260, *saheeh* by Al-Albaani)



By Allah's mercy, this burden of grappling desperately for my faith was removed from my heart as my Lord reminded me Who He is and what it meant to be Muslim. *I am Muslim because I believe in Allah, my Creator, and because I know I have to meet Him,* my heart said.

During spiritual crisis, some people begin to doubt foundational principles like whether or not God exists, whether or not there is a Hereafter, and whether or not religion is in fact a farce, a tool invented by tyrannical humans to merely control the meek on earth. I was fortunate enough to never be burdened with the former two distresses, as even in my weakest moments, I knew I had a Creator and that I would meet Him in the Hereafter—even though I had a difficult time fighting the belief that I would end up in Hellfire no matter what I did.

However, there were moments that I began to question whether or not "religion" as it was popularly taught was in fact a human invention. Though religion was certainly not the only tool of control being utilized as a weapon of

harm on earth, after politics and nationalism, it was definitely one of the most popular.

During this period of confusion, I penned this reflection in my journal: *The more I live the more I see how some Muslims use Islam as a tool of control instead of a religion of guidance.*

For some Muslims, simply reminding themselves that Islam is not defined by the actions of Muslims is enough to quell this spiritual doubt. However, though reminding myself of this obvious fact certainly helped, it was not enough. As I continuously met Muslims who mistreated others, especially those in authority over others—whether parents, spouses, or religious leaders—while claiming God commanded blind allegiance to them, I found it more and more difficult to live in theory. I realized that for myself, logic alone was not going to get me through this trial.

Nevertheless, pinpointing the inherent contradictions in anti-religion thinking did help. During this time, Allah decreed that I met Muslim apostates, secular Muslims, and those who had given up on believing in God and religion altogether. Ironically, listening to their tirades helped me see how utterly ridiculous the anti-religion doctrine was.

Of all of the senseless arguments I came across during that time, the easiest to refute was that of the atheists. Logic alone blew their arguments out the water. Here are some journal entries (some of which are intentionally sarcastic) that I wrote about this experience of refuting atheism and anti-religion as reasonable life paths:

*Atheist Logic 101: If you don't believe in God, there are only two possibilities in life: If you are right and die an atheist, this life was all for nothing and you get absolutely nothing but a bed of dirt at the end. If you are wrong and die an atheist, this life was wasted and you get eternal Hellfire at the end. But for those who believe in God as He taught, there are only two possibilities: If we are right and die as believers, we fulfilled our purpose on earth and thus get eternal Paradise at the end. If we are wrong (as atheists claim), then we get absolutely nothing but a bed of dirt at the end—the *same* that atheists get in their BEST CASE scenario!*

...So based on human logic alone, which would you choose?

- 1. You get absolutely nothing, or you get eternal Hellfire (dying upon atheism)*
- 2. You get absolutely nothing, or you get eternal Paradise (dying upon belief)*

...I'm not a rocket scientist, but my human logic tells me, number 2 wins EVERY time!'



You chose to stand where you are. No one forced you.

You can talk about all the horrible things you witnessed or experienced from people of religion. But doing so requires choosing to ignore and discount all the beautiful things you witnessed or experienced from people of religion—and all the horrible things you do yourself (though of course, you conveniently don't include your faults and sins as stemming from non-religion).

So don't tell me why you believe secularism, atheism, or whatever other falsehood is superior to religion. Because from a worldly perspective, every lifestyle has more than one vantage point—including a multiplicity of both good and bad. And you merely chose the one that allows you to convince yourself that no credible good exists in anyone else's.

Thus, you are a narcissist more than anything. And you chose to be.



It's amazing to me how emboldened secularists and anti-religion people feel in tearing down God and religion in the name of bettering the world. They use the painful experiences of themselves and others to justify this position, yet they ignore the painful experiences of those who have been abused and oppressed by the very secular and anti-religious systems they say will better the world.



You don't believe in God because many people have done evil in His name? You won't accept Islam because many Muslims have done evil in its name? So help me understand how your belief system works: Truth is a contest of participation. Whatever concept has the most participation by "good people" is right and true. Whatever concept has the most participation by "bad people" is wrong and false. So, generations ago, when people of God behaved better, God existed. Now, when people of God behave poorly, God ceases to exist. And, generations ago, when Muslims did much good for the world, Islam was true. So now that Muslims aren't known for much good, Islam is suddenly false. (With the added caveat, of course, that your "truth contest" proves God never existed and Islam was never true, based on the current results of your "contest of participation.") ...Well, matters of truth and faith are not popularity contests. But you'll find that out soon enough—when you die and discover that, unfortunately, eternal suffering does not cease to exist just because it has the most participation by "bad people."



When you want something badly enough, God puts in front of you what reflects the deepest desires of your heart. If you want guidance, He will place before you righteous people and numerous means to attain spiritual tranquility and height. When you want sin and corruption, He will place before you misguided people and numerous means to attain the ugliness your broken soul makes you yearn for. If it is religion you resent, you will see an increasing number of “religious” people indulging in everything you loathe. And this will serve as proof that your turning away from God and religion was the right choice. Yet all you’re seeing before you is a mirror of your own heart.

Religion Is Not a Game

People shouldn’t play with religion. It’s not a game. Or perhaps I should say people shouldn’t play with the human soul. Because the souls of Allah’s servants are not our personal playgrounds.

I prefer the terminology *human soul* instead of *religion* in this context because the former lessens the possibility of some of the more narcissistic people claiming themselves to be guilt-free since they don’t ascribe to any “religion.” Like the professional football player thinking a simple change in religion could protect him from accountability for wronging his soul, the anti-religion crowd believes that a simple change in labeling their ideology can protect them from culpability for crimes committed in the name of “religion.” It is indeed confounding that humans actually imagine that abusing and harming others in the name of atheism, tolerance, or spreading “democracy” is any less evil than committing these same crimes in the name of “religion.”

That is why I prefer to discuss the human soul instead of “religion.” The truth is, however, that all humans have a religion. After all, a religion is merely a set of beliefs about one’s purpose in life, and it is the ideology that ultimately defines our concepts of right and wrong. The human’s “religion” does not always have a readily identifiable name or label—even to the one who ascribes to it—but it remains a religion nonetheless. In other words, a “religion” is a person’s set of ideas, beliefs, and corresponding behavior that determine the experience of his or her human soul.

Muslims often say, “Islam is a way of life.” And it is. But everyone’s religion is a way of life, whether the person is conscious of this reality or not. Or perhaps I should say everyone’s *deen* is a way of life—because that is what makes it a *deen*.

In the Qur’an, Allah commands the Prophet, peace be upon him (and by extension the believers) to say to the disbelievers, “For you is your *deen*, and for me is my *deen*” (*Al-Kaafiroon*, 109:6). Sometimes this Arabic term is translated

as “religion,” other times it is translated as “way.” Irrespective of how the term in translated, what is being conveyed here is that Allah has created every human being such that he or she naturally lives upon a *deen*, a way of life that directly affects the state of his or her human soul.

This is why I say that people shouldn’t play with religion—with the human soul. Whenever we play with this spiritual world, we are wedging ourselves between a person and his or her Lord.

What Helped Me Most

In the end, what helped me most in getting through this difficult period was reading and reflecting on the Words of Allah. Just reading how He described Himself reminded me that He is not merely “out there” somewhere with no meaningful connection to His creation. And while His name is certainly used as an excuse by corrupt people to do evil, my heart knew that there were specific things He had asked of me while I was on earth, irrespective of how others responded to His commands.

I could label the spiritual path He obligated for us as “religion” or I could label it as something else. Either way, I would be held accountable for living according to it.

But Allah had called it “Islam.” And that’s why I was Muslim.

Allah says what has been translated to mean:

“He is Allah, other than whom none has the right to be worshipped, Knower of the unseen and the witnessed. He is the Entirely Merciful, the Especially Merciful. He is Allah, other than whom there is no deity, the Sovereign, the Pure, the Perfection, the Bestower of Faith, the Overseer, the Exalted in Might, the Compeller, the Superior. Exalted is Allah above whatever they associate with Him.”

—*Al-Hashr* (59:22-24)

3

Stressed and Confused



“Most of us who have felt we could no longer be Muslim don’t share our pain or struggles with the world. Most just quietly retreat into the background of the mundane tasks of life, suffering in a quiet bitterness that wears at the spirit and soul.”

—from the journal of Umm Zakiyyah

When I came close to giving up on practicing Islam, my heart and mind were cluttered with things that were consistently causing me stress and spiritual confusion. Though I had reminded myself of who my Lord was, what my ultimate purpose in life was, and why I was Muslim; I still could not pull myself out of my stress and confusion.

All around me people were discussing religion like it was a topic for a debate, instead of a life path designed to purify our souls in preparation to meet our Creator. Amongst Muslims, men and women argued about which group or sect one should join or stay away from, and I found myself feeling more and more distant from my brothers and sisters in Islam. As I listened to their arguments, I was consistently reminded of this hadith narrated by the Companion Hudhayfah ibn al-Yaman, may Allah be pleased with him:

“People used to ask the Prophet (peace be upon him) about good things, but I used to ask him about bad things because I was afraid that they might overtake me. I said, ‘O Messenger of Allah, we were lost in ignorance (*jahiliyyah*) and evil, then Allah brought this good (i.e. Islam). Will some evil come after this good thing?’ He said, ‘Yes.’ I asked, ‘And will some good come after that evil?’ He said, ‘Yes, but it will be tainted with some evil.’ I asked, ‘How will it be tainted?’ He said, ‘There will be some people who will lead others on a path different from mine. You will see good and bad in them.’ I asked, ‘Will some evil come after that good?’ He said, ‘Some people will be standing and calling at the gates of Hell; whoever responds to their call, they will throw him into the Fire.’ I said, ‘O Messenger of Allah, describe them for us.’ He said, ‘They will be from our own people, and will speak our language.’ I asked, ‘What do you advise me to do if I should live to see that?’ He said, ‘Stick to the

main body (*jamaa'ah*) of the Muslims and their leader (imam).’ I asked, ‘What if there is no main body and no leader?’ He said, ‘Isolate yourself from all of these sects, even if you have to eat the roots of trees until death overcomes you while you are in that state’” (Sahih Muslim).

Whenever I would think of this hadith, it calmed my heart, as it was a reminder that I was doing the right thing by striving my level best to stay away from sectarianism. I knew it was impossible to get everything right, but I also knew that Islam was more about striving than actualizing. As I reflected on this ongoing spiritual struggle in life, I penned this entry in my journal:

In the end, Islam is about striving, not actualizing. We strive to follow the Qur'an and Sunnah...though we'll never "actualize" this goal perfectly. We strive against falling into sin, but we'll never avoid sin completely. But this is not a problem. This is the point.

Islam is about earning Allah's Mercy and Forgiveness, not about overcoming our humanity.

Those who suffer most from spiritual turmoil, in my view, are those who view human imperfections as problems, and the definition of practicing Islam as achieving perfection.

Naturally, this non-sectarian life path required constant *du'aa* and asking Allah's guidance. I had already gotten in the habit of praying *Istikhaarah* before making any decision, even if only to attend a certain Islamic class, to go to a certain event, or even to follow a particular scholarly point of view on a topic. And this proved to be very helpful when I was stressed and doubting myself.

Whenever I was in the company of others, I strove to focus all discussions of religion on the goal of clarifying truth and staying away from falsehood, irrespective of which sect, group, or personality spoke the truth or had fallen into falsehood. Though on the surface, this sounds like a pretty safe course of action, many Muslims found this line of reasoning misguided, as they insisted I had to commit to a particular group or single school of thought in order to worship Allah properly. However, I would calmly explain that my goal was simply to be Muslim as defined by Allah in the Qur'an and prophetic Sunnah so that I could enter Paradise after I died, *bi'idhnillaah*.

“You're living in a fantasy!” one woman said to me before declaring that I *had* to formally attach myself to a specific religious group or sect. “You can't be ‘just Muslim’!” I then asked her: “To you or Allah?” She had no response.

Conversations like these reminded me of why religious labels (other than *Muslim* and *believer*) scared me so much. This woman had associated Islam with manmade groups for so long that she'd forgotten that being Muslim was only about you and Allah. Yes, as I told her, I knew that *humans* would categorize me,

thus placing all sorts of labels next to my name. But I was concerned with only what was written next to my name in front of Allah.

In reflecting on how scary it was to fall into misguidance with respect to finding safety in religious labels, I penned this note to myself in my journal:

Dear soul, know this, and know it well. You are never safe. It doesn't matter what group you've attached to, what spiritual teacher praises you, or what praiseworthy label you've put on yourself. You have no guarantee of protection from misguidance or even disbelief.

In fact, we are most susceptible to these spiritual tragedies when we think we are safe from them. Remember, it was arrogance and self-satisfaction that destroyed Iblis, not attaching himself to the wrong group, teacher, or label.

But no one and nothing—and I mean absolutely no one and nothing—can do your soul-work on your behalf.

Have faith, yes, but do not become comfortable. Until your soul is seized and you have received the glad tidings that your Lord is pleased with you, you are never safe.

Despite my ostensible fortitude in living according to only what Allah required of me, I felt alienated from most Muslims around me. Periodically, I would try to go to Islamic classes to lift my *emaan*, but most times I returned home feeling worse than when I'd left. Most classes spent more time talking about issues of *ikhtilaaf* (or about why their group or sheikh was better than another group or sheikh) than about foundational and clear matters that were necessary to reinvigorate and strengthen our *emaan*.

Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said, “*Emaan* wears out in one's heart, just as the dress wears out (becomes thin). Therefore, ask Allah to renew *emaan* in your hearts” (*Mustadrak Al-Hakim*, authentic). I knew my *emaan* was wearing thin, so I was going to classes in hopes of having it renewed by the reminders of Allah. But unfortunately, I would attend classes and hear more praises of certain scholars and sheikhs than of Allah Himself. I'd also hear more quotes from these scholars and sheikhs than those from Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Often Allah and His Prophet were mentioned only to justify what was being taught from or about a particular scholar or sheikh.

I cannot speak for anyone else going through spiritual crisis, but this “*dhikr* of human beings” did not help my *emaan*. Perhaps, for others hearing the lofty traits of certain scholars reminded them of the beauty of Islam. However, for me, it reminded me of how I was so often guilted into following the words of men over the Words of Allah. I simply could not understand what was so hard about sharing the teachings from the Qur'an and Sunnah regarding the Hereafter, the specific supplications we can make during difficult times, the blessings of the night prayer, and so on. These reminders were what my heart was yearning for.

But I'd often go home empty handed, and my *emaan* would drop even more. I eventually gave up on attending Islamic classes altogether except the ones I had with my Qur'an teachers, with whom I studied *tajweed* and *tafseer*.

However, it remained difficult withstanding the criticism of those who felt that my absence in certain classes or groups (or that my discomfort with hearing the praises of certain scholars more than the praises of Allah) was indicative of religious misguidance. Moreover, I still had to interact with the world around me, and anti-Muslim bigotry was increasing manifold, especially amongst atheists and anti-religion extremists who felt emboldened to harass and mock people of faith at every opportunity. In reflecting on this trial, I wrote this journal entry:

This is a lonely journey, I cannot lie. Holding on to your faith, I mean. It's not supposed to be. But it is. It sometimes feels as if making the decision to practice Islam openly is a contractual agreement between you and the rest of the world, saying that it's completely okay for them to make your life miserable—emotionally, psychologically and practically. That it's completely okay for them to follow and announce your faults. That it's completely okay for them to blame you for everything that's gone wrong in the name of God and religion. That it's completely okay for them to harass, abuse, and bully you—while you aren't allowed to have even unspoken beliefs that they find offensive. And that it's completely okay for those closest to you—whether through the bond of faith, friendship, or blood—to watch you suffer and say you deserved it. Because you had the audacity to make others uncomfortable by holding on to your faith at all.

But I don't intend to paint myself as a victim, because I am not. I mention these trials only to illustrate the spiritual difficulties I was going through at the time. In fact, some of my most difficult moments came when I reflected on my past behavior and wondered how many people I had inadvertently hurt during my own period of spiritual zeal. I too had been a student of books and classes who had been taught to disregard intuitive human empathy in favor of rehearsed *naseehah* borrowed from humans' "religious scripts." As I regretted my own unwitting participation in other people's pain, I penned the following entry in my journal, as I shared in my book entitled *Pain*:

*Oh, the script, that religious script,
the one handed to every student of books and classes,
who reads his lines carefully,
then takes the stage,
declaring what is right or wrong in the life of the
unfortunate souls who find themselves the unwitting
audience of their own lives.*

How I Reclaimed My Faith

“O Allah, I am Your servant, child of Your male servant, child of Your female servant; 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 which You name Yourself with, or revealed in Your Book, or You taught to any of Your creation, or You have 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 for my sorrow and a release for my anxiety.”

—Du’aa for anxiety and sorrow as taught by Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him
(Al-Albaani, *as-Silsilah as-Saheehah*, 199)



As I prayed to Allah to remove the stress and confusion from me, I knew that I needed to clear the clutter from my mind and heart because it was distracting me from Allah. Although I had reminded myself that I needed to concern myself with only my Lord, having my *heart* aligned with this noble focus was a different task entirely. In achieving this, I understood that there was no option but to continuously ask Allah for help and find some semblance of peace in the struggle. In my journal I wrote:

There are no shortcuts to purifying the heart. There are no shortcuts to patience. And there are no shortcuts to Paradise. Do the work, and embrace the daily, harrowing struggle of living upon the Siraatul-Mustaqeem (the Right Path).

In reminding myself to stay focused on what was most important, I also wrote: *If you’re struggling in your faith, this is my advice to you: Remove the excess baggage and carry only the burdens your Lord has given you.*

Though this reminder was extremely helpful, I found that one of the most difficult aspects of working through spiritual crisis was that you couldn’t just skip over the stress and confusion, even when you knew where you needed to be. The pain and agony are parts of the healing journey itself, so there was no choice but to bear them with patience. Upon realizing this difficult reality, I wrote this note to myself in my journal:

*Let it hurt.
The only way out of spiritual crisis is through it.
So vent your frustrations, and cry your confusion to your Lord.*

I also wrote: *It's not always about a problem to be solved. Sometimes it's about a struggle to be embraced.*

Part of the pain of the struggle is pushing yourself to do the things you know you need to do while knowing it would be burdensome. During this time, one of those most difficult tasks for me was reading the Qur'an. The truth is, I didn't want to read it, but I forced myself. I knew that I would only complicate my struggle if I couldn't bring myself to read at least one *ayah* of my Lord's Words each day. To some people, this may sound like so little, and maybe it is. But for me, achieving this was momentous.

I was also terrified that if I didn't read the Qur'an each day, Allah would remove from me the ability to read and understand what I was reading. Arabic was not my native language, and it had taken me many years to be able to open the Qur'an and read it without the assistance of transliteration or listening to a reciter. I was still learning a lot of the vocabulary, but I knew having the ability to read Qur'an in the language it was revealed and with correct *tajweed* was a tremendous gift that I did not want taken from me.

Who Is Your Lord?

During some of my more difficult moments of anxiety and stress, I had to keep reminding myself of why I was on earth. *Who is your Lord? What is your religion? Who is your prophet?* Sometimes I would recite these questions to myself so that I could remember that it wasn't the people's opinions that I needed to worry about, but the answers to these questions.

Make your focus the commandments of Allah's Book first and foremost, I told myself, because in them, there is no doubt. This is where success lies.

At the beginning of the Qur'an, Allah says what has been translated to mean:

“Alif, Lam, Meem. This is the Book about which there is no doubt, a guidance for those conscious of Allah, who believe in the unseen, establish prayer, and spend out of what We have provided for them, And who believe in what has been revealed to you, [O Muhammad], and what was revealed before you, and of the Hereafter they are certain [in faith]. Those are upon [right] guidance from their Lord, and it is those who are the successful.”

—*Al-Baqarah* (2:1-5)

As I stressed over all of the things people were saying I needed to focus on based upon the opinions of their group and spiritual teachers, I reflected on what I had studied in the *tafseer* of these *ayaat*, specifically where Allah says “...who believe in what has been revealed to you, [O Muhammad], and what was revealed before you.”

The scholars of *tafseer* explained that the wording here indicated that there was no new revelation or religious teachings that we should focus on after what

was revealed to Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him. So no matter how knowledgeable someone was, I was obligated to them only insomuch as what they were teaching could be verified as coming from the teachings of the Prophet himself.

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