

The Journey of a Toiler

From the Islamic Theory of Origination Project

◆ The Narrative and Literary Embodiment of the Project ◆

ABBAS AL HUMAID

The Journey of a Toiler

THE ISLAMIC THEORY OF ORIGATION PROJECT

The Journey of a Toiler

A Novel

ABBAS AL HUMAID

Reissued as Part of the Islamic Theory of Origination Project
— 2026

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Part of the Islamic Theory of Origination Project

The Islamic Theory of Origination is an interpretive intellectual project situated within the Islamic worldview. It studies human becoming, existential movement, growth, conduct, and purpose-bearing responsibility. It is a human endeavour: it is not identical with Islam itself and does not replace creed, jurisprudence, Qur’anic exegesis, or specialised disciplines. The project is not one book but a system of six books, each with its own question, function, and voice. They complement one another without repeating one another’s role.

The Six-Book Map

- 1 The Islamic Intellectual Framework — the worldview foundation and home of the broader cosmic account.
- 2 Human Becoming in the Islamic Worldview — the governing reference text, including the Reader’s Guide and reference glossary.
- 3 The Immortal Self — the home of the human model and its trajectory.
- 4 No Limits — the reader-facing gateway to the laws and the home of comparative critique.
- 5 Live Happily — the gateway to contemplation and lived engagement.
- 6 The Journey of a Toiler — the gateway to narrative embodiment.

Human Becoming in the Islamic Worldview includes, at its beginning, a Reader's Guide to the project, its books, and its reading paths, and, at its end, a simplified reference glossary of its terms. These are parts of the reference book itself, not a separate volume or a seventh book within the six-book project.

The Place of This Book in the Project

The Journey of a Toiler offers a literary and human embodiment of the project's concepts. It transforms questions about God, existence, toil, trial, and meaning into a living narrative, connecting the intellectual worldview with the situations of everyday life and the transformations of the self.

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Praise for the Novel

Arab media personality Dr Yahya Abu Zakariya

“Whether we like it or not, world literature—and Arab literature as a part of it—is a mirror of the human journey and its becoming. While it may not adhere strictly to historical fact in the academic sense, literature records human emotion and tells the human story. It enters the landscapes of the soul and often presents experiences steeped in sorrow, lamentation, and pain.

“As literary works have accumulated in their various forms, some novels have grown into schools of thought, intellectual frameworks, and ways of life from which many people have benefited. In *The Journey of a Toiler*, the gifted writer Abbas Al Humaid Al Lawati offers a distinctive portrait of a human being who chooses to rise above harsh and difficult circumstances.

“Many people assume that every citizen of the Arabian Gulf is born into comfort and knows nothing of poverty or hardship. In graceful, flowing, tender, and honest prose, Abbas Al Lawati offers a different picture. His carefully shaped narrative is matched by a luminous sincerity of tone, and throughout the novel the author repeatedly invokes God, who accompanies him in his search for relief and a way out of every distress and pain.

“The author presents a rich range of concepts, values, and moving experiences: the loss of a father, the search for hope, academic failure, the discovery of divine wisdom, family, love, his mother, determination to succeed, exile, professional growth, divine aid, the loving and understanding wife, and developments in the contemporary Arab world.

“What moved me most in *The Journey of a Toiler* was the author’s invocation of God throughout his arduous journey. Surely he wanted to draw his reader nearer to the Almighty, who

governs existence, possesses the treasures of the earth, and provides without measure. He was especially successful when his toil led him to discover that success in life is not defined by careers and high positions—otherwise the prophets would have been failures, as the novelist himself observes. True success, for him, lies in how near we are to God and in attaining his pleasure. This recalls the words of a spiritual sage: ‘I searched for God everywhere, only to discover him within myself.’

“The Journey of a Toiler by Abbas Al Lawati is worthy of being read, and worthy indeed of becoming part of an educational curriculum in Oman and throughout the Arab world—especially at this critical Arab moment, when emerging generations are searching for models and examples from which a new beginning may be built.”

Islamic scholar and theologian Sayyid Munir Al-Khabbaz

“One of the clearest manifestations of the ‘good word’ is the call to intellectual and moral uprightness through an engaging narrative. This is what appeared to me in a beautiful and captivating form as I sailed with my thirsty imagination as my sail, my yearning heart as my oars, and my contemplative mind as my guide, while reading ‘Awkward Moments’ from the purposeful novel *The Journey of a Toiler*.

“Through this chapter, the researcher Shaykh Abbas Al Humaid demonstrates both intellectual depth and broad cultural knowledge in grounding Islamic concepts and presenting them upon firm foundations. He also shows literary skill and refined sensitivity in shaping a religious intellectual vision through lucid, graceful prose that combines strength with clarity and draws upon vivid scenes from life in its bitterness and sweetness.

“The narrative is enriched by wise reflections and elevated moral values, fragrant with sacred inspiration and rapt contemplation of God, borne on the twin wings of fear and hope. In this way, the

author shows the comprehensiveness of Islam across the fields of the human journey and its guidance of civilisation across its many horizons. In telling this tale, he is telling the story of the heavenly message through ‘the journey of a toiler’.”

Dr Kifah Fayad — trainer and consultant in human development and skills enhancement

“The Journey of a Toiler is a truly distinctive book by an author bold enough to pose powerful questions about human existence and its Creator. He answers them through situations he lived and witnessed. They come from the heart and enter the reader’s heart, prompting reflection from different angles.

“What distinguishes the book is the realism of its situations, places, and names, narrated in a simple, flowing style that makes you feel the author is sitting before you, telling you his story face to face. You live the moment and feel its impact. The questions posed at the beginning—and the questions that arise in your own mind as you read—are answered when you need them, as though the author had anticipated them.

“The Journey of a Toiler is an important contribution in an age of information overload. It lifts you from one reality and carries you into another, deeper reality of great impact. The book is called The Journey of a Toiler, and through his toil the author brings this journey to both your mind and your heart.”

Dedication

To my companion in this long journey of toil and struggle. Without her love, nobility, authenticity, and boundless generosity, I would not have achieved even part of what I aspired to.

This is the least I can offer you as an expression of my profound love and gratitude. I dedicate this book to my wife, Tahira.

Acknowledgements

I extend my deepest thanks, gratitude, and appreciation to everyone who contributed to bringing this novel into its present form—through literary, linguistic, technical, or substantive review, and through comments and suggestions that helped it reach a level at which I am pleased to present it to readers. I wish especially to thank:

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- ◆ Husayn Ali Dawud Al Lawati
- ◆ My wife, Tahira Al Khabouri
- ◆ My daughter, Ithar Abbas
- ◆ My son, Muhammad Abbas

Introduction



I am not a religious scholar or a specialist in Islamic theology, nor do I claim to be a literary writer or novelist. I am simply an ordinary person, sailing through life with my small family in search of a decent living, security, truth, and God's pleasure. Life confronts me in all its force and complexity, almost as though it means to challenge me. Yet I do not lose heart or retreat. I press on, defending my survival, dignity, and values, armed with patience, resolve, and reflection, and drawing on what I have understood—however limited and incomplete that understanding may be—of the beautiful Islamic values, concepts, and practical methods found in the religious texts and embodied in our teachings and beliefs.

At times I rejoiced in victory; at others I tasted the bitterness of defeat. Sometimes I rose above myself, and many times weakness and collapse overtook me. Yet whenever I broke down, I felt the hand of divine mercy reaching out to rescue and sustain me.

Through it all, difficult questions and riddles about life, existence, and the universe kept pressing upon me and disturbing my peace. One after another, they began to yield their meanings. The truths joined together and appeared as parts of a work of astonishing beauty and grandeur, fashioned by the Creator through his divine grace.

Most of the events in this novel are fictional. The methods, concepts, and values it contains, however, are real. I have tried

and practised them in a life perhaps more challenging, difficult, and turbulent than the one faced by our protagonist. They enabled me to know happiness and tranquillity in a life like a stormy sea, one that seems to grow more violent the stronger and steadier you become.

Many questions about life and the universe troubled me, and I am sure they trouble many people around me. Yet we run from them, having been raised to flee in fear. From childhood, I resolved to face these questions and not to believe something merely because I was expected to believe it. But when I came to believe in God and knew something of his beauty and majesty—as far as my limitations and imperfections allowed—I realised that the truths and mysteries surrounding this universe must themselves be beautiful and majestic, for they proceed from him, exalted be he.

Does God truly exist, or is he merely a product of imagination? Why must we have a Creator while God has no creator? How do we know that God is generous and true to his promises? How do we know that he possesses all the attributes of perfection with which he describes himself? What is God? Might we ever see him? Could he have a partner?

Does God truly love us, and is he merciful towards us? Why, then, did he create diseases and afflictions? Why does he allow people to die from hunger and illness? Why did God create criminals, germs, and beasts? Why did he make some of us intelligent, wealthy, and healthy while afflicting others with poverty, illness, and limited intelligence? Why did he not create us directly in Paradise instead of placing us on earth, where we endure one hardship after another, then err, incur his anger, and are cast into the Fire?

Why did God create us? What does he want us to do in this life? Was it to develop the earth? But why would God want the earth developed? Does he need us to develop it for him? Is the

earth, this silent and lifeless planet, more important than we are, so that developing it should be our purpose? Why did he create the earth in the first place? Did he create us to worship him? But why? God does not need our worship, and whether we worship him or not adds nothing to him and takes nothing away.

Is death a calamity and a torment? How could it not be, when we hear that the dead undergo severe suffering, beginning with the agony of death, followed by the pressure of the grave, the torment of barzakh—the intermediate realm—at the hands of Munkar and Nakir, and then Hell? Yet are we not also told that death is an ascent towards God? How can ascent towards God be torment and misery?

Why would God torment us in the Fire? What harm do our sins cause him when we do not mean to defy his will, but fall into them because desire overcomes us in our weakness and ignorance? Why should a person commit a small sin for a limited time, such as occasionally listening to forbidden songs, and then face a punishment billions of times greater in intensity and duration than the act itself? Would it not be unjust for us to burn someone who insults us? Why, then, do we consider it just for God to burn in Hell those who hurl abuse? Is it because he is God? Because he is stronger?

Why supplication? Why does God insist upon it? If he knows my need and is able to meet it, why does he make my asking a condition? Does God, God forbid, need our supplication?

Why did God create us? Was it not so that we would worship him? Then why did he allow Satan to tempt us, exploiting the desires and illusions with which we were created, and thereby lead us towards the Fire and torment? Why did God grant Satan's plea when it would harm us? Was it because Satan provoked him—exalted be God above such a

thing? Or because God loves Satan? Or perhaps, God forbid, because he hates us? Would that not be a grave injustice? Would it not also defeat the purpose for which God created us, namely, to worship him?

These questions, and many others, are what this novel seeks to address from a simple, realistic perspective—one accessible to ordinary readers and consonant with the sound natural disposition (*fitra*). It seeks to remain consistent with the religious texts and with life as it unfolds around us—indeed, to help make that life more positive and joyful.



CHAPTER ONE

Lost

July 1996

Muttrah, Sultanate of Oman

My feet barely carried me beneath the weight of grief—a grief that filled my heart, crushed my chest, and seized every part of me. I had never known such despair. It seemed my sorrow had stained the whole world: the sky raged, black clouds hung heavy with gloom, and rain fell in sheets. I drifted along the Corniche with no sense of direction, hot tears mingling with the cold rain, my body trembling from the chill and from helplessness.

Memories unspooled, slow and bitter, tearing away what little peace remained within me. Questions I could not answer battered me and hurled me into a hell of doubt and bewilderment.

“Why is all this happening to me? Why me? Why does fate insist on fighting me? I ask only for a little—the little everyone else has. Why am I denied it when I work harder than others? Why?”

I had lived in poverty all my life, but I had never complained. I threw myself into my studies and made excellence my answer to poverty. My father often told me that our poverty was a blessing from God: it drove us to excel in life, and God would reward us with success in this world and the next. The wealthy, he said, were deprived of that motivation.

Where are you, Father? How I need you. How I miss you. Why did you leave me? Who did you leave me with? How I hate this fate. How terrible it is. How can it turn moments of happiness and safety into catastrophe in the blink of an eye? Where does such cruelty come from? What a wretched fate. I do not want to fall into unbelief, but I cannot bear any more. Why, my Lord? Why? Father told me that you love us, that you created us to make us happy, and that you reward those who thank you with goodness and blessings. Why, then, have you made me miserable when you know that I love you?

I was constant in my prayers. I called upon you with my whole being and trusted you without limit. You blessed me and showed me that you were with me. I have never forgotten how you stood by me through every difficulty in my life. Why, then, have you abandoned me now? What have I done, my Lord, to deserve punishment? You know that I do not disobey you deliberately. Could you be angry because, in a few moments of weakness, I slipped away and listened to songs in secret, without my family knowing? I swear to you, my Lord, I never committed that sin out of contempt for you, but because my will was weak; each time, I returned at once and asked your forgiveness. Could you be taking revenge on me for disobeying your command? But you are not like that, my Lord. You love us and know that we are weak. That is what Father always told me. Was he wrong? My God, what is happening to me? I am beginning to fall into unbelief. No. I cannot think.

Father, where are you? How I loved your sweet, warm smile. How I loved your encouraging, reassuring gaze—and the way your gentle hand stroked my head. How I loved talking with you, teasing you, playing with you. You were my friend, my role model, my companion. I drew strength from yours and found calm in your composure. I would rest my head on your shoulder and feel that I owned the whole world. I never imagined you would leave me. Never imagined living without you. You let me down. No—you did not. You were forced to leave me. It was fate.

You left when I needed you most, in my final year of secondary school, the year that would determine my future. Why, Father? Why?

Do you remember, Father, when you came into the house carrying a new, elegant desk as a gift for the beginning of my final school year? It was the first new piece of furniture our home had ever seen, so everyone admired it. Although it was small, it took up much of the little space we had, but everyone was delighted with it: it would make it easier for me to study in that critical year. The goal was clear and openly declared: I would take first place in the Sultanate.

The whole house went into a state of alert. Everyone was ready to serve me and make me comfortable. My little twin sisters, who had come into the world after a long wait, stopped pestering me despite their young age. My grandmother never ceased praying for my success and excellence. As for my mother, it was as though I were her only child and her one concern. A month passed in that state. Everything was beautiful, wonderful—a month of happiness unlike any I had known.

Then came that black day—the day fate declared war on me and took away what I valued most. A foolish, reckless driver struck my father and left him lifeless on the road. My father

was gone, and with him went my dreams and my life. It seemed that all of us had ended with him. The pain was unbearable, the sorrow beyond endurance: desolation, estrangement, loneliness, and fear. Father was gone and would never return. I wished I had gone before him. I had wanted nothing else from life, so why did you deny me even him? If only I could understand this life. My Lord, I am lost and bewildered.

My days dragged by, slow and bitter, as though they took pleasure in my torment and meant to deepen my sorrow and gloom. I had no strength to resist them, so I surrendered. I lost the will to live. I began to wish for death—the death I hated because it had taken my father. It was terrifying and cruel. How I wished Father were still alive beside me.

It was not growing used to the pain that brought me back to life. It was a remnant of strength I dragged from the depths of my heart: fear that my mother might follow Father out of grief for me, and compassion for my small family, who, in a matter of seconds, had come to depend on me. I had to hold fast, or my family would collapse.

I returned to school after several weeks away and began catching up on what I had missed. I had to make Father proud of me. At first it seemed almost impossible, but I pulled myself together and began helping my family bear the loss of Father. From time to time, deep waves of grief overtook me and I lost control of myself, but I would soon gather myself again and summon my resolve—or, more accurately, what remained of it.

The final examinations began, and I was ready. This time, however, my aim was simply to graduate with marks high enough for admission to Sultan Qaboos University, the best university in the country, or at least to one of the government technical colleges. I was determined and deeply confident, even though Father was no longer beside me. I trusted that

God would not abandon me. Father had told me many times that God increases his blessings for those who are grateful, and that he never disappoints those who seek refuge in him and place their trust in him. I was surely one of them. How often I prayed to him, spoke to him, trusted him, and loved him. Indeed, I loved him even more than I loved Father. He was my Lord. He could not let me down, especially after the immense effort I had made and the determination I had shown. God would never abandon me.

I sat the examinations one after another and did well—perhaps even brilliantly—until the last one: mathematics. I do not know what came over me that day. A severe wave of grief struck me; something inside me grew unsettled, and my tears poured down in a stream. I tried to focus on the paper and prayed that God would steady my nerves and calm me. I managed to hold myself together for a while and did all I could. The minutes passed painfully slowly until I left the examination hall without even knowing how I had performed.

Even so, I trusted my Lord. He knew that I had become the support and hope of my family after he had taken Father. He knew there was no way for me to provide for them unless I studied at university. He would not abandon me. If not for my sake—perhaps because I occasionally listened to songs—then for the sake of my small family, faithful and obedient to God.

How I wish I had not trusted. God forgive me, but had I not trusted, I would not have pinned my hopes on you or exhausted myself in vain. If only I had known. Why? Why, my Lord? I needed only a few more marks to enter college—only a few. It was easy for you, so why did you not help me? I was asking for so little. Why would you do this to me, my God? Why? I do not understand you, my Lord. Why abandon me when I need you most and the matter is so easy for you?

Are you not the one who created us and is responsible for us? Are you not powerful over all things? Are you not the one who says, “**Call upon me; I will answer you**” (Q 40:60)? I called upon you again and again. Why did you not answer me? Father always said that you loved us. Do you truly love us? Do you love me? Do you hear me, my Lord? Does my life matter to you? Do you want to help me? Are you there, my Lord, or are these merely illusions? And even if you exist, how am I to know that you are powerful over all things, that you are true to your promises, and that you love us?

If you are perfect and lack nothing, why did you create us? Was it to make us happy, as they say? How can I believe that when you abandoned me and would not even help me gain the few marks I needed for university, despite the depth of my love for you since childhood, my trust in you, and my constant prayers? Ah, my Lord. Ah.

The rain fell harder, and the sky grew blacker. Thunder and lightning shook the air with such force that the sky seemed to rage at my thoughts. Was what I was saying unbelief, my Lord? Were you angry with me? Please do not be angry. I love you, and I have no one but you. My Lord, if you leave me, I will perish. Please rescue me. I am bewildered, lost, and without hope.

My feet carried me to Riyam Park, to the place where I used to play football with Father. I lay on the ground, exhausted and resigned to fate, closed my eyes, and sank into a deep sleep. I did not wake until I heard my mother weeping as she clutched me in terror. The sight startled me, and I rose in alarm.

“Mother, what are you doing out here in this storm? You’ll fall ill.”

“Come home, my love. Please. You’ll kill me with grief.” She broke down in tears.

I embraced her, took her hand, and hurried with her towards home. At that moment, I could think of nothing but my poor mother, helpless and without support. I pitied her, for her ordeal was greater than mine. She was more vulnerable than I was, yet she had to remain composed for us—her family, the pieces of her heart.

The walk from Riyam Park to our home in Sur al-Lawatiya was long and terrifying in that storm. I truly feared the wind would lift us away or the floodwater would drag us into the sea. The sight of the violent waves only deepened our fear. It was an ordeal until we reached the house, where I was startled to find my grandmother and my two sisters standing at the door waiting for us: Grandmother praying that God would keep us safe, and my sisters weeping bitterly in fear and distress.¹

The house was warm. Within minutes I had changed my clothes and made sure my mother was well. Then I dropped onto my cotton mattress, pulled the blanket around me, and sank into a deep sleep. I woke only when a severe fever gripped my body and made every breath heavy. I was exhausted and very ill after the cold and the storm of the previous day, but I thanked God when I learnt that my mother was safe and unharmed.

My illness felt like a severe punishment for my reckless behaviour the day before—rushing out of the house, distraught and broken, as though I could escape my fate, while my mother and family watched in shock. The punishment was not the illness itself. It was that my mother had to bring a

¹ Sur al-Lawatiya is a residential quarter on the Corniche in Muttrah. It was historically home to members of the Lawati community before many moved to other parts of the capital in the 1980s. Some residents—especially older people—remain; roughly sixty of the quarter's 240 houses are still occupied, and it continues to serve as a meeting place for the community's many religious occasions.

doctor to the house to examine and treat me, at considerable expense, in addition to the medicines we had to buy. I promised myself that, whatever happened, I would never lose control in that way again. Losing control meant more hardship for my small family, who did not deserve all this pain and could bear no more.



Days passed as I struggled with the fever. Gradually my health improved and my mood began to settle. One morning I woke feeling almost recovered. My mother was sitting beside me, embroidering a kumma—a traditional Omani cap—so that its sale might cover some of the household’s growing needs.²

I drifted into thought about my situation, my family, and the choices before me. Father’s pension was 229 Omani rials, about six hundred US dollars, and it was not enough for us to live on. It was true that the insurance company had taken over the monthly car instalments after his death, and that the rent for our home in Sur al-Lawatiya was very low. Even so, the pension barely covered food, especially as prices continued to rise.

Perhaps this was why God had not enabled me to go on to university. Perhaps I had to work, ease the burden on my mother, and meet the needs of my family and my two young sisters, whose expenses would increase as they grew.

But where could I work? Who would employ me with only a secondary-school certificate, and for what salary? Perhaps I should look for a position as a sales representative in one of the larger shops.

“Mama, I’m going out to look for a job.”

² A cap sewn from fabric and worn as part of traditional Omani dress. It usually takes about a month to make and yields roughly US\$100.

“Good morning, my love.” She gave me a sweet, warm smile and gently stroked my head. “Don’t think about that now. God will take care of us, and you’ll complete your university education and become the finest doctor in the world.”

A bitter smile, tinged with sorrow and pain, crossed my face. We had all dreamed that I would become a famous doctor. But dreams were all they were. Fate, it seemed, hated me and had decided to oppose me, and I had no strength to fight it. I had to be realistic and leave such beautiful dreams to the wealthy and well-off.

“Mother, do you still trust God after everything he has done to us?”

“God forgive us. Don’t say that. It’s unbelief. God has done nothing but good for us.”

“I wish I had your faith, Mama. How can you trust God in that way?”

“My love, your father hasn’t died. He’s waiting for us in barzakh, and one day we’ll join him there—in a world without pain, where we’ll be God’s guests and he’ll honour us from his bounty.”

“If God is so generous, why does he not honour us here as well? Why does he torment us in this world?”

My words deeply upset my mother. Her voice rose as she answered with emotion and resolve.

“God doesn’t torment us—far be it from him, my love. Never say that again. I can’t bear to hear such words about God. Listen to me. God could have chosen not to create me, yet he did, and he wants nothing from me. He gave me you, your sisters, your grandmother, and your father. When your father went to Paradise, I knew he would be there waiting for us. Soon enough, we will all join him and meet in God’s presence. But for now, until we go to God, being with all of you is enough to make me happy.

“I love God because he loves us and continually blesses us, even when we do not understand how. He himself says, exalted be he: ‘Perhaps you dislike something when it is good for you, and perhaps you love something when it is bad for you. God knows, and you do not know’ (Q 2:216).”

The force of my mother’s answer—her defence of God and her trust in him—was inspiring. Was this what people called the proverbial “faith of old women”? How I wished I possessed it. Yet my mother was not old. She was only sixteen years older than I was, still in her mid-thirties. It was true that she had not completed university, but she was well read and loved books. After Father’s death, however, she had been able to read little besides the Qur’an and books of supplication. In any case, this was one of the very few times I had seen her so deeply stirred.

“I’m sorry, Mama. I didn’t mean to hurt you.” I kissed her blessed hand with tenderness and apology.

“I’m the one who should apologise, my love, for becoming angry with you. Why don’t you discuss this with your Uncle Issa? He’s very well read, and when he was young he studied for a time in the religious seminary.”

“I’ll go to him now. I need to speak to him about work as well.”

At first, my mother hesitated to let me leave the house because I was still somewhat unwell. But she feared the thoughts turning in my mind and understood that I needed to speak with someone mature and knowledgeable, so she agreed.

I changed my clothes and went straight to my uncle’s office. I was not sure that he would be there or have time to see me, but I had no choice but to try. Our telephone had been disconnected two months after Father’s death because the bill had not been paid. I was ready to wait for hours if necessary. The matter could not wait.

My uncle was a remarkable man, full of tenderness and goodness. He worked as human resources director in an oil company. He was educated, intelligent, articulate, and deeply religious, and his presence brought reassurance and ease. He was the uncle closest to my heart, perhaps because he was the youngest—two years younger than my mother—or perhaps because of the distinctive respect with which he treated others.



The day was fiercely hot and bright, as was usual in our scorching summers. It was hard to believe that only a few days earlier a violent storm had swept through and left me ill.

Within fifteen minutes I was knocking at my uncle's door. He was in his office, but unfortunately he was preparing to leave. Embarrassed, I apologised for coming to his workplace without an appointment, but he put me at ease and greeted me with warmth and affection.

"I can sit with you for ten minutes. We'll have tea, and you can tell me what brings you to see me. Then I must leave, but I should be back in about an hour, around the lunch break, and we can go out for lunch. What do you think?"

"Of course."

"Then let's begin. I'll make the tea while you talk."

"Uncle, I don't know how to begin, but I'm in trouble. Please listen to me and advise me on how to solve it—without becoming angry with me."

"Of course, my dear. Go on. I'm listening."

"You know everything I've been through recently: Father's death, our difficult financial circumstances, and finally my result, only one percentage point below the mark required for admission to the technical college."

"I know." His voice was low, almost broken, and his eyes were full of compassion.

“I now have to find a job so that I can ease the burden on Mother. I want your help with that.”

“Certainly. But tell me, don’t you want to continue your education and build a promising future?”

“Of course I do, Uncle, but such dreams aren’t for the poor. Fate hates me.” I spoke quietly, but with deep sorrow, and hot tears slipped silently down my cheeks.

Before meeting my uncle, I had resolved to keep control of myself and say nothing that would reveal the deep chasm of gloom and pain in which I was living. I could not. The volcano of sorrow and confusion raging within me was too much to contain, and my uncle’s gentle, compassionate manner broke through what remained of my restraint.

Visibly moved, he rose from his chair, sat beside me, and took my hand in his.

“This is my second problem. I have lost my trust in God. I know that is unbelief—God forbid—but I cannot control it or stop myself from doubting. I believe in God because I am a Muslim, but intellectually I am no longer certain that God exists, that he loves us and does not wrong us, or that he is powerful over all things.”

“You feel that God abandoned you when your father died, and again when he didn’t enable you to gain the marks needed for university, although the difference was very small and you had made an extraordinary effort in the circumstances.”

“We never stopped praying to him, but he didn’t extend a hand to help us. He let me down, and he let down my whole family, even though we love him and cling to him. If he existed—or if he possessed even the goodness of an ordinary human being—he wouldn’t have abandoned us after all our hope and trust.”

“What if I proved to you that, contrary to what you think, God answered your prayer and protected you from a serious

mistake you would have made had he enabled you to gain the marks needed for university? He knew that if he gave you what you wanted, you would thank him, and that if he did not, you would think badly of him. Yet he still chose what was better for you. Perhaps that itself carries a lesson.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I haven’t explained yet. Listen, I have to leave now. I’ll be back in an hour, and then I’ll show you how God in fact protected you, answered your prayer, and opened the way to university and a promising future by allowing you to fall just short of the mark required for the scholarship.”

“Forgive me, Uncle, but that makes no sense. In any case, go now so that you aren’t late. I’ll wait.”

“Make yourself comfortable in the office. No one will disturb you. You can pray—the noon call to prayer has sounded. But telephone Aunt Safiya, your mother’s neighbour, and ask her to tell your mother that you will remain with me until after the sunset prayer. When you finish praying and making the call, search the internet for something called ‘career path planning’ until I return from the meeting.”

“God willing, Uncle.”

My uncle left, but his words gave my spirit a glimmer of hope when I desperately needed one. Could he be right? Had God not abandoned me after all? Had I been too quick to accuse him—exalted be he? God forgive me. My Lord, are you angry with me now? I love you despite all I have said and despite the despair and frustration I feel. But I am lost, my Lord. Please, my God, if you love me, help me understand. Do not leave me in confusion. After that, do with me as you will, but be gentle with me. My God, I need you. Will you abandon me while I call upon you?

Once again, hot tears began to fall. This time I let them come. Without thinking, I reached for the copy of the Qur’an

on my uncle's desk and opened it, hoping to find something that might cool the fire within me and settle my troubled spirit. My eyes fell at once upon words that made me feel God was speaking directly to me: "As for those who strive in our cause, we shall surely guide them to our ways. God is indeed with those who do good" (Q 29:69). I could no longer contain myself. I broke into sobs, this time in gratitude to God, although I still did not understand how.

I prayed and telephoned Aunt Safiya, but I was in no state to search for anything. I sank back into my uncle's comfortable chair and closed my eyes to rest them after so much crying. The next thing I knew, he was waking me.

"You still seem worn out from the fever. Shall I take you home and continue our discussion when you have recovered?" he asked gently.

"No, please, Uncle. I've only just found hope. I feel much better and no longer feverish, and I've missed playing with Tamer." Tamer was my uncle's nine-year-old son.

"He speaks of you often and loves playing with you. We'll see which of us wins today at FIFA on the Nintendo." It was the home console that had been popular before the PlayStation. "And by the way, I've taken the rest of the day off so that we can spend time together, as in the old days."

We left the office and got into the car in silence. I waited for him to speak and explain the riddle he had left with me before the meeting; perhaps he was still considering how best to explain it. At last, he spoke.

"Tell me: suppose you had passengers to take from Al Khuwair to Ruwi. Which vehicle would get them there faster and more comfortably, a luxury BMW or a minibus?"

"The BMW, of course."

“And of course the answer is wrong. If there were more than four passengers, you would have to make two journeys in the BMW; the minibus would then be much better. If there were four or fewer, the BMW would be the better choice. Right?”

“Yes. I didn’t think about the number of passengers.”

“You would have made a similar mistake had you entered Sultan Qaboos University or any other college. God therefore protected you and made your score fall short by that small margin. Perhaps he intended the shortfall to be slight so that it would point to his care for you and make you ask what lay behind what had happened—as you did.”

“Forgive me, Uncle, but I don’t understand how entering university could have been the wrong choice when I wanted to study there.”

“Suppose you had entered university. In a few months, your sisters will begin school, and the household expenses will rise. Your mother may become too tired to continue embroidering kummas, while prices keep increasing. Yet you and your mother firmly refuse to allow us to fulfil our responsibility towards you. Tell me, then: how would you continue your university studies without enough income to meet your family’s most basic daily needs?”

I lowered my head for a few seconds, then looked up. “And the solution?”

“The minibus.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning that you work in the morning to cover the shortfall in the household expenses and, at the same time, gain experience that will help you succeed and distinguish yourself in your career. In the evening, you study at a private university at your own expense. The fees will take up only part of your monthly salary.”

“That sounds very reasonable.”

“But it’s difficult. Can you combine work and study?”

“Without the slightest doubt. That doesn’t worry me at all. I don’t know why I failed to think of such a simple answer from the start.”

“Because we have grown used to copying what others do instead of planning our lives according to our own circumstances. In any case, if you like this answer, I have advice that may put you far ahead professionally. We’ll discuss it at home.”

We reached my uncle’s home, where I spent an enjoyable time with the family. We ate lunch together in a warm, relaxed atmosphere. Afterwards, while Tamer played Nintendo with us, my uncle and I discussed my professional goal and mapped out the details of my career path.

The plan was that I would take a job as a public relations officer (PRO)—a government-liaison role handling official paperwork. At the same time, I would prepare for the international Certified Management Accountant (CMA) qualification, which would probably take about a year to complete. I would then look for a job in accounting at a relatively high salary, while beginning an undergraduate degree at a private college in the evenings.

If matters went as we planned, then within five years I would hold a university degree, have five years of work experience—four of them in accounting—and possess an international professional qualification in management accounting from the United States. Professionally and financially, I would be far ahead of the classmates who had gone straight from school into university.



That night I was very happy. I lay on my mattress, covered from head to foot by my heavy blanket, my body curled against the cold of the small room. My mattress lay directly opposite the air conditioner. My grandmother and little sisters slept quietly, while my mother, as usual, had spread out her prayer mat and risen to perform the night prayer. From time to time, I saw her weeping silently in awe of God, as she often did during those prayers.

I felt deeply content. Since Father's death, I had been like a man whose boat had sunk in a violent storm, tossed from side to side by towering waves, clinging to a small plank and using all his strength to keep himself and his small family from drowning. Then, just as his strength was spent, his resources exhausted, and his hope gone, the waves cast him onto a beautiful island—and washed ashore beside him a treasure he had never imagined: an answer to our financial problems, a promising future, God willing, and a trust in God restored after I had been scorched by estrangement and loss.

Yet the problem had not been resolved completely. I did not want to suffer a similar shock if I faced a trial more severe than this one. My uncle and I therefore agreed to meet after Friday prayers so that he could answer my questions about God, and so that my faith in him could become deep and grounded in reason and logic rather than merely in feeling.



We left Friday prayers together. It was one of the hottest days of summer. We walked for several minutes before reaching my uncle's elegant car. I remained silent, arranging the questions and doubts I had been hesitant to voice.

I sat down. The leather seat, for all its luxury, had absorbed so much of the sun's heat that I let out an involuntary gasp.

"Uncle, this seat is on fire."

"I'm sorry. I forgot to put up the sunshade."

"It's all right. I'm used to it."

"Tell me: you readily accepted that the seat was 'on fire'. Why?"

"Naturally. The weather is very hot."

"Suppose it were winter. Would you be surprised if the seat were this hot?"

"Of course. The seat would not be this hot in winter."

"Why not?"

"Because there would be no reason for it to be hot. What are you getting at, Uncle?"

"Stay with me a little longer. Would you be surprised to find fire hot even in winter?"

"Of course not. I would be surprised if it were otherwise."

"Then what is the difference between the seat and fire when it comes to heat? Why would a hot seat surprise you in winter while a hot fire would not?"

"Fire is fire. It cannot, under any circumstances, be anything but hot. The seat, by contrast, takes its heat from the surrounding air."

"Let me put your point another way. Heat cannot be separated from fire: the two are one. In other words, heat is essential to fire. A seat, by contrast, may be hot or cold depending on the air around it. Heat is accidental to the seat, not essential. Is that what you mean?"

"Yes. You could put it that way."

The road was almost empty, perhaps because people had fled the fierce heat. It did not take us long to reach Kargeen restaurant in Madinat Qaboos, where my uncle was taking me for lunch. He parked beside the restaurant, reclined his seat, and turned fully towards me.

“Good. But notice that even the seat must possess some degree of heat at all times, regardless of how high or low that degree is. Would you agree?”

“True. Yet heat, in your terms, remains accidental to it. That much is clear. But how do we distinguish an accidental attribute from an essential one?”

“You said it yourself. If an attribute can be separated from the thing described, it is accidental; otherwise, it is essential. The separation need not occur in the external world; it may be possible at the level of thought and conception—or, as philosophers put it, in reality itself. Let me ask you: is height an essential or an accidental attribute of a human being?”

“Clearly accidental. But forgive me, Uncle, does this discussion have anything to do with our original subject?”

“We are discussing the very same subject. Do not hurry. What about the liquid nature of water?”

“That is essential.”

“Now, notice something. When an attribute is accidental, you naturally ask for its cause or source. You do not ask the same question when the attribute is essential; indeed, the question may sound strange. If a sheet of paper is wet, you ask how it became wet. But you do not ask why water is wet—you would regard the question as foolish. Would you agree?”

“Certainly.”

“Then tell me: is existence essential to you or accidental to you? In other words, does your existence arise from your own essence and therefore remain inseparable from you in every respect, or is it something that has come to you?”

“It clearly comes to me. I did not exist at first, and one day I will die.”

“What of all the beings around you and the universe as a whole? Is existence essential to them, arising from themselves, or accidental to them, bestowed upon them?”

“Accidental, of course. They may exist or not exist. They came into being after not existing.”

“Good. If existence is accidental to them and does not arise from themselves, then they are in need of existence. There must therefore be a source that possesses existence in itself and bestows existence upon them, creating them. Would you agree?”

“Clearly.”

“That source is self-sufficient in existence: existence is essential to it and cannot be separated from it. Put differently, existence arises from its own essence; in a third formulation, it is existence itself. These are different expressions of the same meaning: God, exalted be he.”

“Uncle, the argument is very clear as a proof that God exists. But may I be bold and speak frankly?”

“Of course.”

“It proves that there is a Lord who created us, but it does not prove that he is benevolent, all-powerful, or gentle with us; that he does not deceive or wrong us; or that he is free of deficiency.”

“It does prove that. Did you not agree that existence is accidental to all beings? Why do you think so? Do you remember the basis on which we distinguished an accidental attribute from an essential one?”

“To be honest, I have forgotten.”

“Let me refresh your memory. We said that if an attribute can be separated from the thing described, it is accidental; if it cannot be so separated, it is essential.”

“Yes. And we said that the separation need not occur in external reality; it may be possible in thought and conception.”

“Now that you remember, answer me: why do you believe existence is accidental to created beings?”

“The answer is clear: because all created beings can be conceived and imagined through their limits and deficiencies. Is that right?”

“Good. That means the source of existence cannot, in reality, be conceived or imagined, for if it could be conceived, existence would be accidental to it. Does that follow?”

“It does.”

“If the source of existence cannot be conceived in its essence, then it has no limit, restriction, or deficiency in existence. It must also be one, simple, and not composed of distinct parts or of attributes separate from its essence. If it were composite, it could be conceived through its parts. If it were limited, restricted, or deficient in any respect, it could be conceived and defined through that limit or deficiency. Is that not how we identify every being around us?”

“It is. The matter is simple and complicated at the same time.”

“This shows that God possesses every existential perfection and every attribute of perfection, and is free of every deficiency, flaw, and limit.”

“The point is clear,” I said, lowering my head to ponder my uncle’s words.

“Now think a little further. What can be simple, one, utterly without limit, and the source of existence—in other words, something whose existence arises from itself?”

“My God,” I cried aloud. Then I continued excitedly, almost asking for confirmation:

“It is existence itself. Now I understand what I once read: that God is pure existence.”

“Yes. He is existence itself—existence, pure and simple. Nothing stands outside existence except non-existence, and non-existence does not exist. He is therefore absolute existence, unmixed with anything else; this is what we call pure existence. If he were not absolute, he would be bounded in some respect by non-existence. But non-existence does not exist, so how could it mingle with existence?”

“Uncle, I am going to lose my mind.”

“I will stop, but one point remains. Because God is pure existence, he is simple and not composed of parts; otherwise, as we said, he could be conceived. This means that his attributes are identical with his essence, and his essence with his attributes. His power, wisdom, hearing, and sight are not distinct realities; all his attributes are identical with his one, simple existence.”

“How remarkable, Uncle. Now I can understand the sermon of Imam Ali that we so often hear preachers repeat:

“‘Praise belongs to God... whom the reach of aspiration cannot grasp, nor the depths of understanding attain; whose description has no prescribed limit and no existing characterisation... The beginning of religion is to know him; the perfection of knowing him is to affirm him; the perfection of affirming him is to proclaim his oneness; the perfection of proclaiming his oneness is to devote oneself sincerely to him; and the perfection of sincerity is to deny attributes of him, for every attribute testifies that it is other than the thing described, and everything described testifies that it is other than the attribute. Whoever attributes

qualities to God has coupled him... whoever points to him has limited him, and whoever limits him has numbered him.”

My uncle smiled with encouragement, satisfaction, and relief.

I was delighted by what I had understood. A shiver ran through me, as though a divine energy were moving through my spirit and my entire body. I had never known such tranquillity. It was a beautiful feeling—more beautiful than I could describe.

We got out of the car in silence. I remained absorbed in the sacred, beautiful meanings I had just discovered—meanings I had never imagined. I had been lost; now I was more certain than ever. My uncle did nothing to disturb the feeling, allowing me to remain absorbed in it. I barely noticed entering the restaurant and settling into a wooden chair at a table to the right of the fountain, facing it.

“Uncle, why do they not teach us these wonderful arguments at the mosque school? Why do scholars not present them in their sermons and lectures?”

“We will discuss that later. For now, we should order some food. What will you eat?”

“I do not know. This is the first time I have been to a restaurant like this. You choose for me, Uncle.”

My uncle ordered the food, and we began eating while I remained deep in thought. Out of respect, he did not interrupt me. Then a beautiful thought suddenly flashed through my mind.

“Uncle, with this understanding, we can also prove God’s oneness conclusively. Can we not?”

“We can. Would you like to explain how?”

“Of course. It is clear. If there were another god, each would be limited by the other. We could therefore conceive each of them through those limits, which would mean that existence was accidental to both. Is that right, Uncle?”

“Excellent. You seem to have grasped the idea.”

“But do we not place a limit on God ourselves? Wherever I am, God cannot also be there. Two things cannot occupy the same place.”

“Our existence is real, but it does not stand alongside God’s existence. If it did, his existence would be limited by us, his creatures; existence would then be accidental to him, and he would no longer be the source of existence. Wouldn’t that follow?”

I furrowed my brow and tried to concentrate. The matter seemed like a genuine dilemma. How could our existence be real and, at the same time, not stand alongside God’s existence? What could that mean? Yet it was also impossible to claim that God’s existence was limited by his creatures. The matter was bewildering.

“Let me ask you: do you know of any place in the universe that is wholly empty, containing nothing, so that God might be there?”

“We learnt in physics that there is no absolute void anywhere in the universe. Does that mean God is nowhere in the universe? Of course not.”

“The Qur’an and the sacred traditions repeatedly affirm that no place is empty of God and that no place contains or limits him. Do you recall the verse, ‘*We are nearer to him than his jugular vein*’ (Q 50:16)? How can God be closer to a human being than the human being is to himself—truly, not metaphorically?”

“I had never thought of that.”

“Although we truly exist, we are still only manifestations of divine existence. Think of light and heat as manifestations of the sun: they are not the sun, yet their existence does not stand alongside the sun’s existence.”

“That is reasonable, and it reminds me of the words of Imam Ali, peace be upon him, about God: ‘He is with all things, but not through conjunction, and other than all things, but not through separation.’ Yet I still cannot clearly conceive how we are manifestations of God without being part of God, while our external existence remains real.”

“Perhaps because that would require us to grasp the essential nature of both forms of existence—our own and God’s. We have already agreed that the essence and reality of God cannot be grasped. Is that not so?”

“It is, Uncle.”



That evening, my uncle dropped me off opposite the great gate of Sur al-Lawatiya on the Corniche. I almost flew with joy as I hurried home through the quarter’s narrow, interwoven alleys, which reminded me of Venice. At times I broke into a run, so eager was I to see my mother and grandmother, talk with them, and play with my mischievous sisters. A whole year had passed during which I had withdrawn into myself and neglected them, although they needed me deeply. Worse, I had exhausted them with my troubles and constant sorrow. I had been selfish. Now it was time to make amends and fill at least part of the emptiness Father had left.

I entered the house and greeted them with longing, teasing my sisters as though I had returned from a long and bitter journey. Then I began telling my mother, with enthusiasm, about the discussion with my uncle, repeatedly praising his goodness and breadth of knowledge. She listened with intense

interest, a beautiful, almost angelic smile on her face. She was happy because I was happy and thanked God from time to time. My grandmother, by contrast, grew visibly more agitated by what she heard and never stopped asking God's forgiveness for what she regarded as boldness towards him.

Sleep would not come that night. I lay going over my thoughts, while many sacred traditions and supplications that carried these meanings returned to my mind—meanings I had never noticed before. I was profoundly happy and at peace: the happiness of someone whose beloved returns after a long estrangement and absence; the happiness of discovering with certainty that the one he loves returns that love and deserves all his devotion—indeed, far more.

Everyone around me was asleep. I slipped quietly from my mattress, performed ablution, and stood for the night prayer, speaking of my love for God with every atom of my being and every movement of my heart. Nothing could express the feelings that filled me towards him. I took up a book of supplications, but this time I searched its pages for the meanings I had discovered that day. I lost all sense of time until the call to the dawn prayer sounded. I prayed, returned to bed, covered myself, and sank into deep sleep.

I do not know how long I slept. I woke with a passage from the Supplication of Arafah by Imam Husayn, peace be upon him, echoing insistently in my mind: "How can something that depends on you for its existence be used as proof of you? Can anything other than you be more manifest than you, so that it could reveal you? When were you ever absent, so that a proof would be needed to point to you? When were you ever distant, so that traces might lead to you?"

A striking idea leapt into my mind. When there is heat, we know spontaneously and without reflection that there must be a source in which heat is intrinsic, even before we discover or think about the things affected by that heat, whether or not they are present.

That was what the passage from the supplication was saying: existence itself, regardless of particular beings, points to a source possessing existence in itself—pure existence—which is God. We therefore need no proof to establish that God exists. God forgive me: how could we be so foolish as to demand proof for the source of existence itself? I later learnt that this argument is known as *Burhan al-Siddiqin*—the Proof of the Truthful.



The weather was fairly mild that night. The sky, as usual in Oman, was clear and bright beneath a full moon. It was beautiful. I had often heard people speak of the moon's beauty, but perhaps this was the first time I truly felt it. I was as calm as the sea beside me at *Seih al-Maleh* and as clear as the sky. My fingers moved through the soft, cool sand, and it seemed that the moon, the sky, the sea, the sand, and I had become one scene speaking of the Creator's beauty. How wondrously he had made it.

The atmosphere inspired me. The sound of the sea and its quiet waves was like a divine hymn slipping into your depths, drawing out the stirrings and whispers settled there, until you heard them clearly and discovered what you had not known about yourself.

A year had passed, filled with sorrow, despair, and frustration. I had endured suffering beyond description and had lost faith in everything around me. Now, after a year of pain, it was over, and nothing remained but bitter and painful memories,

as though all that had happened had never been. Father was dead, and the pain of his absence still lay like a blade driven into my heart, burning in my depths whether I moved or became still.

Yet in proportion to the suffering I had endured, I had grown and matured. It seemed that I had aged many decades in a single year. I understood what I could never have understood without that terrible pain. My capacities had grown and my self-confidence had deepened. I was no longer the small child I had been a year earlier. I would never have planned my future in this remarkable way had everything passed without difficulty.

Indeed, my suffering had driven me first to doubt God and then to reach the truth and know him with a certainty that would otherwise have been impossible. Later in life, I realised that what happened to me had been like a vaccine: a weakened virus administered to build immunity, while the suffering I endured resembled the symptoms that sometimes follow the injection.

The experience rooted my trust in God deep within me. It kindled love for him in every part of my being and taught me to speak with him easily, without ceremony, at every moment of life. It trained me to thank my Lord as soon as I recognised a blessing and to turn to him whenever the earth felt narrow around me, even when I could not yet see an answer to my prayers.

Was that why God had put me through all that suffering? Was that why he had taken my father? Perhaps. But what was my father's fault? What fault lay with my young sisters, my mother, or my grandmother?

But why was I speaking of death as though it were a curse and a torment? How could I not, when we heard that the dead suffered terrible anguish: first the agony of death, then the

pressure of the grave, then the torment of barzakh at the hands of Munkar and Nakir, before finally going to Hell? Yet were we not also told that death was an ascent towards God? How could an ascent towards God be torment and misery?

Why did I assume that God had caused my suffering and Father's death? Was God the one who moved life and everything around us, or were we the ones who acted and set events in motion? The driver killed Father through his own recklessness, not because God commanded him to do so. That was why he deserved punishment; otherwise, why should he be punished? But if that was the case, why did we pray to God?

Who were we, and why did God care about us so deeply? Who was I? Was I so important that God watched me closely in every moment of my life and intervened to arrange matters in my favour? Did he do that for every creature? Why, then, had he not created us directly in Paradise instead of placing us on earth, where we suffer trial after trial, then err, and he becomes angry with us and casts us into the Fire?

Why does he torment us in the Fire? What harm does it cause him if we commit sins without intending to defy his will, but because desires overcome us in our weakness and ignorance? Why should we commit a small sin for a limited time—occasionally listening to songs, for example—and then face a punishment billions of times greater in intensity and duration? Would it not be unjust for us to burn someone who insulted us? Why, then, do we consider it just for God to burn in Hell those who hurl abuse? Because he is God? Because he is stronger?

Why had God created us? What did he want us to do in this life? I remembered asking my Islamic studies teacher that question at school. He answered, "To develop the earth." But why did God want the earth developed? Did he need us to develop it for him? Was the earth, this silent and lifeless

planet, more important than we were, so that developing it should be our purpose? Why had he created the earth at all?

Another teacher answered, “To worship him.” I could not reject that answer, for the Qur’an itself says, “I created jinn and humankind only to worship me” (Q 51:56). Yet I did not understand the verse. God did not need our worship, and whether we worshipped him or not added nothing to him and took nothing away.

Questions upon questions battered my mind, and I could find no answer. I had enjoyed riddles since childhood, but now I had begun to hate them. Bewilderment surrounded me and gave me no rest. Yet I was sure there were clear, even beautiful, answers to all these questions. God was wise and gentle with us; far be it from him to act without purpose.

There had to be a secret—or many secrets—behind this universe and this life. There had to be beautiful and wonderful things we did not know. Perhaps, if we knew them, our lives would be transformed into something incomparable. I could not forget how beautiful life had become when I understood only part of God’s wisdom. What would it become if I knew more and understood the secrets of this life?

But how could I reach those secrets? Would I have to endure trial after trial in order to discover the mysteries of the universe? Was this what people meant by learning through experience? My Lord, be gentle with me and help me reach the truth. Then the verse came to mind: “As for those who strive in our cause, we shall surely guide them to our ways. God is indeed with those who do good” (Q 29:69).



CHAPTER TWO

Awkward Moments

I pressed on with my life with extraordinary enthusiasm and a will that seemed to blaze within me, but also with fear of the unknown future and of failure. I knew the road ahead was not paved, and at times I doubted whether I could change my circumstances. Still, I had nothing to lose. How deeply I longed to distinguish myself and make Father proud of me in his resting place.

My first task was to secure a suitable position as a public relations officer (PRO), handling government paperwork, with a reasonable salary—at least 250 Omani rials, together with a car and its running expenses—preferably in a large company. At the same time, I planned to study for the US Certified Management Accountant (CMA) qualification.

Through his wide network of contacts, Uncle Issa arranged several interviews with companies looking for a suitable PRO.

My first interview was at one o'clock on Wednesday afternoon with a local securities and investment firm on Muttrah Commercial Street. I was frightened, tense, and full of expectation; all my hopes rested on it. I could not sleep after the

dawn prayer that morning. I needed to call upon God and plead with him. Although I trusted him, deep down I feared that he might leave me disappointed and let me down, and that the opportunity I dreamed of—the chance to change my bitter circumstances—would slip from my hands.

The suitcase in which I kept my clothes and belongings contained only two dishdashas, the long robes worn by Omani men, apart from the one in the wash. Both were stained. I chose the better one and asked Mother to iron it, but our iron was broken, so she took it to Aunt Safiya's house and pressed it there.

I did not have enough money to put petrol in Father's car, so I walked to the Corniche roundabout to catch a shared taxi, along with passengers like me who could not afford the luxury of hiring one alone.

The heat was fierce, and sweat poured from every part of my body as I walked to the roundabout. I waited a long time before finding a taxi to Wadi Kabir, where it would drop me off on the road parallel to Muttrah Commercial Street, near the company.

It was almost one o'clock. I was terribly late. Anxiety gripped my heart. My Lord, please help me. I need this job. Help me, my God. We were nearly there when traffic stalled at the Greater Muttrah junction and delayed us further. The clock hands raced ahead as though intent on wringing my heart.

It was 1:19 when I finally reached the parallel road. I jumped out of the taxi, but I still had to find the company and get there as quickly as possible. I ran, trying to outrun time, stopping every minute or two to ask passers-by whether I was heading in the right direction. Finally, at nearly half past one, I reached the company.

As I entered, a man was preparing to leave. I asked him where I could find Muhammad Atiya, the company's director of administrative affairs, only to discover that he was Muhammad Atiya himself. I was panting from the effort; sweat poured from me, and the smell of it clung to me. My clothes were shabby, and my dishdasha was covered in stains and creases that even Aunt Safiya's faulty iron had failed to remove. I looked every inch a beggar. I was truly in a pitiable state.

I told him that I was the applicant he was meant to interview. He looked me over with disgust, rebuked me for arriving late and for the state I was in, and told me plainly that I was not suitable for the job.

His words struck me like a thunderbolt. He went on his way, but I froze where I stood, as though helplessness, humiliation, need, and powerlessness had drained every trace of energy from me and left me unable even to groan. Pain struck deep in my chest; I could not breathe. Then, suddenly, the pain flared into a violent rage that engulfed me. My blood surged through my veins, boiling as though it wanted to burn everything. I rushed out of the company without looking back. "Damn it. Damn it. Damn it. Everything is wrong. I am tired of it all."

Despair, frustration, and resentment filled me as I walked the five kilometres home through the blazing heat because I did not even have the two hundred baisa—about half a US dollar—for the taxi fare. I was crushed. I wanted to do anything that might vent my anger: pick up a stone, perhaps, and smash the windows of the cars owned by those pampered, frivolous rich people. But my conscience and reason held me back, so the anger recoiled inside me and burned more fiercely.

For an hour I walked through that furnace while the anger raged within me, gradually turning into sorrow and depression. I reached home staggering on the edge of collapse. I could not open my mouth to answer Mother's bewildered questions or reassure her. I switched on the air conditioner, spread out my cotton mattress, and curled up on it. "I'm exhausted. Enough. I'll lie here until I join Father."

Mother began to weep and plead with me to answer her, but her tears only increased my anger and pain. I could no longer remain silent. I shouted, "Enough!" and threatened that, unless she left me alone, I would run away and never return. It was the first time I had ever raised my voice to Mother. Terror, shock, and fear seized her. She swallowed all her own pain and withdrew, shaking with sobs but keeping them silent because she was afraid for me.

Pain ground my heart to pieces, and demons seemed to leap around me. Yet a thin thread of hope still bound me to God. I repeated his name bitterly and asked for his help before sinking into a deep sleep. I did not wake until night, when I saw Uncle Issa's face above me and heard his gentle voice.

"I'm sorry. It was my fault."

My nerves had settled after the long sleep. Although my uncle's presence surprised me, it also brought me reassurance. I needed him.

"Uncle!"

"After your mother called me, I telephoned Muhammad Atiya and learnt what happened. I apologised for your lateness and asked him to give you another chance."

"No, Uncle. I can't work for that company after what happened. It was my fault." I sat up and leaned against the wall while he remained seated opposite me.

“It doesn’t matter. There are many other companies. And the mistake wasn’t yours; it was mine. I should have stayed close until you found your feet, but I neglected you. I’m sorry.”

“No, Uncle. Please don’t say that. You’ve done more than anyone could ask.”

“Listen to me, my dear. Just as we can’t send a soldier into battle without a weapon, you can’t attend interviews without some preparation. You need decent clothes, good sandals, a watch, and a good kumma. You also need a monthly allowance so that you can use the car to get around.”

His words embarrassed me deeply. He knew how difficult our financial circumstances were and that I could not afford the things he was describing, but my dignity would not allow me to tell him so. I was also terrified that he might offer me help, because then I would have to refuse it. I could not stretch out my hand to anyone, not even Uncle Issa, even if I starved.

“I’ve borrowed a small amount for you from the community’s interest-free loan fund, in my name. Over the coming months, you can make the repayments from the borrowed money itself until you find a suitable job.”

The proposal was very reasonable. At first I wanted to refuse, but there was no real reason to do so, especially since many people in our community benefited from the fund, which had been established for their use.

“Thank you, Uncle. I agree, but on one condition: the loan must be in my name, with you as guarantor.”

“As you wish.”



I do not claim that I was skilled at job interviews, but repeated practice soon taught me how to handle them. My command of English, my ability to draft letters, and my calm, disciplined nature worked almost like magic in every interview. Before

long, I had three offers. The best came from an English company that wanted me to work as a driver and PRO, handling its government paperwork, for 450 Omani rials a month, including the car instalment and running expenses.

The job suited me very well. It gave me a great deal of spare time that I could use for study, whether in the office or during the long hours I spent waiting in queues at government institutions while completing the company's transactions.

A quiet, comfortable year passed. By God's grace, our financial position improved. We repaid all the debts that had accumulated, and we moved to a larger house in Sur al-Lawatiya.

The only thing that disturbed that peace was my struggle with the American CMA qualification. At first the material was extremely difficult—almost impossible—and it caused me deep frustration. Yet as my English improved and my determination hardened, I gradually began to master it.

After a year of struggling with the material, sitting the examinations, and failing again and again, I passed all four papers. It was no ordinary success for me. It was a hard-won, radiant victory born of sorrow and despair.

Ah, Father, how I wished you were there to share that joy. Were you happy in your world with what I had achieved? Were you proud of me there, or did all this mean nothing in the world where you now lived? How I missed you, Father.



My next task was a different kind of challenge, though it felt like a reward for succeeding in the first. I had to find an accounting position with a better salary while enrolling in an evening bachelor's programme in commerce at a private college.

Some might say that I was lucky. I saw it as God's favour. The day after I passed the CMA, I went to see Sir Andrew, our company's regional director. During the previous year, I had

earned the respect of the people I worked with and built good relationships throughout the company, especially with Sir Andrew, whom I had helped several times with personal paperwork.

As usual, Sir Andrew was bent beneath his desk searching for a pen he had dropped, so I waited at the door until he emerged. A moment later he settled into his luxurious chair, lowered his head, and looked at me over the top of his reading glasses. He smiled pleasantly.

“Muhammad, how can I help you?”

“Sir, I have passed the CMA.”

“Really? Congratulations. You deserve it. What comes next?”

“I want to find a position in accounting and complete a bachelor’s degree in business administration.”

“You clearly understand your career path. How would you feel about moving into our accounting department?”

The offer took me by surprise. I was not accustomed to things becoming easy so quickly. I accepted at once, my voice loud and unsteady, as though I feared he might change his mind.

“Good. In that case, you must find us an excellent PRO to replace you, and then you can transfer to accounting. Will two months be enough to make the arrangements?” He smiled encouragingly.

“One month will be enough, and I promise that the new PRO will be excellent.”

“Excellent. Take care of yourself.”

“Thank you, sir. Thank you.”

Finding a replacement was not difficult. Our company paid good salaries, and through my work I had come to know several first-rate PROs.



The accounting position took the lion's share of my time and effort. Sometimes I worked through the night; at other times I spent Thursdays and Fridays in the office, especially at the end of each month when we had to issue the monthly management reports.

Even so, it did not stop me enrolling in evening classes at the College of Commerce. Every night I returned from college worn out, dragging my feet home to eat the delicious dinner Mother had prepared, enjoy the wonderful tea she made, and spend a little time with her, Grandmother, and my mischievous young sisters. It was truly time stolen from a world filled with struggle and toil.

However exhausted I was, energy returned to my limbs as soon as I saw Mother's bright, angelic face while she sat, as usual, on the bench in our home, embroidering a beautiful kumma for me with her generous hands.

The days passed, and the burdens and pressures grew. I reduced my sleep to four hours a night so that I could meet the endless demands upon me. Headaches became my constant companion and were relieved only by painkillers. My body felt as though it weighed tonnes. I was drowsy all the time, especially when driving. At last, my performance at work and college began to deteriorate, my mistakes multiplied, and tension and irritability took hold of me. Had it not been for the twenty minutes of solitude I kept every night, I might have lost myself and collapsed.

There was no other choice. I had to continue to my last breath. I kept telling myself that the years would soon pass, that I would graduate, and that then, God willing, I would finally know rest.

I called upon God insistently to relieve me and asked Mother every day to pray for me. Yet deep inside, I doubted that there could be any way out of the trap I was in unless God granted me a treasure I had never imagined.

One evening, while I was performing the sunset prayer, a strange and wonderful idea flashed into my mind. I remembered that, as a child, whenever I dreaded going to school, I would pretend to be ill and persuade myself that I had a fever until I genuinely believed it. When Mother examined me, she noticed the heat and exhaustion and allowed me to stay home. Once it was too late to go to school, I would reverse the process, convince myself that I felt better, and show enough improvement for her to let me go outside and play.

The idea was to tell myself—and convince myself—that my body needed no more than three or four hours of sleep a day, and that any more would exhaust me and make me drowsy. Strange as the idea was, I did manage to plant it in my subconscious mind. The result was immediate: every sign of fatigue and exhaustion disappeared, and I felt energy flowing through my body and mind throughout the day, except when I drove long distances, when intense drowsiness still overcame me.

I was delighted by this achievement—not only because my performance at work and college improved, and not only because I finally began to enjoy some ease and calm, but because I sensed God’s nearness and support. I understood it as a great reward for my effort and sincerity: God had enabled me to discover a remarkable capacity within myself that I had not known before. This capacity for self-suggestion enabled me to overcome several negative states and weaknesses, including intrusive thoughts and insomnia, and to acquire skills and abilities I had previously sought in vain. It was not always easy, and I admit that I failed to overcome some

weaknesses and to acquire some of the positive qualities I sought. Even so, the capacity was generally very effective.



The college prayer room was small and deserted. Few students ever entered it, and its dim white light made it seem even more desolate. At first, praying there unsettled me, but with time I grew accustomed to it and even began to find comfort in it. I could pray with humility whenever my heart yearned to do so without fearing that I would draw attention to myself.

One evening, while I was performing the sunset prayer and weeping bitterly over my weak resolve to stop listening to songs, a fellow student suddenly entered. I stopped crying at once and wiped my tears hurriedly with the sleeve of my dish-dasha, terrified that he might have seen me, as though I had been committing a crime. Perhaps it was because people were not accustomed to seeing someone weep in prayer. Perhaps I feared being thought excessively religious or rigid and becoming an object of ridicule among the students. To some extent, I already was. I did not mix with the female students or shake hands with them, and I refused to listen to songs—at least in front of other people, though I still listened secretly when I was alone.

Unfortunately, what I feared soon happened. When I finished praying and went to the college café, the young men gathered around me and began mocking me and my religious commitment in a wholly inappropriate way. Their words cut deeply. My blood seemed to boil and rush to my face, yet outwardly I remained calm, perhaps because hardship had become familiar to me.

I wanted to answer them harshly, but I could not. Never in my life had I exchanged insults with anyone. In the intensity of my anger, my hand reached for a chair beside me, and a

violent urge seized me: I wanted to smash it over their heads. I was close to losing control and doing something I would regret for a long time. Then, in that decisive moment, I remembered the Prophet, peace be upon him. I remembered how much he had been harmed in the path of God and how he had answered those who harmed him only with goodness. I called his example to mind and decided to follow it, hoping that God might forgive me for listening to forbidden songs.

I calmed down, drew the chair towards me, and sat, forcing a gentle smile onto my face. A shiver ran through me as the words of God came to mind:

“Good and evil are not equal. Repel evil with what is better, and the one between whom and you there was enmity will become as though he were a devoted friend. Yet none are granted this except those who are patient, and none are granted it except one who possesses a great share of goodness” (Q 41:34–35).

Tranquillity spread through my chest. I decided to listen carefully to their remarks and reflect upon them, trying to understand them, their way of thinking, and what troubled them about me.

I noticed that, despite their sarcasm, some of their words concealed a measure of respect and appreciation for me and for my religious commitment. I realised that their heavy-handed humour came from a desire to entertain themselves. Their laughter and comments were not born of contempt for me or my faith, but from the strangeness of my behaviour and its difference from what they were used to.

The incident might have ended there without difficulty, but Amer—my mischievous friend who had entered the prayer room and seen me crying—was not content to leave it there.

Amer was not wicked by nature. On the contrary, he had been very religious and kind in his early years. He and I used to spend long hours each day on the Corniche discussing religious questions, the concerns of the Muslim community, and many other matters. We seemed far older than our years. Then he suffered a severe shock when his “religious” father, whom he loved deeply, left the family. His pain grew worse when his mother developed cancer. He lost his trust in God, and his life turned completely around. His comfortable financial position, exceptional intelligence, good looks, and weak parental supervision made the change easier.

“Tell me, Muhammad. Since, mashallah, you read so much about religion, could you help me? For some time I have had troubling questions about belief. I have searched for answers but found nothing satisfying.”

I heard the challenge in Amer’s voice. I knew his intention was not innocent and that he meant to embarrass me. I had no choice but to accept. I raised my head towards him with a smile that I tried to make look innocent and answered in a firm, confident voice.

“I’m still learning, and I know very little. But go ahead. If I don’t know the answer, I can ask the religious scholars.”

“What troubles me is this: if God loves us and is merciful to us, why did he create disease and affliction? Why does he allow people to die of hunger and illness? Why did he create criminals, germs, and wild beasts? Why did he make some people intelligent, wealthy, and healthy while afflicting others with poverty, illness, and limited intelligence?”

Amer’s questions disturbed the other young men. In our prevailing culture, discussing such matters—especially in public—was treated as taboo. Although I had no detailed, satisfying answer, I could not leave his questions unanswered.

“There is much about this universe that we do not know. God says, ‘You have been given only a little knowledge’ (Q 17:85). What is beyond doubt is that God is wise and powerful, that he loves us and shows us mercy. Our minds cannot grasp the divine wisdom behind some matters, including the questions you have raised. But that does not mean that God does not love us or show us mercy. Does he not say, ‘God is most kind and merciful to humankind’ (Q 2:143)?”

“But, Muhammad—”

Amer tried to interrupt, but one of the students, Omar, stopped him and asked him to let me finish.

“I have finished my main answer, but let me give you an example. Amer, do you remember when your father used to take you to taekwondo classes as a boy so that you could learn to fight? Do you remember how angry you became with him and how you thought he did not love you because he stood watching while stronger, more skilful boys struck you again and again during sparring practice? Did your father truly not love you, or was he doing it for your good when you were still unable to understand that good?”

“Muhammad, that is avoiding the question—”

Before he could finish, another student, Salim, interrupted him.

“To be frank, Amer, your question is inappropriate. We were joking and you turned the matter into a serious debate. It was not right to object to God’s wisdom in that way or to cast doubt on his love and mercy. Even so, Muhammad answered you, but you do not want to listen.”

“No, Salim. Forgive me, but I did not mean to cast doubt on God’s love for us.”

“You did. In any case, let us leave the matter. If you have more doubts and questions, go to a religious scholar and ask him, but do not raise them in a group of students like this.”

The argument continued among several students, but for me the incident ended there. I thanked God for inspiring me with an answer, because I had not been prepared for the discussion. Yet, to be fair, what I had said, though true, was—as Amer had observed—an evasion. Why had God created evils? Why were abilities distributed so unequally among people? These were bewildering questions whose secret I did not know.

The analogy with Amer's father was not sound. A human father is limited and powerless; he has no way to make his son strong except by training him to fight. God, by contrast, does not need such means to achieve what he wills. Does the Qur'an not say, "His command, when he wills a thing, is only to say to it, 'Be,' and it is" (Q 36:82)?

I could not understand why God had not created us directly in Paradise instead of placing us on earth, where we endured one suffering after another, committed mistakes, incurred his anger, and were cast into the Fire.

People said that God had created the Prophet Adam in Paradise, but that Adam's disobedience—eating from the tree God had forbidden—made him deserve to be sent down to this world as punishment. But why had God created that tree? Why had he placed it within Adam's reach? Why had he not stopped him, or at least warned him when he saw that Adam intended to eat from it? Why had he allowed Satan to deceive him when Adam was a prophet?

And even if Adam deserved punishment for his disobedience, what wrong had the rest of humanity done that we should be punished for the act of our father Adam?

The questions pressed upon my mind and I could find no answer. I had no doubt that God was wise and the most merciful of the merciful, but I could not solve these riddles. My heart told me that deep secrets lay behind them.



The argument between Amer and Salim was still in full force when we entered the lecture hall. A group of young men surrounded them, and their voices sometimes rose almost to shouting. It was an arresting sight, for they were not accustomed to debating with such seriousness and passion.

The lecturer entered, and the students took their seats, except for our group, which remained strangely absorbed in the debate. At last he intervened and told them to sit down.

After hearing a brief account of what had happened, he suggested that the whole class discuss the subject. Some students objected that it was a specialised issue requiring a religious scholar, but the lecturer persuaded them that the discussion should proceed. Most voted in favour of a debate one month later, giving each side enough time to prepare.

The members of my team—and even most of Amer’s opposing team—were confident in my ability to debate and “make the truth prevail”, as they put it. I was deeply anxious. The matter was no longer a group of questions circling in my own mind. The beliefs of dozens of students were now at stake, dependent on my ability to answer Amer’s questions and whatever objections and arguments he might present in the coming debate.

I knew that God would not abandon me, but I did not know how or where I could find the answers. Had Uncle Issa been in Oman, I would have gone to him, but he was in Germany for medical treatment and would not return soon.

I had no choice but to approach religious scholars. I was dismayed to discover that those I consulted had nothing beyond the same general answer I had already given Amer—an answer that might not persuade many people.

I was also surprised that, whenever I tried to explore the question more deeply, they became annoyed and warned me that delving into such matters was discouraged in religion and even forbidden.

Their words could neither extinguish the fire within me nor satisfy my hunger for truth. Instead of making me stop out of fear for my faith, their warnings drove me to search all the more insistently. Dozens of students were looking to me for a convincing answer, while a determined opponent wanted me to falter so that he could gloat and justify—to himself and to others—why he had turned away from religion.

The days passed and the debate drew near. Every avenue seemed closed, with no way out. It did not feel right to telephone Uncle Issa in Germany only a few days after his operation, yet the matter was serious and went beyond personal courtesy. I hesitated repeatedly, then made up my mind, lifted the receiver, and called him.

His voice was still weak, which deepened my reluctance. I asked about his condition, and he answered wearily. I almost ended the call after reassuring myself that he was recovering, but I pushed past my hesitation and briefly told him that I faced a college debate on the question and that the matter was important because the beliefs of dozens of students might depend on what I said.

Uncle Issa took my concern seriously. He admitted frankly that he too had not reached a satisfactory solution, but asked me to go to the library in his home and borrow a book called *Divine Justice* by Shaykh Murtada Mutahhari, which discussed the issue.

I spent days reading the book, especially its second chapter, “Untying the Knot”. I read it several times, but still did not feel that I had mastered the idea.

At last, dawn broke on the day of the debate. I was intensely distressed. The answer lay before me in the book, but I could not digest it well enough to present it. I was afraid—not so much of humiliation as of disappointing those who had trusted me.

After the dawn prayer I fell asleep with tears burning down my face and my heart calling upon God. From the depths of my being, I begged him not to abandon me because of my disobedience. I knew that, if he willed, he could inspire me with the answer. I swore to him, by his own right, that I was sincere and wanted only to support his religion.

Before the alarm rang, I woke with the answer clear in my mind. My God, how simple it was! Why had I not seen it before? I thanked God, leapt from my bed, took *Divine Justice*, and read the second chapter once more, this time in the light of the answer I had grasped in my sleep. I found that it was indeed what the book said. My God! Praise be to God! Now I could answer Amer's questions. Thank you, my Lord. How magnificent you are!



That evening the lecture hall resembled a crowded marketplace. Everyone was eager for the debate they had been awaiting for a month. Some students patted my shoulder on their way to their seats and offered words of encouragement or praise. I hardly noticed. I was extremely nervous; sweat covered my forehead and my hands trembled.

The debate was meant to be between my team and Amer's, but from the beginning it had taken the form of a personal challenge between him and me. My teammates gathered around me from every side as though I were the champion who would lead them to victory.

The discussion began. The lecturer asked Amer to restate his questions, then invited me to answer. I requested more time because the issue was specialised and difficult, and because my answer required two introductory premises. He agreed, provided that I did not exceed fifteen minutes.

“I do not deny that, at first, I found the matter extremely complicated. Once I understood the answer, however, I found it simple and clear. Before presenting it, I would like to ask Amer a question, if I may.”

“Go ahead, Muhammad.” The lecturer smiled encouragingly.

“Take your time,” Amer said with a confidence that suggested he was certain I would never reach an answer, however hard I tried. Had he not searched for one himself and questioned religious scholars in our area, only to find them as unable to answer as I had been?

“Thank you, Amer. You are asking why God gave you the features you have. Right?”

“Let us take that as an example.”

“Very well. If your father took you to a cosmetic surgeon who changed your face, would you then have the right to ask why God had given you those new features?”

“Of course not. But I would have the right to ask my father and the surgeon why they had given me those features.”

“Exactly. I agree with you.”

My agreement seemed to surprise him.

“Muhammad, allow me to clarify one point. If your answer rests on the claim that we human beings create evils and afflictions rather than God, then I will ask: why did God create the possibility of evil and disease in the first place?”

“Do not hurry. Let me complete my answer, and then respond as you wish.”

I spoke with a confidence I was only pretending to possess. Inside, I was frightened and confused.

“Before I answer, I need to explain two premises.

“First, the capacities we possess and the attributes by which we are described—intelligence, strength, height, skin colour, and the rest—are not things external to our existence. They are our existence. In reality, our existence is nothing other than the capacities and aptitudes we possess and the attributes by which we are characterised.

“The same is true of every being: a stone, water, the sun, a jellyfish, and every other creature. In reality, the existence of each is nothing other than the totality of its capacities, aptitudes, and attributes.

“Your facial features, whatever they may be, are your face itself. They are the limits and attributes of your face, not something separate from it. Likewise, any physical body is its extension, volume, mass, and other physical attributes; these are not two different things in reality. Does anyone disagree?”

Everyone listened. What I was saying seemed almost self-evident, so no student objected. The lecturer gestured for me to continue.

“By their nature, the attributes and capacities of every being in this universe interact with those of the other beings around it. Together, these interactions constitute the movement of the universe.

“For example, the nature of paper interacts with the liquid nature of water. A sheet becomes wet when it falls into water and, because of its own properties and those of the water, may tear. Our human bodies likewise interact with the properties of the earth—its mass, gravity, and the rest. That interaction enables us to walk, run, and jump, but not to fly like birds, breathe under water like fish, or crawl on our bellies like reptiles, because their bodies possess different natures and capacities.”

“Forgive me, Muhammad,” the lecturer interrupted. “Before you go further, I am not sure the idea is entirely clear to everyone. Can you explain it a little more?”

“Of course. What I mean is that all creatures and beings, in all their variety—planets, animals, trees, rivers, seas, living creatures, human beings, even angels and devils—interact with one another according to their attributes, aptitudes, and capacities.

“The interaction of those attributes and capacities gives rise to the laws and systems that govern the universe: gravity, the tides, cause and effect, and all the other laws that order existence.

“Although these laws govern and determine the movement of the universe, they are not independent things imposed upon beings from outside. Rather, they are nothing other than the beings themselves and their interactions.

“If a stone falls on an egg, it will naturally break it. If it does not, there must be some cause protecting the egg; otherwise, the stone would not be a stone or the egg would not be an egg.

“All science and the whole order of existence rest on this regularity. No one would believe, for example, that pouring water onto the ground could produce a nuclear explosion. If the United States claimed that it had dropped no bomb on Hiroshima, but merely scattered flowers and thereby caused the explosion, we would laugh ourselves to death at such contempt for our intelligence, would we not?

“The Qur’an calls these regularities God’s unchanging ways (sunnat Allah) and affirms that they do not fail: ‘You will never find any change in the way of God, and you will never find any alteration in the way of God’ (Q 35:43).”

“An excellent point. Continue,” the lecturer said.

“The second premise is that God did not create each being through an act of will independent of all the others. He did not

create my father by one isolated will, me by another, and every creature by a separate act. Rather, he created the whole universe, with all its beings and components, through one simple divine will: a single, continuous bestowal of existence. The Qur'an describes this by saying, 'We have created everything according to a measure, and our command is only one, like the blink of an eye' (Q 54:49–50). Created beings then formed and took shape through the laws governing the universe and the order of cause and effect.

"This second premise follows naturally from the first. According to cause and effect, my existence, with all my qualities and capacities, is the natural—indeed, inevitable—result of one particular sperm among the billions produced by my father fertilising one particular ovum released by my mother, each of them carrying particular genes and inherited traits.

"Had a different sperm fertilised that ovum, or had my mother released a different ovum, I would not have existed. Another human being, with other qualities, would have come into existence.

"The same applies to every creature and every being. Each must have a cause that brought it into existence, and that cause determined its attributes and capacities in the very act of bringing it into being."

"Are you saying that God created the universe and now it operates by natural laws without any further involvement from him?" Amer asked with interest.

"Of course not. The universe and everything within it are always, and in their very essence, dependent on God for existence. God's bestowal of existence is continuous and uninterrupted, like the sun's continual bestowal of light upon the earth, by which things become visible. That is why God describes himself as light: 'God is the light of the heavens and the earth' (Q 24:35)."

“Then who brought me into existence with the qualities and faculties I possess: God, or my father and mother?”

“Both statements are true. God brought you into existence, and your parents were also the immediate causes of your existence. Tell me, Amer: who planted the mango tree in your garden?”

“My father.”

“Yet God says, ‘Have you considered what you sow? Is it you who make it grow, or are we the grower?’ (Q 56:63–64). He attributes the plant’s growth to himself. Let me make the point clearer. When we light a fire, it produces intense heat. If we bring an egg close to that heat, it cooks. Is that right?”

“So far, yes.”

“Then what cooked the egg: the fire or the heat?”

Relief swept through me when several students answered spontaneously, “The fire and the heat,” and “Both.”

“Now we can return to Amer’s objection. Why is one person dark-skinned and another light-skinned? Why is one beautiful, intelligent, strong, and wealthy, while another is unattractive, less intelligent, weak, and poor? Why did God create germs and wild beasts?

“The answer is that God bestows existence in one simple, continuous act upon everything that can exist. He does not withhold existence from something merely because it is deficient, for God is generous and bountiful, and existence in itself is good. Each being receives from that goodness according to the aptitudes and capacities produced by the interaction of beings within the order of causes and effects.

“The Qur’an illustrates this by saying: ‘Say: God is the creator of all things, and he is the One, the All-Subduing. He sends down water from the sky, and valleys flow according to their measure’ (Q 13:16–17). Rain may be abundant, but each valley receives only what its own capacity can hold, not the

full abundance of the rain. In the same way, God's bestowal of existence and creation is vast and without limit, but created beings receive from it according to what the causes directly responsible for their existence allow.

"Amer, this is precisely the point of the example with which I began. When I asked what you would say if your father took you to a cosmetic surgeon who changed your features, you replied that you would not blame God, because your father and the surgeon, not God, had changed your features. In the same way, the qualities with which you came into the world are the natural outcome of the genes inherited from your parents. Everything that happens in the universe is likewise a natural result of the movement of beings as they exercise their attributes and capacities in pursuit of their needs."

I paused for a few moments, then turned towards the students.

"Allow me to ask you something. Every one of us feels deficient in one respect or another. Would you rather not exist at all? Do you wish God had never created you? Or are you happy to exist and grateful that God did not withhold existence from you because of the deficiencies you possess?"

I was deeply moved as I spoke, filled with gratitude towards God. I was therefore surprised when the lecturer began to applaud warmly. The students followed, including Amer.

"I have asked many people about this dilemma," Amer said, "but I have never heard an answer like this. I still have two questions."

"Excellent. Ask them," the lecturer said.

"The first is this. According to what you have said, Muhammad, God bestows existence through one simple, continuous act, and every being receives from that bestowal according to the cause that brought it into existence. But there

must be a being that received existence directly from God and had no prior cause other than God. Isn't that so?"

"That is correct. This first caused being—also called the first existent or, in another terminology, the first emanation—possesses every perfection, power, and intensity of existence that a created being could possess, including will and awareness. From this first existent proceed the remaining beings in their ordered chain of causes and effects, as I explained."

"To be honest, the idea is new to me, and I need time to absorb it. Let us move to my second question. Correct me if I am wrong. The essence of your argument is that the universe proceeds according to systems and laws determined by the interaction of beings, in accordance with attributes and capacities that are their very existence and not something external to them. Is that right?"

"Exactly. Thank you for that excellent summary."

"You also said that these laws are God's unchanging ways (sunnat Allah) and cannot fail under any circumstances. An egg would not be an egg if a stone fell on it and it did not break, and water would not be water if it caused a nuclear explosion. Is that right?"

"It is."

"Then what is the use of prayer? Why do we call upon God? If everything in the universe proceeds through the movement and interaction of beings according to their attributes and capacities, why do we pray to God?"

I fell silent for a moment and swallowed. In an instant, memories flashed through me: God had always been with me, caring for me at every moment of my life, even when I had failed to see it and had imagined that he had abandoned me. A tremor ran through my body.

"Tell me, Amer: if you saw a fire burning beside the bed of your little brother while he slept, what would you do?"

“I would wake him and try to put out the fire.”

“How would you extinguish it?”

“With a fire extinguisher, of course.”

“Would that violate the laws of nature?”

“Of course not.”

“Suppose you could put out the fire with a single breath. Would you wake your brother, or simply extinguish it?”

“Would that not violate the laws of nature?” Amer asked with a smile. “What are you trying to say?”

“You will see in a moment. First answer this: if you possessed Superman’s strength, would putting out the fire with one breath violate the laws of nature?”

“No. It would occur in accordance with natural laws.”

“Then whether an act conforms to the laws of nature depends upon the being acting and upon its attributes, powers, and capacities. Is that right?”

“Yes.”

“You extinguish a fire with an extinguisher. Your little brother cannot do so because he is too small to carry or control it. Superman would not need the extinguisher because, with his extraordinary strength, one breath would be enough. Tell me, then: would God—whose power has no limit—not be able to extinguish the fire?”

Amer fell silent and gave no answer. I took two steps towards him and continued.

“Indeed, God is powerful over all things. He needs neither an extinguisher nor a breath. ‘His command, when he wills a thing, is only to say to it, “Be,” and it is’ (Q 36:82). His intervention violates none of the natural laws. We call upon him because he is mighty, all-powerful, and merciful to us; because we and everything in the universe belong to him and remain in his hand; and because he has commanded us to pray and

promised an answer in one form or another: ‘Call upon me; I will answer you’ (Q40:60).”

“Wonderful.” Amer applauded, a satisfied smile spreading across his face.

His positive response surprised me. I had expected him to argue and find some way to answer, for he was very skilful in debate. I had imagined that he would close his heart and mind to the truth and that pride would prevent him from admitting it. I had judged him unfairly.

“Thank you, Amer. Now, please allow me a few more minutes to share my own experience of this question.”

I lowered my head, closed my eyes, and remained silent for a few moments. In a flash, I remembered the bitterness and suffering I had endured and how God had accompanied me through it all. Then I raised my head, filled with mixed emotions—above all, deep gratitude to God. I spoke with visible feeling, but in a quiet, steady voice.

“All of us pass through difficult circumstances from time to time, but I may have suffered more than most of you. I lived in poverty all my life. Then Father died while I was in my final year of secondary school. I was profoundly attached to him, and his death left me unable to enter university. Now I am pulled between many responsibilities—home, work, and study—and I cannot find enough time even for rest or sleep.

“Outwardly, I may appear the most miserable person among you. In truth, I may be the happiest.

“I have discovered that every calamity I have endured so far has been for my good. Father’s death plunged me into depression for a full year, but it also opened my heart and spirit to true love—the love of God. Had it not been for the shock of his death and the depth of its effect upon me, I might still be the soft, pampered young man I once was. My inability to enter university opened beautiful new horizons in my life. The

pressures created by my many responsibilities strengthened my determination and will, sharpened my mind, and revealed within me beauty, wonder, and strength I would never otherwise have discovered.

“What I mean is that the calamities, trials, and afflictions we imagine to be evil are in fact good for us, and they unfold beneath God’s care. Out of his mercy and love, God watches over us and tests us from time to time with different kinds of hardship. He says:

“‘We will certainly test you with a measure of fear and hunger, and loss of wealth, lives, and fruits. Give good news to those who are patient—those who, when calamity strikes them, say, “We belong to God, and to him we return.” Those are the ones upon whom are blessings and mercy from their Lord, and those are the rightly guided’ (Q 2:155–157).

“There is no evil in existence. How could there be evil when the only source of existence is God, who is absolute goodness, perfection, and beauty, with no evil or deficiency in him? The problem is that we look at things from a narrow and limited angle: the angle of our own egos and the pleasure or pain things bring us, even when that pleasure or pain is immediate and temporary.

“For many children, school therefore appears evil. Your taekwondo classes once appeared evil to you, Amer. And does not human culture generally regard death as an absolute evil? In reality, death is an immense good, for it raises the human being to a stage millions of times greater and better, just as birth raises a child into this world. Yes, death is a tremendous and beautiful good because it is an ascent towards God and towards happiness for a human being in their natural state.

“Father died, and we wept from the pain of separation. We also pitied him because we imagined that a calamity had

befallen him. Yet in reality, his death was the finest and most beautiful thing that happened to him in his life, for he moved to the abode of happiness and divine pleasure.”

I stopped. Silence filled the hall and lasted for several moments. Everyone seemed moved, perhaps by the solemnity of death, which we feared to mention in our gatherings as though death itself were a jinn, and perhaps because I had once again spoken with such feeling and conviction.

The lecturer’s applause broke the silence, and the students joined him.

“Excellent, Muhammad. A fine performance, a beautiful argument, and a positive, hopeful view of life. We need to learn this from you.”

I then turned to the students and asked whether anyone wished to ask a question or make a comment. Everyone chose silence. The discussion ended well, praise be to God.



I was utterly exhausted, perhaps because of the anxiety and tension that had consumed me for an entire month. Now a great weight had lifted from my chest. I ought to have been intoxicated by victory, almost flying with happiness, yet something deep within me disturbed my joy and denied me contentment. I could not identify it, but its effect was strong enough to make me ignore all the praise around me and turn inward in search of its source.

I asked the lecturer’s permission to leave, got into my car, and drove to Qurum Beach. As usual, it was nearly empty apart from a few people and families strolling or exercising.

I lay on my back upon the soft sand. Its coolness seemed to draw every trace of fatigue from my body, while the gentle air filled my lungs and chest with freshness and energy. I moved my hands from beneath my head and stretched them beside

me, resting my head directly on the sand in complete relaxation.

Yes, my thirst had not yet been quenched. It was true that I had understood the solution to the problem of divine justice. That understanding had removed a great burden from my chest and reduced some of the incessant buzzing in my mind. Yet it had also increased my longing to know the whole truth. The larger picture was still obscure, and many of its truths remained unknown to me.

Why had God created us? Was it not to worship him? Why, then, had he allowed Satan to tempt us and thereby cause us to be cast into the Fire and torment? Why had he answered Satan's plea and granted his request when that request would harm us? Had Satan provoked God—exalted be he above what they describe? Did God love Satan? Or, God forbid, did he hate us? Every one of these possibilities was clearly false. But was there another? What was it?

Suppose I owned a beautiful, magnificent horse that I had bought to enter in an international race. Would it not be complete folly to give my enemy permission to enter the stable, tempt the horse, and feed it something that would poison it and prevent it from racing? Would that not defeat the very purpose for which I had bought the horse?

And would it not then be unjust to punish the horse for eating from another person's hand when I myself had trained it to eat only from mine?

Why, then, did God create us for his worship and for stewardship, knowing that, by virtue of the causes that brought us into being, we are filled with appetites, desires, and illusions—so much so that the angels described humankind as those “[who will spread corruption there and shed blood](#)” (Q 2:30)—and then permit Satan to tempt us by exploiting the very desires and illusions with which we were created? We commit

one sin after another. Most people fall into corruption, and the angels' concern comes true. Then God, knower of the unseen and the seen, casts us into the fire of Hell, whose sparks burn more fiercely than the sun, for periods that seem never to end. Why?

Was this not evil itself—an evil not produced by the universe's network of causes and effects, but arising by God's own will, since he had placed upon us a responsibility beyond our strength and then allowed Satan to lead us astray?

My tears flowed freely, and a sense of oppression and bewilderment filled me. My Lord, forgive my boldness towards you, but how can I silence the voice of my mind? Do you want me to silence it? Are you not the one who calls us to use reason so that it may lead us to you? I am certain that there is much I must still learn. I am certain that a magnificent story lies behind this universe, fashioned by the one whose attributes are exalted beyond description. I love you, my Lord, from the depths of my heart, for I know that you are the most merciful of the merciful and that you love us.

Then I sank into a deep sleep.



CHAPTER THREE

The Story of Life

Friday, 22 June 2001

At seven o'clock on Friday morning, as usual, I was curled beneath my blanket against the cold of the room. The air conditioner was blowing directly at me. I was sunk in a deep sleep, unmoved by all the efforts my mischievous sisters Khadija and Khawla made to wake me, until they decided to take turns jumping on my stomach.

I almost exploded with anger. I had not gone to bed until after the dawn prayer, having spent the whole night with my friends at Qurum Beach, talking, laughing, and swimming in the sea. But when I heard their innocent laughter and saw their delight at having me with them, my anger softened. I felt that, in some small way, I was giving them a little of the fatherly tenderness they missed.

It was the day of our monthly gathering on Mother's side of the family. All my maternal uncles and aunts, together with their families, would spend the whole day at Uncle Issa's farm, enjoying one another's company.

I looked forward to these gatherings from one month to the next, but this time I was exhausted after the previous night. Still, I had promised my sisters a week earlier that we would leave for the farm first thing in the morning, and everyone was ready and waiting for me. I sprang out of bed, splashed cold water on my face to clear away the last traces of sleep, changed my clothes, and we all set off.

In my haste, I put on two different sandals and did not notice until we reached the car. Khawla spotted them, pointed at my feet, and burst out laughing. Within seconds, everyone was laughing as they climbed into the car. Needless to say, I became the subject of their jokes for the next quarter of an hour. I finally diverted them by suggesting the guessing game “Hidden Character”, but Khadija first insisted on giving us a riddle she had heard from a friend, who claimed that no one had ever solved it. Just children’s talk.

The riddle concerned two doors, one leading to Paradise and the other to Hell. A guard stood at each door: one always lied and the other always told the truth. You did not know which door led where, nor which guard was truthful; the truthful guard might even be standing at the door to Hell. You were allowed to ask one guard a single question that could be answered only with yes or no, and from that answer you had to identify the door to Paradise with certainty. The riddle was to discover the question.

We all seemed to sink into thought, searching for the answer. Then I glanced in the rear-view mirror and saw Grandmother resting her head against the car door, already fast asleep. My sisters had begun quarrelling over who would sit by the window, while Mother took a small Qur’an from her handbag and began to read.

We were all delighted that the summer holiday had begun and a long, tiring school year was over. Our joy was

heightened by our plan to travel to Turkey, then perform the umrah pilgrimage and visit the Prophet. Our financial circumstances had improved greatly since my promotion the previous year to head of the accounting department, with a monthly salary of 1,200 Omani rials.

My happiness was beyond description. It would be my first time on an aeroplane, my first chance to travel like other people. It soothed my wounded pride and restored something of the dignity I had long felt poverty had taken from me. Yes, the journey would prove to everyone that we were no longer poor.

The mere thought of visiting the Prophet, peace be upon him, sent a shiver through me. I longed for him and needed to pour out the feelings that crowded my chest. I wanted to tell him that I had once again surpassed myself and earned my bachelor's degree with a very good overall grade, despite all my difficult circumstances. Perhaps he would be pleased with me and, out of mercy, pray to God to grant me repentance and forgiveness.

Several years had passed since I began my career. I had made immense efforts—tilling the soil with my fingertips and watering the crop with my sweat and tears. Yet I had harvested more than I had ever dreamed: a sense of strength, determination, and happiness that filled me and seemed to blaze within me.

Even the questions about the universe and life had grown quiet. Their buzzing in my mind had subsided, and I remembered them only now and then, without finding time to think about them, let alone immerse myself in them and search for answers.

The one thing that troubled me, leaving me defeated, frustrated, and at times despairing of myself, was the failure of all my repeated attempts to give up my addiction to forbidden

songs. Sometimes I succeeded for several weeks and imagined that I had finally escaped their hold and would never return. Then my resolve weakened, Satan whispered to me, and I found myself listening again with pleasure and excitement.

Most people might have regarded this sin as slight, or not as a sin at all, just as they had grown accustomed to many other major sins, such as backbiting, malicious gossip, and lying. I did not see it that way. I had been raised in a devout, conservative home.

Whenever I came to my senses, I hated and despised myself for what I had done, and I felt ashamed before God. How often I wept before him in bitterness and sorrow, ashamed and remorseful, yet still failed to give it up.

I was bewildered by myself. What made me so attached to these songs? What pleasure did they offer that I could not relinquish them? It was nothing extraordinary, so why could I not stop, or at least replace them with religious chants or quiet music? How could the will with which I had overcome such formidable hardships retreat before this simple pleasure? And what had become of the power of self-suggestion with which I had overcome insomnia, anxiety, obsessive doubts, and other difficult problems? Why could I not use it to help me leave the songs behind?

I was not trying to excuse myself. I knew that I listened to the songs entirely of my own free will, but I could not understand the complex workings of my own self. I wondered whether the long cycle of listening and abstaining had created an inner pressure: the intensity of my efforts to stop, the severity of my self-reproach and shame before God, and, against all that, my feverish longing to listen again. Perhaps that pressure had become a defensive barrier raised by my own self in its urge towards wrongdoing, preventing me from dealing with my attachment to songs. I therefore decided to

set the problem of songs aside for a long while and turn my attention to other qualities I wanted to reform and develop within myself. When the pressure and that defensive barrier had gradually subsided, I would return to the problem and uproot it once and for all.

“Khadija, the answer is to ask either guard: ‘If I asked the other guard whether the door he is guarding leads to Paradise, would he say yes?’ If the guard answers yes, the door guarded by the person you asked is the door to Paradise. If he answers no, his door leads to Hell.”

“Impossible. You are joking. That answer is obviously wrong.”

“It is correct. I swear by God.”

It proved impossible to make my sister understand the solution, but I knew I would never escape her persistent questioning unless I tried. I explained it again and again, to no effect, until we reached the farm and I was rescued from her questioning.



Uncle Issa’s family had spent the night at the farm, and we were the first to arrive. That suited me very well, for I needed to discuss the next steps in my career with him.

He was swinging on a rope whose ends he had tied to the trunk of the great baydam tree, a tropical almond, in the yard overlooking the farm entrance. He jumped down and came to welcome us warmly, then embraced me, congratulated me on my success and bachelor’s degree, and reminded me how God had intended good for me when I failed to earn the marks required for a university scholarship.

Tamer soon came to greet us as we made our way into the yard. Uncle Issa, Tamer, and I sat on the grass beneath the baydam tree, where my uncle had arranged several

evaporative coolers to soften the heat. Mother went to the kitchen to help his wife bake thin rakhal bread and prepare breakfast. Nearby, my sisters played with his young daughter Reem, while Grandmother went to lie down and rest after the journey.

“Uncle, what is the next step?”

“To rest, my dear,” he said with a laugh.

“I truly need a rest. But before I can rest, I need to know what I should do next to develop my career.”

“You now have a bachelor’s degree, the Certified Management Accountant (CMA) qualification, and five years of experience. On that basis, I would advise you to pursue an MBA at a respected university.”

“I see it differently, and I want your opinion. I once read in a professional journal that the ability to adapt to different organisational environments is an extremely important skill.”

“That is true.”

“Remaining in the same organisation for many years, especially at the beginning of my career, would erode that adaptability. At present, I am also under intense pressure from my expatriate manager, who fears I may compete for his position. Our new regional director tends to side with him. If I begin an MBA now, my manager may turn my working life into hell, and I would not be surprised if he tried to get rid of me with the regional director’s help.

“At the same time, I feel I need a stronger and more professional grounding in accounting and auditing, financial and operational risk analysis, and systems of internal control.”

“What are you thinking of doing?”

“I am considering moving to one of the international Big Four audit firms and staying for about two years, until I have learnt the secrets of the profession and become proficient in auditing and accounting. During that time, I would complete the US Certified Public Accountant (CPA) qualification.”

“Excellent. But you may have to accept less than your current salary. I doubt they would offer you the same amount.”

“That would not trouble me.”

“And the MBA? When would you study for it?”

“Although I now have a year of management experience as head of the accounting department, I still need more management experience if I am to gain the full benefit of an MBA. I would rather not begin it until I have acquired enough experience at the international audit firm.”

“Very reasonable. Do you need my help in finding the position?”

“Thank you, Uncle, but not this time. Tomorrow I will ask for a meeting with the partner at the firm that audits our accounts. It is one of the Big Four.”

“With God’s blessing, my dear. May he grant you success.”



We remained beneath the tree as my uncles and aunts arrived one after another. Of my five maternal aunts and eight maternal uncles, nine had confirmed that they would attend; so far, two aunts and four uncles had arrived.

For several minutes, I was the centre of their conversation and praise. They were genuinely pleased by my success and achievements. Uncle Hassan was perhaps the most deeply moved after Uncle Issa, for he and Father had been close friends since childhood.

“May God have mercy on your father,” Uncle Hassan said. “He would have been very happy with your success if he were alive.”

“May God have mercy on him,” Aunt Zainab replied. “He’s alive now in barzakh. He knows of Muhammad’s achievements and rejoices in them.”

“That is true,” Uncle Salman said. “The sad thing is that, in our culture, we have grown accustomed to thinking of death as though it were the end of life.”

“To be honest, I would rather death were the end,” Aunt Najla replied, “than live in a narrow pit beneath the earth, be crushed by the grave, and be tormented by Munkar and Nakir for the wrongs we commit in this world—only for God to raise us on the Day of Resurrection and cast us into Hell, burning us in its fire for periods whose length only he knows.”

“That cannot be right,” Uncle Salman interrupted. “Is God not the most merciful of the merciful?”

“He is the most merciful of the merciful, but only towards obedient believers. For people like us, who commit sins, he is severe in punishment.”

“I do not know much about religion,” Aunt Zainab said, “but I know that cannot be true. It would be a terrible injustice, and God cannot be unjust. He has no need to wrong anyone, so why would he wrong us?”

Aunt Najla answered with a verse: “God did not wrong them; rather, they wronged themselves” (Q16:33).

“Everyone, let us hear what Shaykh Issa thinks,” Uncle Hassan said, winking mischievously at him.

“Is what I am saying not true, Issa?” Aunt Najla asked.

“I have a completely different view.”

Before he could continue, the rest of my uncles entered the farm together. Everyone rose to greet them, and one can imagine the cheerful commotion created by the reunion of more than fifty members of the family.

As usual, the women and girls went to the women's sitting room. Some of my uncles remained beneath the tree, talking and joking, while most of us went to the field to play football. We played for a long time and stopped only when Uncle Hassan came to tell us it was time to pray.



As usual, we prayed beneath the tree, led by Uncle Issa, the most devout and religiously knowledgeable of my uncles, who had spent several years pursuing religious studies.

When the prayer was over, we settled again beneath the tree. Some played carrom, one group played Uno, others talked, and a few walked around the farm. A large group of my aunts and my uncles' wives resumed their discussion of death and what follows it, and eventually agreed to ask Uncle Issa.

He was playing Uno with us when my aunts asked him to complete the answer he had been unable to give earlier because the others had arrived.

"I would like to know the answer too," Uncle Hassan said.

"Everyone, Issa is going to explain what happens after death," Uncle Salman announced. "Anyone who wants to listen should come over."

Uncle Issa looked unsettled. He had not prepared for this, but he quickly composed himself, with a pensive smile, as though his mind were racing to find a simple way to present the subject.

Everyone listened closely, waiting for him to begin, perhaps because death haunted us all. Death truly was frightening. I too longed to know more about it.

Uncle Issa began by reciting from the Qur'an:

“We created the human being from an essence of clay; then we placed him as a drop in a secure resting place; then we made the drop into a clinging form, and the clinging form into a lump, and the lump into bones, and we clothed the bones with flesh; then we brought him forth as another creation. Blessed, then, is God, the best of creators. Then, after that, you shall surely die. Then, on the Day of Resurrection, you shall surely be raised” (Q 23:12–16).

“God Almighty has spoken the truth,” he said. His expression was unusually serious, as though he were about to tell us something of great importance—or perhaps he was gathering his thoughts so that he could present the idea with the clarity we had come to expect from him.

“First, I ask you to remove from your minds the ideas of death, ending, annihilation, non-existence, and every similar word. Listen instead to the beautiful story I am about to tell you. It is closely connected with our subject.

“Every one of us—indeed, every human being on earth—has a beautiful story of existence made up of four stages. On the surface, our stories look very similar, but in reality they differ as our faces and fingerprints differ. Each of us has a distinct story of existence, one that has a beginning but no end.

“The first stage began when each of us was conceived: when the fortunate, heroic sperm from the father, one among billions, fertilised the fortunate ovum—one the womb had selected from among billions, brought to maturity, and released into the womb to await that sacred moment.

“With each act of fertilisation, the story of one of us began—the story of a new human being chosen from among trillions of living creatures that struggled to their last breath for the

greatest prize: to become human. From among them all, you were chosen, I was chosen, and each one of us was chosen.”

“Amazing,” Uncle Jaafar said.

He had been lying on his back beneath the baydam tree. Now he sat up to listen more closely. Uncle Issa did not turn towards him, but continued.

“Those living creatures could not understand what it meant to become human. It lay beyond their capacities. If someone had told the chosen sperm that the vast world in which it swam was no more than a point—less than a point—within an immense outer world, and that within a few months it would become a complete human being, far larger, better, stronger, and more capable, able to experience pleasure and pain trillions of times more intensely than it did then, it would have laughed and dismissed the claim as a tale of the ancients. It would have been excused, of course, for it possessed neither awareness nor reason.

“Fertilisation takes place and the first cell is formed, but that is only the beginning. The road remains long, arduous, and full of danger. This single cell must pass through many stages before it becomes a complete and healthy human being.

“The long, perilous journey begins in the womb, a world far larger and more complex than the one in which the sperm had swum. Days and months pass. The single cell divides and multiplies at a speed beyond imagination; its size grows trillions of times over, and its existence becomes unimaginably more complex.

“Within a few months, it gradually develops from one simple cell into a complete human being with a heart and mind, five senses, and a spirit—the human spirit that can use all the body’s capacities and instruments to hear, see, love, think, and do countless other beautiful things.

“‘Wait. There is a grave mistake,’ the nine-month-old foetus would cry in protest. ‘Are you saying that I can see, hear, and think?’

“We would answer, ‘Yes. You can see, hear, and smell. You can think and love, and do many things we cannot even list.’

“It would reply, ‘This is madness. I do not understand what you are saying. What is sight? What is hearing? What is love? What are all these absurd things you mention?’

“We would then realise the difficulty and say, ‘You are excused. The world of the womb in which you live is incomplete, narrow, and limited. It allows you to use only a small part of the capacities you possess, and even those within very tight limits. You are therefore unable to understand what we mean.’

“The foetus would laugh at us. ‘Woe to you. These are only tales of the ancients. The world in which I live is millions of times more complex and advanced than the world of seminal fluid from which I came, and you tell me it is almost nothing beside the world beyond it. Forgive me, but what you claim is sheer fantasy.’

“It would not matter if the foetus refused to believe us. It has neither reason nor the will to alter its fate, for better or worse. Whether it believes us or rejects what we say is therefore of no consequence.”

“Are you referring to those who deny that they will be resurrected in the Hereafter after this worldly life?” Aunt Zainab asked.

“Exactly. Let us return to the story. The days pass, and soon the foetus dies in the world of the womb. Forgive me—I mean that it moves to another realm, the world of earthly life.

“The passage into this world, which we call birth, is not easy. It is very painful. The foetus must leave the womb through a very narrow opening that squeezes it as it passes. It

cries from the pain, while we—those who love it and long for its presence among us—laugh, rejoice, and celebrate. We do not disregard its pain. We rejoice because it has arrived, and because that pain is almost nothing beside the happiness awaiting it in this world.

“Here we are now in earthly life. We know in general what happened to us in the earlier worlds, but remember none of it, as though it had never occurred. All we feel is that we are here, enjoying the abilities and capacities God has granted us.”

“This is the second stage of our story, is it not, Issa?” Uncle Jaafar asked.

“Yes, Jaafar: the stage of earthly life, which usually lasts no more than a hundred years. It is followed by the third stage, beginning at the moment we die in this world—or rather, the moment we are born into barzakh. That stage may continue for thousands of years, until the fourth and final stage begins: the Hereafter, which never ends. Not a hundred thousand years, not a million, a billion, or a trillion, but beyond all measure. Mathematically, the combined duration of the first three stages counts as zero beside the final, endless stage.

“What are those coming worlds like? I do not know, and I do not believe that any human being knows except those whom God has taught. Imagine one sperm asking another as they swim through the seminal fluid towards their highest goal, the fertilisation of the ovum:

““They say there is an enormous world beyond this one called earthly life. Do you believe it?”

“Its companion replies, ‘Yes. It is immensely large, complex, and wonderful—far beyond anything you can imagine.’

““Really? You have made me long for it. Can you describe it?”

“Of course. I have read that earthly life is trillions of times larger than our world. People live upon a great sphere, rather like our heads. They have a beautiful sun, which also resembles our heads, and magnificent seas much like the fluid in which we swim.’

“‘What a marvellous world. I wish I could go there.’

“Tell me, by God: can you imagine that sperm understanding even a speck of the world of earthly life? Could it comprehend this beautiful universe with its galaxies and stars? Could it understand love, knowledge, goodness, or beauty? Could it grasp happiness and misery, motherhood, tender longing, passionate love, or yearning?

“The same is true of us. We may describe barzakh or the Hereafter as the sperm described earthly life, but we cannot comprehend their reality. Even those who dwell in barzakh cannot comprehend the true reality of the Hereafter.

“To form some impression of the difference between those coming worlds and this one, compare your existence as that first fertilised cell with your existence now as a complete human being, then imagine that in barzakh you will develop by a similar proportion—indeed, far more. Compare the world of seminal fluid, or even the womb, with earthly life: this vast universe of millions of galaxies, one of the smallest of which is the Milky Way, with our solar system and all its planets and moons lying near the outer edge of one of its arms. Then imagine barzakh as larger, vaster, and more developed than earthly life by the same proportion as earthly life surpasses the womb, and the Hereafter surpassing barzakh by a similar proportion.

“But wait. This is only an analogy intended to make the meaning easier to grasp. The reality is far greater. Although earthly life is so much more developed than the womb and the world of the sperm, we are still made of physical matter bound

by time and space. In the stages to come, neither we nor our worlds will be made of this same physical substance, and we will not be confined by time and space.

“Can you now imagine what we and our worlds will become in the later stages of our story?”

“It seems to me that we might—” Aunt Najla began.

“Of course not,” Uncle Issa interrupted instinctively. “It is impossible. God says, ‘**We shall bring you forth in a form you do not know**’ (Q 56:61).”

He continued, “In the same proportion by which we and the world of barzakh develop beyond earthly life, our capacity to experience pleasure and happiness, pain and torment, also develops. Indeed, these become part of the reality of our being: we ourselves become happiness, Paradise, and divine pleasure, or, conversely, misery and Hell, just as coal becomes glowing embers.

“Then, by the same proportion by which we and the Hereafter develop beyond barzakh, our experience of pleasure and happiness, pain and torment, develops again in the Hereafter beyond what it was in barzakh.

“Our existence in this world, with all the qualities and capacities we possess, was not chosen by us. It was determined by the particular sperm and ovum from which each of us was formed, and by our existence in the womb, where we had no knowledge, power, or will to determine the form and identity with which we entered this life.

“Our existence in barzakh and then in the Hereafter, however—the qualities and capacities we possess there, the happiness and pleasure we enjoy, or the pain and torment we suffer—will be shaped by our movement, choices, and decisions in this world. Yes, we are the ones who form the reality of our being and identity in the later stages of our story.”

“Please explain that last point, Issa,” Uncle Salman said.

At that moment, the housemaid brought a tray filled with glasses of lemonade. Uncle Issa took one, sipped from it several times, placed it beside him, and resumed.

“You mean: how are we the ones who form the reality of our being and identity in the coming worlds?”

“Yes.”

I was so deeply absorbed in Uncle Issa’s last words that I had not noticed Uncle Salman’s question. What he had said answered one of the hardest questions that had troubled me for years. With the excitement of someone who had found water after a long thirst, I spoke eagerly.

“That is wonderful, Uncle. What you have said answers a question that has troubled me for years.”

“Which question?”

“Why does God torment us in the Fire? What harm do our sins cause him when we do not intend to defy his will, but commit them because desire overcomes us in our weakness and ignorance? And why, when we commit a small sin for a limited time—listening to songs occasionally, for example—would God torment us with suffering trillions of times greater than the sin in both severity and duration?”

“That is precisely the point. God does not torment or punish us. We torment ourselves through the form of being we create for ourselves in barzakh and the Hereafter. God is the guide who warns and counsels us so that we may avoid that suffering. Out of mercy, he sends messengers so that we do not wrong ourselves and distort our being, then suffer as a result. It is just like a loving mother warning her child against taking drugs. The act may last only seconds, yet it may ruin a life for months or even cause death.

“This brings us back to Salman’s question: how do we form the reality of our being and identity in the coming worlds of

barzakh and the Hereafter? The detailed answer lies in the second stage of our story—earthly life. The details differ from one person to another, just as our faces differ, but the central foundation is the same in every story.”

Uncle Issa recited another passage from the Qur’an:

“When your Lord said to the angels, ‘I am creating a human being from clay. When I have formed him and breathed into him of my spirit, fall down before him in prostration’”
(Q 38:71–72).

“We enter this world with two dimensions: a bodily, animal dimension and a spiritual, psychological one. Skin colour, hair, height, and our other physical traits, together with intelligence, cheerfulness, courage, and all the other psychological traits and latent capacities of both dimensions, are inherited and determined by the set of genes carried by the particular sperm and ovum from which each of us was formed.

“Yet traits and latent capacities are not all that we bring into this world. We also arrive with a shared set of standards and values implanted in all of us, including knowledge of God, attachment to him, love for him, and servanthood to him. This innate disposition is what we call the fitra.

“Physical traits may be difficult, and sometimes impossible, to change. Psychological traits, however—which form the basis of our movement in this world—together with our latent capacities and the values and standards of the fitra, never remain fixed. They continually change, grow, or diminish according to our movement and will, the knowledge we acquire, and the beliefs we embrace.

“They change through our view of life and our simplest daily actions: while we study, work, play, sleep, deal with friends and family, engage with the society around us, and interact with every part of the universe we can perceive; while

we think, feel, and live life in all its detail. It is as though these actions were letters writing and shaping our inner qualities—knowledge, will, determination, wisdom, love, piety, beauty, goodness, courage, certainty, and many others we may be unable to name because the material nature of this world is too limited to reveal the whole range of our inner reality. Yet the most important of all these qualities—at their beginning and their end—is our awareness of our servanthood to God.”

“Issa—” Uncle Jaafar began.

“Please, let him finish,” Uncle Salman interrupted.

Uncle Issa continued, “We come into this world with needs arising from both dimensions within us, spirit and body. We need to eat, drink, dress, enjoy ourselves, love, think, learn, and take pride, among many other things. We interact with the world and all that exists within it in order to meet those needs. We study, learn, search, work, create, and toil. As one need is met, others arise, and from childhood until death we strive continually to meet needs that never end.

“To earn your living with dignity and security, and to live without the humiliation of need, you must study and learn for many years, then work and toil. Throughout every stage of study and employment, you face countless daily situations and must make many choices. Those choices determine your traits—or, more precisely, your settled dispositions—and through them you shape the self you become.

“You inherit from your parents a certain measure of courage, and in this world you build upon it. If you repeatedly respond fearfully and timidly, you form fear and cowardice within yourself until they become part of your psychological being. If you respond courageously, you build courage until it becomes part of you. And if your choices are mixed—cowardly at one time and brave at another—you increase or diminish

your reserve of courage according to your decisions and responses.

“The Prophet, peace be upon him, said: ‘Truthfulness leads to righteousness, and righteousness leads to Paradise. A person continues to speak the truth until he is recorded with God as truthful. Falsehood leads to wickedness, and wickedness leads to the Fire. A person continues to lie until he is recorded with God as a liar.’ The same occurs with every other inner quality: knowledge, will, piety, certainty, wisdom, forbearance, and the rest.

“At the end of the second stage of our story—or, to put it another way, when the body fails and the inner dimension within us, the spirit, can no longer continue with it in this world—the spirit leaves and journeys to another realm, incomparably wider, more beautiful, and better than this one. There begins the third stage of its story, in *barzakh*. It enters a world in which it has determined its own destiny, a world in which the intensity, strength, and perfection of its being depend upon all the settled dispositions, qualities, gifts, and capacities it acquired and formed within itself here. It enters a world where happiness and contentment rest upon servanthood to God, nearness to him, and his good pleasure.”

Uncle Issa fell silent for a few moments and lowered his head. Then he looked up with a warm smile and turned to Uncle Jaafar.

“Jaafar, did you want to say something?”

“I had a question, but I have forgotten it now.”

“I am sorry I did not let you ask earlier. I was afraid the ideas would fly from my mind.”

“Not at all. It was not important.”

“The essence of the story is that, from the moment God created us, we have been in a continuous, tireless movement towards development and perfection. God says, ‘O human being, you are surely toiling towards your Lord, and you shall meet him’ (Q 84:6).”

“We move from one world to another when we have completed our purpose in the world we occupy—or, rather, when our development there has reached the point at which we are capable and ready to enter the next.

“Only when the sperm fertilises the ovum and becomes the first cell can it enter the world of the womb through what we call pregnancy. Only when that cell develops fully and becomes a human being can it enter earthly life through what we call birth. From the moment we arrive here, our development begins and grows stronger and faster after maturity, until we pass into barzakh through what we call death.

“There we continue to develop alongside the other spirits until the day comes when the spirits are ready to enter the Hereafter, the final realm and permanent abode, through what we call resurrection. There we continue to perfect ourselves, rise, and draw nearer to God.”

Uncle Issa stopped speaking, but we all remained silent for a while, as though we had just emerged from watching a deeply affecting film. At last, Uncle Hassan broke the silence.

“What you have said is truly fascinating and wonderful, Issa. I wish I had heard it at the beginning of my life. Still, it is not too late. But tell me: what do you mean when you say that we draw nearer to God? Is God not already close to all of us—closer even than we are to ourselves? He says, ‘We are nearer to him than his jugular vein’ (Q 50:16).”

“The nearness mentioned in that verse is the nearness of God’s continual bestowal of existence upon us, his all-encompassing presence, and our being held within his power.

Nothing is hidden from him: neither actions, words, thoughts, nor intentions, not even the whisperings that arise within the heart. The nearness we are discussing, however, is our existential growth and development, and our nearness to him through servanthood.”

“I do not understand. What does our growth and development from one world to another—the acquisition of more capacities and settled dispositions, and their increasing depth and strength within us—have to do with nearness to God? What kind of nearness do you mean?”

“Nearness to God in this second sense—nearness through servanthood—is the extent to which we understand and live our servanthood to God in our conduct, understanding, and inner life, through both conscious and unconscious feelings. It may deepen until a person reaches a state of servanthood and self-effacement in the love of God, wholly devoted to him and seeing nothing apart from God. Imam Ali, peace be upon him, expressed it in these words: ‘I have seen nothing without seeing God before it, after it, with it, and in it.’”

“But what does our servanthood to God, and our awareness of it, have to do with our growth and development? Are they not two different things?”

“They are very closely connected. Our nearness to God and our awareness of our servanthood to him arise from two elements. The first is the strength and intensity of our actual servanthood to God. The second is the extent to which we understand that servanthood intellectually, emotionally, and practically. Do you agree, Hassan?”

“To be honest, I have lost my concentration,” Uncle Jaafar replied. “What I have learnt today is enough for me.”

“On the contrary, I want to understand,” Aunt Zainab said. “Please continue, Issa. I agree with you so far.”

“Continue, Issa,” Uncle Hassan said. “I understand what you mean, and I agree.”

“But I do not understand,” Aunt Najla said.

“Najla, think of it this way,” Uncle Salman said. “If the reality of your servanthood to God were one thousand, and your awareness and experience of it were sixty per cent, the resulting realisation of your servanthood would be six hundred. Is that right, Issa?”

“It is obvious that our awareness of servanthood differs from one person to another according to their consciousness and piety,” Uncle Jaafar said. “But how could we calculate the degree of each person’s servanthood? Is not our servanthood to God absolute and without limit?”

“It is true that the reality of our servanthood to God is absolute in the sense that it equals the whole of our existence, every part and aspect of it. Indeed, our servanthood is nothing other than the existence God bestows upon us. Our entire existence, in every part and from every aspect, is absolute servanthood to him. Existence and servanthood are two sides of the same coin. Do you agree?”

“That is reasonable. Continue,” Aunt Zainab said.

“It follows that, as our existence grows stronger and more intense, the reality of our servanthood to God grows by the same measure—even if we do not realise that we are his servants, deny our servanthood, or dare to challenge the Creator as Satan did, may God curse him.

“This is why our servanthood as human beings is stronger and greater than the servanthood of a jellyfish. The servanthood of every creature encompasses its entire existence, but the strength and intensity of that existence differ from one creature to another. Would you agree?”

“Your argument is beautiful and reasonable,” Uncle Salman said. “Where did you learn all this?”

Uncle Issa smiled and continued.

“Let us return to the equation we mentioned at the beginning. Our nearness to God therefore reflects two things: first, the strength and intensity of our actual servanthood to him; and second, the extent to which we understand and feel that servanthood and allow it to take root in our inner life, conduct, and thought.

“The strength and intensity of our actual servanthood, in turn, depend upon the strength and intensity of our existence—or, in other words, the degree of our development. If a person develops their settled dispositions, capacities, and gifts and acquires noble qualities such as generosity, courage, wisdom, purity of the self, and determination, their servanthood to God and nearness to him increase by the same measure. If they lose those qualities and capacities—losing knowledge, fitra, courage, and purity of the self—they move further away from God.”

“But, Issa, do you not notice how closely those two elements are connected?” Uncle Hassan asked. “The more we develop and perfect ourselves, the more deeply we understand our servanthood to God. And the more deeply we understand our servanthood, the more we develop and grow in knowledge and purity of the self.”

“What you say is true. They are distinct elements, but usually very closely connected. They do not always go together, however, as Satan’s case demonstrates. Is the meaning of nearness to God clearer now?”

“Yes, but I have another question,” Aunt Najla said.

“I think we have discussed enough,” Uncle Jaafar replied. “Today I have heard ideas unlike anything I have heard in my life, and I honestly need time to reflect upon them.”

“But the question will not leave me. Please allow me to ask it.”

“I welcome any question if everyone else agrees,” Uncle Issa said. “Otherwise, we can end the gathering and continue the discussion privately.”

“I want to hear it. Go ahead, Najla,” Uncle Salman said.

“I leave it to God. Go ahead, Najla,” Uncle Jaafar said.

“What about the torment of the grave and the severity of death that we hear about so often?”

“There is no doubt that death, like birth, is difficult for a human being. It carries a person into an unknown world for which they are not psychologically prepared. Yet they soon settle into and become accustomed to the beautiful new life of barzakh. This does not mean that death itself is torment or misery.

“When we die, we are born into barzakh with the form, identity, and reality we have shaped, and with the settled dispositions and capacities we have acquired. Our happiness or misery there therefore depends upon how the being we have formed interacts with the laws and patterns of that realm.

“To make the point clear, imagine that a woman who is four months pregnant develops AIDS—acquired immune deficiency—and passes the disease to her unborn child. While the foetus remains in the womb, it suffers no harm from AIDS because it does not need that capacity—immunity—in the world of the womb. But it will begin to suffer intensely when it enters this world and encounters its laws and its inhabitants, including germs and viruses.

“Something similar happens when we enter barzakh, except that the child’s loss of immunity was caused by its mother, whereas our loss of immunity and the impairment of our being in barzakh arise from our own conduct in this world, despite the divine warnings given to us.

“Notice how the Qur’an describes the taking of believing souls: “Those whose souls the angels take while they are good, saying, “Peace be upon you. Enter Paradise for what you used to do”” (Q16:32).”

“But of those who disbelieve, it says: ‘If only you could see when the angels take the souls of those who disbelieved, striking their faces and their backs: “Taste the torment of the burning fire”” (Q8:50).”



Throughout the journey home, I remained lost in thought, reflecting on Uncle Issa’s words. I had never heard or read anything like them before, at least not with such clarity.

They turned my whole way of thinking upside down. It was true that, since completing secondary school, I had not wasted my time. I had used it as well as I could: learning, working, developing myself and my abilities, caring for my family, and drawing nearer to God. All of that was good. Yet my vision had remained confined to earthly life. I had never viewed the stages of my life—from conception to the Hereafter—as one continuous story. My thinking and ambition had been focused on becoming the chief executive of a major company—perhaps one of the largest—so that Father would be proud of me.

I had always loved God, and still did. I asked him and prayed to him, and he answered and gave. Yet I had never thought about my servanthood to him or asked how I might please him. My thoughts had always revolved around myself—what I wanted, felt, and desired. I had never seriously considered what God wanted from me.

Even if every dream I possessed in this world came true, and I became the richest and most powerful of people, what would any of it gain me when I would so soon leave this world and go to my destiny?

How ashamed I was before my Lord. How would I meet him when I died? What would I say about how I had fallen short in my duty towards him? What had I offered God? What had I done to help people know him as I knew him, or to help them worship him as he deserved? And did I myself worship him as he deserved?

Throughout history, the prophets, messengers, Imams, and righteous people had not withdrawn into themselves. They had gone out into the world, filling it with goodness, calling people to God, and teaching them servanthood to him. For that mission, they had sacrificed everything precious, even the lives of their children and families, while enduring immense suffering themselves. What had I done?

I lived in ease and peace, asking and praying whenever I wished, as though I owed no duty to the Lord who had honoured me.

But what should I do? I loved my Lord with all my being, and the thought of sacrificing for him filled me with joy. Yet what was required of me?

I thought of living every moment of my life in servanthood to God and travelling abroad for religious studies, so that I might return as a scholar and call people to him. But how would I support myself and my family? My God, I am ready for anything that pleases you, but tell me what pleases you.

My tears fell hot and bitter, but silently, so no one in the family noticed. At last, I had to pull over. I rested my head upon the steering wheel and wept with all the bitterness in my heart.



CHAPTER FOUR

Unending Failure

Medina, 13 July 2001

Many thoughts were turning in my mind as I sat in the Prophet's Mosque, facing his blessed grave and reflecting on the grace the Prophet, peace be upon him, had brought into our lives.

The Prophet had sacrificed everything and endured harm such as no prophet before him had endured, simply so that we might believe in the true message of Islam and become God-conscious. Fourteen centuries later, he was still alive with God, watching our deeds and grieved by the humiliation into which we had fallen, by our sins, and by our distance from the teachings of God—teachings he had spent his sacred life planting and establishing within us, and for which, after him, even his family were sacrificed.

Shame overwhelmed me in his presence. I was one of those who grieved him through my sins and my listening to songs. I was ashamed of myself, and I pledged that I would not be among those who hurt him again.

My phone rang. It was Mother. She had completed her own visit to the Prophet, and after hours of supplication and devotional visitation (ziyara), it was time to return to the hotel.

I put my kumma back on my head, fastened my watch, and rose. After sitting for so long, I had pins and needles in my legs. Then I walked towards the place where we had agreed to meet.

I was confused. Ever since my last conversation with Uncle Issa at the farm, I had felt an overwhelming desire to devote myself to worship and the service of God. I had read widely in books on spiritual wayfaring, and they all centred on increasing one's acts of worship. Yet daily life, with its endless demands, scarcely allowed us to perform anything beyond the obligatory acts, let alone to give them full attention.

Should I reduce the care I gave my family? That could not please God. Then should I abandon my professional development? Perhaps. Study, work, and the demands of professional success consumed most of my time and occupied me mentally and emotionally, leaving me little attention to spare for anything else.

There was another great drain on my time: spending time with people, especially after prayer. I had read in some books on spiritual wayfaring that keeping company with ordinary people—whom they described as heedless—drew a person away from God and distracted them from the path towards him.

“Muhammad!” my sister shouted directly into my ear. I jumped, and everyone laughed. I had been so absorbed in thought that I had not even noticed them arrive, and, as usual, she had seized the chance to annoy me.

“You’re awful. God won’t accept your visit. In fact, he’ll give me the reward for all your good deeds today because you annoyed me.” I was genuinely irritated, but that only made her laugh harder.

“Aren’t you going to tell us who the lucky girl is?” Mother asked teasingly as we walked towards the hotel.

“Who?”

“The one occupying your thoughts.”

I stared at her, astonished and embarrassed at once. We had never discussed such a subject before. In fact, I had never seriously thought about it.

“Mother, that’s not proper. We’re in the presence of the Prophet. Besides, you know I’m not that kind of young man.”

“And what is wrong with that kind of young man? Marriage is recommended, not forbidden.”

“Yes, but you know I think about more important things.”

“And will you go on like that for the rest of your life? Does that mean you’ll never marry? Didn’t the Prophet say, ‘Whoever marries has safeguarded half of his faith’? What could be more important than half your faith?”

“But who would accept me? You know, Mother, that I’ve decided to travel for religious studies as soon as I establish a source of income. Who would agree to marry a future religious scholar? And who would agree to travel with me?”

“Don’t worry, my dear. Make your decision, trust in God, and leave the rest to us. There are many devout young women in our community.”

I could not deceive myself: I liked the idea very much. My absorption in self-development, study, work, and ambition had apparently pushed marriage entirely out of my mind.

I took Mother gently by the arm and drew her aside. Overcome with embarrassment, I whispered:

“Mama, find me someone very beautiful and slender—that’s essential. I also want her to be generous in spirit, pure-hearted, innocent, and educated. Perhaps I should give you a written list tomorrow of everything I’m looking for in a wife.”

Mother burst out laughing. “All that, and you say you’ve never thought about it. May God help your heart.”



The days passed quickly, and we returned home. I had never known days happier or more beautiful. I experienced feelings I had never known before: happiness, tranquillity, and a longing to meet God and the Prophet. I would spend the whole night in supplication, prayer, and contemplation, facing the Mizab al-Rahma—the Spout of Mercy—only a few metres from the Kaaba, the holiest place on earth. I felt my love for God bursting from within me. Every cell in my body, every part of my being, seemed to join me in prayer and supplication. I asked God to free me for his service and keep me from disobeying him. Wretched am I, and wretched my whole existence, if it is not devoted to God.

And now we had returned to this worldly life: its concerns and troubles, which never ceased to wring the heart with pain; its relentless challenges, grinding a person down while the years passed in an unending whirl—one that continued until it brought you to an end and earth was heaped over your grave.

My God, how I hated this world, and how I longed to leave it for you in the world to come: a world where no responsibilities would trouble me, where I could worship you and live in love, purity, innocence, and serenity among the prophets and messengers, the Prophet’s Household, and the righteous believers.

My Lord, take me to you. I seek your forgiveness—but who would care for Mother, my sisters, and Grandmother if I were gone? I could not bear the thought of them having to ask anyone for help, even my uncles. My Lord, lengthen my life until I know that my family is secure and my sisters are old enough for one of them to care for Mother and Grandmother. Then take me to you.

But what would I place before God when I entered the next world? What had I offered my Lord? What had I offered my religion? What had I offered the people in God's care—his creatures, whom he loves and whom he created because he loves them? What had I given humanity? How had I contributed to its happiness?

My Lord, enable me to establish an income that will free me for your worship and service. Then, when you are pleased with me, take me to you while you are pleased with me.

Yet to establish such an income, I would have to continue developing myself until my salary rose enough for me to invest part of it in a commercial building whose returns would support me and my family.

But that would mean becoming absorbed in worldly affairs once again, at the expense of worship, remembrance, and the night prayer. No—this was Satan whispering to me and deceiving me. I would trust in God and not occupy myself with provision more than necessary. I would devote the rest of my time to remembrance and worship, confident that if God saw my sincerity, he would provide me with a source of income by his grace. He is generous and noble and never disappoints those who seek him.

I therefore decided to look for a government job. The hours were shorter and the work less demanding, which would give me some of the time I wanted for worship, especially as my responsibilities would grow with marriage and, later, with children.

Although I was at peace with the decision, I wanted to consult Uncle Issa. He was away for several months on an assignment in the Netherlands, so I placed my trust in God and began looking for government work. I left the search for a bride to Mother. That was her field of expertise.



“Would you prefer her fair-skinned or dark?” Mother asked as we sat at the dinner table with the rest of the family.

I was mortified, and my face reddened.

“Mama, that’s not the kind of thing to discuss so openly.”

Everyone laughed, and Khadija called out enthusiastically:

“What about Marwa, Aunt Safiya’s cousin?”

“This has nothing to do with you. And because you suggested her, I don’t want her.” I meant it as a joke, but my tone was a little harsh.

I had grown accustomed to speaking roughly to my sisters at times. They were mischievous and took great pleasure in provoking me. This time, however, I had gone too far. Khadija’s expression changed, and I saw that she was hurt. My heart softened. I went over, kissed her on the head, and apologised.

“I forgive you,” she said, “on condition that you agree to consider Marwa.”

“We’ve never really had anything to do with each other, but she feels like a sister to me because she’s Aunt Safiya’s cousin.”

“Don’t worry, my dear,” Mother said. “I’ve prepared a list of names, together with all the information you need.”

“Excellent—but you and I will discuss it in private.”

Both my sisters’ faces fell. Khawla protested, her voice rising and her eyes filling with tears.

“We have a right to take part in this decision. The woman joining our family will be our brother’s wife, and she will take you away from us.”

My heart softened towards them. Faced with their insistence, I agreed, on condition that they neither commented nor laughed at me. They jumped and laughed with delight, and we began discussing the names one after another, late into the night. In the end, we agreed on the young woman to whom I had felt drawn from the beginning. I felt an affection for her, and something within me said that, God willing, she would become my wife.

Naturally, no final decision could be made without meeting her and discovering whether we were compatible. That first required her preliminary approval, so we asked Uncle Issa’s wife to raise the matter with her mother. If the family agreed in principle, we would arrange the meeting and complete the remaining steps.

More than two weeks passed before we received their initial approval. I was delighted. To marry a righteous, believing, beautiful woman who would share my life, dreams, and aspirations seemed the greatest blessing I could imagine.

The meeting was set for half past five on Thursday evening. I waited impatiently, counting the minutes and seconds. Her name returned to my mind again and again, bringing happiness and ease. I was certain that she was a reward from the Lord of the worlds for my umrah pilgrimage.

At last the time came. I made certain that I arrived exactly on time. I was extremely nervous. Although the air conditioner was running, heat seemed to pulse through my body and sweat gathered on my forehead.

The sitting room was elegant and reflected refined taste. There were five of us. Mother and I sat on one side. Opposite us sat Nada, with her father, Qasim, on her right and her mother, Batoul, on her left.

My heart leapt when I saw Nada for the first time. She was more beautiful than I had imagined. Her father, however, made me uneasy. His questions were rather stern, as though he saw me as someone who had come to take his only daughter from him. I held myself together, kept smiling, and remained composed.

Half an hour of questions and answers passed without my having any opportunity to speak to the woman I hoped to marry. Yet I sensed that I had won the first round: her mother seemed comfortable with me, and her father's manner had softened.

Mother whispered to Batoul that I wished to sit with Nada alone. Batoul rose with an approving smile and apologised on behalf of her husband, who had to leave for a meeting at his office. Qasim shook my hand warmly and departed. Mother and Batoul then moved to the adjoining room, leaving the door between us open.

The conversation went wonderfully. Nada shared many of my values. She was gentle and sweet, with deep modesty and virtue. I was strongly drawn to her—perhaps this was what people called love—and I was confident that she felt something similar, despite the shyness visible on her face.

I was so happy that I wished the meeting would never end, but time passed quickly and I still had to tell her of my wish to travel for religious studies. I was almost certain that she would not object, for she admired the values I carried and the sense of mission by which I wanted to live.

When I told her, however, disappointment appeared on her face. She was silent for a few moments, as though absorbing a

shock. Then she said frankly that she believed in this path of service and held religious scholars in great respect, but she was not sure that she could endure the journey abroad or the demands of life as a scholar's wife.

The meeting ended, and I was deeply affected and saddened. I had genuinely fallen in love with her—perhaps because I had never before spoken to a young woman in my life, perhaps because we had been so compatible. I did not know why, but she had taken hold of my whole being. Yet the price of marrying her was one I could not pay: abandoning religious studies and the hope of drawing nearer to God through service. To give her preference over what I believed would draw me nearer to God was, in my understanding, impossible; it would have amounted to shirk—taking my own desire as a god. I kept repeating inwardly: ‘Have you seen the one who takes his own desire as his god?’ (Q25:43).

I did not wait long for the answer. Two days later, the rejection came. Although I had expected it, I was deeply disappointed, perhaps because I had still hoped that she would accept me despite everything, and that she had loved me as I had loved her.

The disappointment was real, but the reverence I felt before God and the happiness of sacrificing for his sake were much stronger. Hot tears ran down my face, and my heart beat hard in humility and brokenness before him. With my whole being I said, “My Lord, accept this sacrifice from me out of love for you and commitment to your path. I know it is little, but I am ready to sacrifice everything for your sake. Only accept me, my Lord, and accept my service.”

The experience taught me a harsh lesson. I asked Mother and Uncle Issa's wife to tell any woman we approached, from the outset, of my wish to pursue religious studies. That is what they did.

Months passed, and I proposed to one devout young woman after another until it seemed that no one remained. As time went on, I relaxed many of my conditions, including beauty and age, yet every one of them rejected me.

Each rejection hurt. I pitied myself; my dignity and pride were wounded; and each refusal seemed to reduce my chance of forming a family with a wife who would share my concerns, ambitions, and the thoughts that filled my heart and mind.

It was true that I had not originally been thinking of marriage. But once Mother raised the subject, the idea began to dominate me until the rest of my life seemed to have come to a halt.

I also suffered for Mother. I saw her suppress her pain each time her only son was rejected, as though—God forbid—I had scabies or leprosy.

I grieved at what our society had become. For some people, travelling for religious studies had become almost a fault or a stigma, enough to make families refuse me as a son-in-law. They praised students and scholars of religion so long as those scholars remained far from their own families and daughters, and so long as their own sons were not among the students.

Uncle Issa's wife suggested that I conceal my plan to study religion until after marriage, when my wife would no longer be able to object. I refused outright. To me, that would have been deceit and a breach of trust.

Yes, I was in pain and sometimes pitied myself, but I remained firm. My love for God grew, and my attachment to him deepened. I often felt him near me, and spent many nights speaking to him and asking him to draw me closer.



As the days passed, I managed to uproot from my heart any preoccupation with professional advancement or promotion, while remaining committed to fulfilling my duties at work to the best of my ability, as God commanded.

I withdrew from people and sought refuge in silence, using it to remember God wherever I was. God scarcely left my mind except in sleep; even then, I dreamed that I was in Paradise among the righteous.

God rewarded me by freeing me from songs. I had not listened to them since pledging before the Prophet that I would stop, and I no longer even wanted them. I could hardly believe that I had escaped their grip for ever.

My nature changed completely. I became quieter, calmer, and more attached to God. Even acts that were merely discouraged began to feel like sins that distanced me from him, and I recoiled from them.

That was how my days passed after the umrah pilgrimage. Yet within a few months, a strange feeling I had never known began to creep into my heart—a disturbing and frightening feeling.

Deep within, I began to feel that I was better than other people, whom I privately called “ordinary folk”, echoing the language common in our religious culture. While I, praise be to God, sacrificed everything for him and neither slept, woke, moved, nor rested except in remembrance of him and pursuit of his pleasure, other people were heedless in their worldly lives. They chased material things, remembered God only a little, and even came to prayer lazily while thinking about everything except him. Yes, I was closer to God than they were.

I noticed that my tears began to dry during prayer and supplication, and that my reverence was fading. The warmth that had marked my relationship with God gradually disappeared, together with the sting I used to feel whenever I remembered my sins.

My connection with God weakened. I no longer wept out of longing for him or fear of his punishment. Why would God punish me when I no longer committed even discouraged acts, let alone sins? God is never unjust to his servants.

My God, how I longed to return to my former state—to that beautiful relationship of fear and love, yearning and humility, hope for forgiveness and desire for his pleasure, moving from one state to another in his presence.

It did not take long for those strange and frightening thoughts and feelings to take possession of me. Only my mind remained beyond their grip, and it understood clearly what they were: the affliction—indeed, the curse—of self-admiration, or ‘ujb.

I had read about this disease. It was a grave and stubborn illness of the self, especially among the devout, capable of dragging a person to the lowest depths. It was as dangerous as despair of God’s mercy and pride, and perhaps worse than satanic whispering. Was it not ‘ujb that had cast Satan from the highest rank among those brought near to God down to the lowest depths of Hell?

Intellectually, I was afraid—terrified for myself. Emotionally, however, I felt almost nothing, as though my feelings inhabited another world entirely ruled by ‘ujb.

I prayed that God would save me from this curse and asked scholars how to rid myself of it, but nothing helped. Time passed quickly and worked against me. With every moment, the curse spread further within me and took deeper root. It even began to attack my reason: Satan whispered that I was

mistaken, that I did not suffer from self-admiration at all, and that the very fear of ‘ujb was only a satanic device intended to distance me from God.

With what awareness remained to me, I became certain that if I continued in this state, I would eventually follow Satan’s path. I was ready to do anything to recover my former relationship with God. Only one solution remained. I did not dare ask anyone about it. I placed my trust in God, prayed that I was choosing rightly, and acted at once.

I went back to listening to songs and gave up remembrance of God outside the obligatory prayers. I abandoned the voluntary acts of worship and kept only to the minimum obligations. I gave up silence and returned to ordinary social life. I rejoined my old group of friends; we travelled, stayed out late, laughed, and enjoyed ourselves without committing anything forbidden. I also enrolled in a programme for the American Certified Public Accountant qualification, intending to sit the examinations the following May.

Only a few days after I joined the CPA programme, what I had feared occurred. The finance manager persuaded the new regional director that I made mistakes, lacked competence, and should be removed.

The two of them called me to a meeting, told me that I was no longer wanted in the organisation, and asked me to resign in return for three months’ salary as compensation.

The news struck like a thunderbolt. I submitted my resignation, surrendering to a fate I did not understand. The world seemed to spin around me.

I could not understand why I, of all people, could never get my affairs to go right. What was happening to me? Was this punishment from God? But why would he be angry with me? Was it because I had fallen into self-admiration? And was it my fault that ‘ujb had overtaken me against my will? It was an

illness I had not chosen. Could a sick person be blamed for falling ill? Or was God angry because I had tried to treat ‘ujb in the wrong way? Yet was there another path I had failed to take? I had chosen this one only to return to him. My God, I was lost.

Could all this simply be a trial? But what kind of trial afflicted me with ‘ujb, took away my job and the income on which my family depended, and left me unable to find anyone willing to marry me?

Why was I framing everything in that way? Perhaps it was simply the ordinary course of life, unfolding through its laws, and I was merely unlucky.

Wait. I must not scatter my thoughts, or I would go round in circles. Whatever the reason for what had happened, it belonged to the past. The future was in God’s hands. What remained within my power was to act as God wanted me to act.

I had to remain positive and refuse to yield to obsessive thoughts, despair, or illusion. I had to search harder for a job, even in the private sector, and never surrender. I would welcome every failure, then leave it behind as though it had never happened and continue with resolve. If God was truly angry with me, that was what would please him.

I also had to work harder in my CPA studies, which would improve my prospects of finding a better, safer, and more stable position.

That was how the following days passed. I do not know how many months went by. I remained persistent and tireless in both study and the search for work.

I never allowed despair or boredom to creep into my heart, despite the repeated rejections and failures I faced, both in marriage proposals and in employment, and despite the immense effort I made.

At the same time, I began to recover something of my former relationship with God. Yet this time I was afraid to advance too far, lest I lose him altogether as I had before.

A sense of crushing failure closed around me and stifled my breath. Since returning from the umrah pilgrimage, I had failed at everything. I had been dismissed from my job, failed to find another, and failed to find a woman who would accept me, until Mother and Uncle Issa's wife had grown weary of searching. Worst of all, I had failed in the greatest matter of my life: I had failed to draw near to God.

My Lord, I wanted nothing from this life. If you would not grant me nearness to you, then take me to you rather than leave me in this world while I disobey you.



Thursday afternoon, 7 February 2002

I was swinging happily, absorbed in reciting devotional chants, when Uncle Issa suddenly appeared at the door.

"Uncle!" I cried with longing, and sprang up to embrace him warmly.

"When did you return? Why did Auntie Umm Tamer not tell us, so that we could meet you at the airport?"

"I asked her not to. I wanted to surprise you."

"What a wonderful surprise."

"The house seems empty. Where is everyone?"

"As usual, Mother and Grandmother have gone visiting. Khadija and Khawla are at their lesson in the mosque."

"And you are taking advantage of their absence to recite at the top of your voice. I could hear you from the beginning of the road."

"Really, Uncle? Did I disturb the neighbours?"

“No, I am only teasing you. I could hear you, but your voice was not loud enough to trouble anyone.”

“Have you heard my news?”

“I have been following it through Auntie Umm Tamer, but what I heard was confusing and very different from the decisions you made when we spoke at the farm. What happened?”

“Uncle, I desperately need to tell you what happened and hear your advice. Shall we walk along the Corniche and talk until the sunset prayer?”

“With pleasure.”

The air on the Corniche was cold, and the tide was unusually high, making the walk genuinely pleasant.

As we walked, I told him everything that had happened since our return from the umrah pilgrimage, except that I concealed the fact that I was listening to songs again. I referred instead to ‘a wrong I was committing’. It was deeply embarrassing even to admit that much, but I desperately needed his advice. I was so lost that I had become afraid to stop listening, lest I fall into self-admiration again.

Uncle Issa remained silent for a long while, perhaps gathering his thoughts, perhaps disappointed in me or even looking down on me because of the wrong I had confessed.

“Muhammad, will you allow me to speak frankly?”

I swallowed.

“Of course, Uncle. That is why I told you everything. I need you to advise me and help me through this crisis.” I could hardly hide my embarrassment.

“Despite the wrong you say you commit, I have no doubt that you are a believer who loves God deeply. God has granted you remarkable certainty. But what has happened since your return from umrah is your own doing.”

“My doing? How?” I asked in astonishment.

“By your own will, you have tried to close three of the most important paths that lead to God.”

“Me? Impossible.”

“First, you abandoned your professional development. Second, you withdrew from social contact. Third, you avoided speech and inclined towards silence.”

“But I did that to make more time for worship and to avoid the forbidden things that arise through contact with people. How can those three things bring us nearer to God?”

“Do you remember our discussion at the farm? We said that the reality of our servanthood is the measure of existence we possess, and that our existence consists in our capacities and settled qualities—wisdom, knowledge, will, kindness, and others. As those qualities take root and become inseparable from the self, our existence grows stronger and more intense.”

“Yes, I remember.”

“Then how do you think we acquire those qualities and make them take root except by living, facing different experiences and challenges, and exercising our capacities through them?”

“The more challenges we face, and the more resolutely and positively we overcome them, the more our qualities and capacities grow and take root. By the same measure, our servanthood to God deepens and our nearness to him increases.”

“You are right. I do not know why I failed to see it.”

“Tell me: is professional development not the process by which a person improves their ability to perform and achieve through developing their capacities and their whole self?”

“It is.”

“Then your professional development carries you, to a considerable extent, towards God, while also bringing you happiness and self-fulfilment in this world. Isn’t that so?”

“Yes. I agree. I do not know what came over me when I thought otherwise.”

“The same is true of social contact, and of speech, which is one of the chief tools of communication, professional development, and life itself.”

“But, Uncle, is love of this world not the root of every sin?”

“That is true, but what is forbidden is becoming confined to this world and allowing it to distract us from what lies beyond. Otherwise, as the Prophet is reported to have said, ‘This world is the farm of the Hereafter’: here we sow what we shall harvest there.”

“Listen, my dear. The balance between this world and the Hereafter is captured in a saying attributed to Imam Ali: ‘Work for your worldly life as though you would live for ever, and work for your Hereafter as though you would die tomorrow.’”

A shiver ran through me as the air grew colder.

“Are you cold? Let us go into the mosque.”

“No, let us stay here. The sea is beautiful, especially when it is restless like this.”

“As you wish.” He smiled at me tenderly.

“What about that sin—I mean, the wrong I cannot stop? Can I still walk towards God while I continue to commit it?”

“I value the fact that, despite your need to speak and despite the closeness between us, you have kept your fault concealed and not disclosed it. I do not even know whether what you are doing is truly a sin or whether, as believers often do, you have magnified your fault in your own eyes.”

He fell silent, picked up a small stone from the rocky barrier between us and the sea, and threw it far into the water. Then he turned back to me.

“A sin remains a sin. We must never make light of it. We must keep seeking forgiveness and do everything in our power to leave it. At the same time, we must not remain trapped by it

or allow it to stand between us and God, even if we have not yet succeeded in abandoning it.”

“We can rise through degrees of perfection and draw very near to God despite weakness in particular matters and in our worship. It is reported from the Prophet: ‘A servant may attain great ranks in the Hereafter and noble stations through good character, even though weak in worship.’ It is also reported that he said: ‘Had you not sinned and sought God’s forgiveness, God would have brought forth people who sinned, sought forgiveness, and were forgiven. The believer is tried and constantly repents.’ Have you not heard God’s words, ‘God loves those who constantly repent and those who purify themselves’ (Q 2:222), and, ‘Seek your Lord’s forgiveness, then turn to him in repentance’ (Q 11:52)?”

“Muhammad, many reports from the Prophet’s Household indicate that a believer who struggles, burns with remorse, and turns fervently to God—even while carrying a sin—may be in a better state than when outwardly upright but self-admiring. Imam al-Sadiq is reported to have said, ‘God knew that sin was better for the believer than self-admiration; otherwise, no believer would ever have been tested by sin.’”

“No one understands that saying better than I do,” I said with a smile.

Uncle Issa laughed and sat on the stone bench facing the sea. I sat beside him.

“I need to understand more about the path towards God.”

“The problem with many books on spiritual wayfaring is that they either recommend practices from which human nature recoils and which conflict with Islamic teaching, or they reduce the path to remembrance, prayer, and worship in the specific ritual sense. Those acts are magnificent, but the whole journey to God cannot be confined to them.”

“Is there worship in a specific sense and worship in a broader sense?”

“Certainly. Worship in the broader sense means that every movement and stillness, every thought and feeling, is directed towards God’s pleasure and placed in his service.”

“That sounds extremely difficult.”

“What is truly difficult is reaching the very highest degrees. Yet it is entirely possible to rise very far. In the supplication of Abu Hamza al-Thumali, Imam Zayn al-Abidin says: ‘The traveller to you has only a short distance to cross. You are not veiled from your creatures; only their deeds veil them from you.’”

“Do not forget that God created us to turn towards him. He is more intent than we are that we should reach him and, by his command, takes us under his care.”

“I have come to understand that through experience. I have known it many times in my life. Please tell me more about the journey towards God.”

“My dear, I am not qualified for this. I am not a religious scholar, and the matter requires deep knowledge and practical experience of striving against the self and travelling towards God.”

“Uncle, I have no one else. I genuinely need to understand. Could you gather in one conversation the different points you have explained to me before?”

“Very well—but not now. The sunset prayer is near, and afterwards I must go home. Why do you and your family not come to the farm tomorrow? We can talk there.”

“I would be delighted, but I must first ask Mother. I will telephone you to confirm.”



The air at the farm was fresh and slightly cool. Uncle Issa and I walked among the trees. As usual when gathering his thoughts, he frowned and remained silent. After a long pause, he was about to begin when I spoke first.

“Uncle, would you mind if I recorded this conversation? I want to hear it again and reflect on it.”

“Not at all. Go ahead, my dear.”

I took out the recorder and switched it on.

“You can begin now.”

“I had been reading Stephen R. Covey’s *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*—one of the world’s bestselling books—and this passage made me stop: ‘We may spend weeks, months, even years toiling over our personal character, trying to change our attitudes and behaviour, without even beginning to approach the change that happens spontaneously when we see things differently. It is therefore clear that, if we wish to make relatively small changes in our lives, we may appropriately focus on our attitudes and behaviour. But if we wish to make a fundamental change of a different order, we must direct our efforts towards our basic paradigms.’”¹

“This is what the Qur’an emphasises: ‘*To him ascends the good word, and righteous action raises it*’ (Q 35:10). And it is reported that ‘the believer’s intention is better than their deed.’”

“When we speak of journeying towards God, we must first understand that the change we seek is not confined to behaviour and deeds. It must also reach our feelings, perceptions, and fundamental mental images.”

¹ Stephen R. Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. English rendering of the passage quoted in the Arabic novel.

“The greatest help in changing and developing ourselves, and in travelling towards God, lies in the magnificent concepts, perceptions, and mental maps that Islam plants and reinforces within us—concepts that accord with the *fitra*, our innate human disposition. Foremost among them are the doctrines of faith.”

“Such as divine unity and divine justice?”

“Yes. They include the understanding that God created us because he is pure outpouring, generosity, and bounty. By his will, he bestows existence upon whatever can exist because, in its origin, the existence of any creature is a good and a source of happiness for that creature.”

“Do you remember, Muhammad, when I told you at the farm that our existence and the reality of our servanthood to God were two sides of the same coin?”

“Yes. That truth affected me deeply.”

“In fact, they are not merely two sides, but three aspects of one reality: existence, servanthood, and the capacity to experience happiness or misery. The stronger and more intense a being’s existence becomes, the deeper its servanthood to God and the greater its capacity to experience either happiness or misery.”

“Why misery? Is existence not supposed to give us happiness?”

“Perhaps that appears so in earthly life. Beyond this world, however, the strength and intensity of our existence determine how deeply we can experience happiness or misery. What determines which of the two we experience is the extent to which we recognise our servanthood to God, allow it to take root in our depths, conduct, and inner life, and submit to truth. The more fully we live that servanthood, the more intense our happiness, until we ourselves become happiness.

The more we reject God and truth in pride, the more intense our misery, until we ourselves become misery.”

“Excellent, Uncle.”

“Notice the greatness of God’s mercy and love. He made the purpose of our life servanthood to him, love for him, self-effacement in devotion to him, and nearness to him—not so that we might obtain happiness, but so that we might live in servanthood to him.”

“And as we rise through degrees of servanthood, our happiness grows and our existence becomes stronger and more intense. But what exactly do we mean by servanthood?”

“Servanthood to God means freedom from every chain around you: from darkness and false powers, from frustration, fear, anxiety, weakness, and even enslavement to your own self. Nothing in this world, great or small, has power over you. You submit wholly to God and become self-effacing in devotion to him.”

“That meaning appears in the Verse of the Throne: ‘God is the protector of those who believe; he brings them out of darkness into light. As for those who reject faith, their protectors are false powers, which bring them out of light into darkness’ (Q 2:257). And God is ‘the light of the heavens and the earth’ (Q 24:35). Do you see?”

“Very good, my dear. A person who reaches that degree of servanthood is what we call the perfect human being, and the way to that degree is through our integrated growth.”

“Forgive me, Uncle, but could we avoid specialised terms? They sometimes make the meaning obscure. What do you mean by ‘integrated growth’?”

“I mean human growth in its ordinary sense, but in a more comprehensive and methodical form.”

“Here, integrated growth means developing the whole self—our human values, capacities, and settled qualities together,

in harmony and proportion, so that none remains stunted while the others mature. They grow towards their highest levels and take root throughout our conscious and subconscious minds and in every movement and stillness, until they become inseparable from the self. The greatest of these qualities is our awareness of servanthood to God.”

“How can we develop ourselves to that level of servanthood?”

“God has given us the method: live your ordinary daily life according to Islamic guidance and in the balance Islam requires. In that way, human values and noble character grow comprehensively and in harmony, while you keep God, the desire for his pleasure, and love for him before your eyes in every moment, movement, and stillness.”

“The Islamic way of life—its sharia—is, in this sense, a training programme God has approved for the development of the individual and society, raising both towards him through a natural and smooth progression that accords with the human fitra, human nature, and the patterns and laws of the universe.”

“That is the general method. Its applications—the particular paths by which people reach God—are, as the narrations put it, as numerous as the breaths of creation. Every person carries a unique combination of inherited aptitudes and qualities. Every person also lives in a different environment and faces challenges and events unlike those faced by anyone else.”

“Uncle, I tried to follow Islamic teaching as I understood it, yet I nearly slipped into an abyss.”

“That is entirely true. A person may be sincere and use their will, yet still take the wrong path through ignorance of Islamic guidance or through heedlessness. Both have remedies.”

“What are they?”

“The remedy for ignorance is to deepen your understanding of religion: read the Qur’an, the noble traditions, and the supplications; reflect upon them; and develop your intellectual capacities and understanding of the faith.”

“The remedy for heedlessness is to spend time alone with the self and practise self-accounting each night, if possible, even for half an hour. The company of truthful friends who advise you sincerely also helps.”

The last point stirred memories of my childhood friendship with Amer. Among all my friends, he alone could once have been called both truthful and sincere in his advice. Sadly, the bitter events of his secondary-school years had changed him completely. He had turned against every value and fallen frighteningly deep into the pursuit of his desires, despite all my efforts to stand beside him and counsel him.

“You seem to have drifted away.”

“Not at all, Uncle. I remembered one of my dearest friends. Tell me: how do we actually travel towards God?”

“Your enthusiasm seems to have returned,” he said with a smile.

“Very much.”

“Good. The central point is that your ability to acquire human values and settled qualities depends upon three things: first, your desire for the quality; second, your practice of it; and third, the nature of your inner psychological environment—how healthy and positive it is.”

“By ‘psychological environment’, do you mean the capacities, settled dispositions, skills, perceptions, and mental maps held within the self?”

“Exactly. That inner environment is naturally dynamic and continually changing. It is, in fact, the accumulated result of all your responses to every stimulus and influence you encounter in life, however small, whether you are conscious of it or not.”

“If our selves are the accumulated result of our responses throughout life, why did God condemn Abu Lahab and Satan to torment before their lives in this world had ended? Could they not have changed for the better and repented?”

“The very fact that God condemned them to torment before the end of their earthly lives shows that he knew there was no possibility that they would change for the better.”

“The possibility of changing any quality, habit, or mental image depends upon the same three factors: how deeply it is rooted in you, how strongly you desire to change it, and your behaviour and practices.”

“Ugliness may reach such a degree in a person, through desire and repeated action, that it becomes one with the self and impossible to separate from it—as happened with Satan, and with those of whom the Qur’an says, ‘God has set a seal upon their hearts’ (Q 2:7).”

“Conversely, beauty and majesty may reach their fullness in a person through desire and practice, becoming one with the self and inseparable from it, as in the case of the infallible ones, peace be upon them.”

“That helps explain God’s words: ‘Say: Shall we tell you who are the greatest losers in their deeds? They are those whose efforts are lost in the life of this world while they think that they are doing good’ (Q 18:103–104). The verse refers to people in whom ugliness has become part of the self through bad action, so that they take wrong for right and right for wrong. Isn’t that so?”

“Yes. A person’s inner psychological environment is the lens through which they see the world and engage with daily life.”

“You may look at the sea and see beauty and goodness. You may hear beautiful music in its waves, find peace in them, and let your imagination roam.”

“Or you may see a terrifying, mysterious giant that fills you with fear, and hear in its waves a lament for all who drowned in its depths, their breath crushed out by its power.”

“Or you may see something else entirely. It depends upon your inner environment, perceptions, and mental maps.”

“A sunset may bring distress and pain, so that your chest tightens whenever you see it; or it may mean calm, serenity, rest, and beauty.”

“You may be somewhere and hear a mobile-phone ringtone you once used. If it was the tone that sounded when you received news of the death of someone dear, the sound may awaken intense sadness. If it belonged to a period filled with happy news, it may instead bring ease and joy. All of that is connected to your perceptions and mental associations.”

“This is why the Qur’an, the books of supplication, and our acts of worship give such great attention to reshaping perceptions and mental maps: making them healthy and positive, centred on servanthood to God alone, and freeing them from sources of fear, weakness, anxiety, and other destructive feelings.”

“More than that, our inner psychological environment spontaneously shapes the way we respond to the ordinary matters of life.”

Uncle Issa paused, then continued slowly, as though emphasising what came next.

“Of course, through our will we can act against what our inner environment inclines us to do, whether for good or for ill.”

“Uncle, I have lost the thread.”

“The point, my dear, is this: if your inner environment is marked by purity, strong will, and love of goodness, accords with the *fitra*, and is free of psychological obstacles or complexes, then you can acquire human values and settled dispositions—which, as we said, are the path to God—simply by longing for a particular quality, attending to it, and willing yourself to acquire it. Practice, however, makes it firmer and more deeply rooted.”

“Continual practice of any quality, good or bad, can lead you to acquire it even without consciously desiring it. Naturally, the quality becomes much stronger—and may eventually become inseparable from the self—when you desire it and your inner environment supports it.”

“Let us take an example. How might a person who feels distressed at sunset free themselves from that negative feeling?”

“Imagine that sunset always troubles you. First, you must understand why. Search your memory for the mental image or association planted within you that gives rise to those feelings.”

“Concentrate and search hard. When you grow tired, leave the matter and occupy yourself with something else. Return to it periodically—perhaps three times a day. That prompts the subconscious mind to continue working while you are occupied with other things, even while you sleep.”

“You may discover the cause immediately. It may take a day, several days, or weeks, but you will probably identify it eventually.”

“Suppose, for example, that your manager always wears an orange coat and reprimands you harshly whenever he sees you, humiliating you in front of your colleagues. Over time, your distress becomes associated with the orange colour you see whenever you encounter him.”

“When you watch the sun turn orange at sunset, the colour may then awaken the same distress you feel in your manager’s presence.”

“Let us suppose the reason goes back to childhood.”

“Very well. Suppose that as a child you were terrified of the night and of the monsters you imagined appeared in it. You remained fearful and unhappy until daylight returned.”

“If those feelings were never treated, they could remain buried within you even after you had outgrown your fear of the dark. Sunset would then trigger them because it announced the coming of night.”

“Merely understanding the source of the association between sunset and distress, and recognising that the connection is no longer rational, may help relieve the distress and perhaps break the association at once.”

“At that point, you possess two elements of change: desire and psychological readiness. You still need the third—practice—to make certain that no negative residue remains.”

“To establish a positive response to sunset, consistently do something that brings happiness and ease while you watch it—at least two or three times a week for several months. You might walk along the beach with a friend whose company makes you comfortable.”

“That practice will weaken the old negative association and replace it with a positive one between sunset and tranquillity.”

“Do you know, Uncle, I have used this method since overcoming the crisis after secondary school, and it works well.”

“Becoming accustomed to this method brings you closer to your subconscious mind and strengthens your confidence in yourself and your capacities. It makes you better able to understand and develop yourself. In time, you may even change some mental maps and form new ones through desire and will alone, even without practice.”

“That happens to me sometimes. Several years ago, for example, I persuaded myself that my body needed only three or four hours of sleep a day, and that more sleep made me tired.”

“You are fortunate. I still cannot do that. In any case, those three elements are acquired through living daily life positively—through toiling in it and seeking its good things: wealth, children, comfortable homes, and material and emotional ease—while remaining in harmony with the fitra and within the guidance of Islam.”

“When we live positively, we mature, learn, and acquire wisdom. We rise, and our character and spirit rise with us. Through the fitra planted within us, we come to love God, his attributes, majesty, and beauty, and to feel our servanthood to him. That makes us more positive in daily life and more able to live our servanthood in its smallest details.”

“We meet our responsibilities towards family, work, society, ourselves, and humanity with greater ease and goodwill. Our love expands towards people and every part of creation. We become more elevated and pure, more receptive to beauty, majesty, and noble character; the stains of the self begin to fall away; our knowledge of God grows; and our ardent love for him, for his beauty, and for his love of us deepens. We become humble and self-effacing before him, seeing nothing in the universe apart from him and seeing

everything through him—especially when we understand that we are his manifestations and his creatures, and that he loves and cares for each of us individually.”

“And by repeatedly exercising will and determination in daily life, we strengthen our ability to struggle with the self and shape it as we wish—or, rather, as God wishes.”

“What a wonderful life you are describing.”

“It truly is. Islam does not regard earthly life as an abode of evil. Imam Ali described it in these words: ‘This world is an abode of truth for the one who deals truthfully with it; an abode of richness for the one who takes provision from it; and an abode of salvation for the one who understands it. It is the place where God’s revelation descended, where his prophets prayed, and where his friends traded, gaining mercy and earning Paradise.’”

“How could what God created be evil? The evil lies in becoming enclosed within this world and forgetting what lies beyond it. All true good lies in what is beyond; when the world distracts us from that, it becomes evil in relation to us.”

“Then withdrawing from the world, renouncing it, and devoting ourselves entirely to prayer and fasting would deprive us of the opportunity to elevate and purify the self, and therefore to draw near to God?”

“Yes. The test is not to remain dry while walking along the riverbank. It is to swim and dive in the river—to remain in it throughout your life—without getting wet. That requires long practice and training. This is why God created earthly life: to be our field of training.”

“The test is to toil in this world with all the capacities God has given you: seek lawful provision, enjoy it, give your family comfort, educate your children in the best schools, live in a spacious and pleasant home, and drive a top-of-the-range car without falling into extravagance. Yet you must not become a

prisoner of those pleasures. You remain inwardly detached, so that losing them and being forced into poverty does not break you.”

“But that inner freedom must never weaken your energetic and positive effort to improve your financial circumstances. If it does, it is not true detachment.”

“If you can preserve both, you are truly detached. Even then, you must continue until that detachment becomes a settled quality inseparable from the self, fulfilling God’s words: ‘So that you may not grieve over what escapes you, nor exult over what he gives you’ (Q 57:23).”

“Detachment does not mean owning nothing. It means that nothing owns you.”

“Remember: the goal is not to achieve complete, wholehearted turning to God while alone in retreat, worshipping in a prayer niche.”

“The goal is to live that wholehearted turning while among people and within life, with all its details, contradictions, and challenges. You engage with life; it acts upon you and you act upon it. Yet through all of that you see nothing apart from your Lord and your servanthood to him.”

“At the same time, wholehearted turning does not distract you from life. It drives you into life with the greatest positivity and with a God-given energy beyond imagination.”

“You live it while eating, drinking, and sleeping; while studying and working; while playing with your children and joking with your friends; while living every detail of ordinary life. Your turning to God does not distract you from life, and life does not distract you from that turning. They do not run on parallel tracks; they run along the same track. Living as God commands is itself your servanthood to him.”

“‘They do not run on parallel tracks; they run along the same track’—that is a difficult expression, Uncle.”

“Have you watched Zinedine Zidane at the World Cup finals? Have you seen his intensity, his absorption in the match, and the way the rest of the world disappears for him?”

“Not only Zidane. Every player is like that.”

“Good. Do you agree that they perform at the height of their ability and concentration?”

“They do, because they are desperate to win the World Cup.”

“They run and try to score while completely absorbed in the dream of winning. Because that dream fills their thoughts and feelings, it inspires them, gives them energy, strength, and focus, and raises their performance.”

“That is true.”

“Then their complete concentration on playing does not conflict with their pursuit of the World Cup. The dream is their chief motive and the reason their determination and energy intensify. Right?”

“Of course not. The two are really one movement. If their desire to win weakened, their performance would fall.”

“That is what I meant. Our movement through this world and our striving towards God are not separate pursuits; they are one movement, just as Zidane’s play in the match and his pursuit of the World Cup are one movement.”

A long silence followed. We walked slowly. I lowered my head and considered his words from every side. He too remained silent, giving me room to think.

“But how can a person ensure that life presents enough of the right challenges to develop every part of their character?”

“The responsibility for developing every part of your character is yours. You do it through periods of solitude, self-accounting, reflection, and contemplation, then through the will to undertake the positive practices required, as we discussed.”

“Yet if you strive sincerely towards God, he takes you under his care, draws you towards him, and guides you along paths suited to your capacities and characteristics. Indeed, he does this with every person who responds, even in some small measure: ‘As for those who strive in our cause, we shall surely guide them to our ways. God is indeed with those who do good’ (Q 29:69).”

“What is required of you is to live daily life in as positive and balanced a way as you can, develop yourself as far as you can, make your intention sincere for God as far as you can, and place your trust in him. He will take you under his care.”

“Then God wants us to enjoy the lawful pleasures of this world and even to seek them, but positively and in balance. Our striving for them contains opportunities for growth, integrated development, and nearness to God. The challenge is not to be chained or taken captive by our desires and pleasures. Is that right?”

“Not only the world. God wants us to love, understand, and care for ourselves without allowing the self to gain even the slightest mastery over us.”

“To put it differently, God wants us to become wholly self-effacing before him, with no being of our own apart from the complete awareness of our servanthood to God.”

“How can we free ourselves from the self’s control?”

“Our pursuit of bodily and instinctive needs—food, desire, and the like—and our pursuit of self-development and spiritual growth through knowledge, strength, and purification reinforce our love of our own selves, our tendency to revolve around them, and their hold over us.”

“God wants us to escape that hidden self-centredness, so that the self does not become a veil between us and him, as it did with Satan. This is why he commands generosity and self-giving, asks us to desire for others what we desire for

ourselves, and affirms that meeting another believer's need is greater in his sight than seventy Hajj pilgrimages."

"Pilgrimage is a magnificent act of worship lasting several days and drawing us nearer to God. Meeting someone's need may take only a few minutes, and may even interrupt an act of worship. Yet it frees us from revolving around ourselves. At first, we do something that brings us no direct benefit simply because God asks it of us. With time, we do it because our love for others has grown greater than our love for ourselves, arising from our love of God and our self-effacement before him."

"Then every need I meet for another believer becomes like a goal Zidane scores on the way to winning the World Cup," I said, smiling.

A broad smile spread over Uncle Issa's face. He was pleased that I had understood the example so deeply.

"Islam has identified four interwoven axes of our movement towards God. If we pursue them seriously and in balance, in accordance with the fitra, Islamic guidance, and sound reason, we continue drawing nearer to God until we reach complete servanthood to him."

"The four are: first, seeking to meet human needs and satisfy human instincts with balance and moderation; second, developing the self; third, giving to others and carrying a message of goodness, reform, and happiness to those around us and to humanity as a whole; and fourth, maintaining remembrance and worship of God."



Nearly two weeks had passed since my last conversation with Uncle Issa, yet its echo still sounded within me. The conversation had been decisive. My view of life, its details, and its movement had changed completely. I began to see events

spontaneously and positively. Often, in what people called good or bad, I saw only one reality: my movement towards God and nearness to him.

Previously, I had used willpower to remain positive and persistent, refusing to let anxiety and pain defeat me. Now happiness and tranquillity seemed to rise from within. The tests and challenges around me had become opportunities for greater nearness to God, in proportion to the effort and striving I brought to life.

Eid al-Adha arrived. This time I was happy and at peace, unlike the miserable state in which Eid al-Fitr had passed. We spent several delightful, restful days at Uncle Issa's farm with the rest of the family.

As soon as the holiday ended, I received a job offer. It came from the international audit firm that had audited my former employer. I had met its partner before travelling during the summer holiday and had contacted him again after losing my job.

It was the position I had truly wanted, but the offered salary was only 1,000 Omani rials—two hundred less than my previous salary. The partner promised, however, to raise it to 1,500 rials as soon as I passed the CPA examinations.

I had little choice but to accept; it was the only offer I had received. We were at the beginning of March, and the CPA examinations were only about two months away. God willing, my salary would therefore be adjusted within six months at most, which was not a very long time.

I began the new job immediately. It was as though the position brought good fortune with it. When I returned home after my first day, wonderful news was waiting for me.

A devout young woman in the community had recently ended an engagement that had lasted more than two years. She was exceptionally beautiful, possessed every quality I sought to an almost unbelievable degree, and was in the final year of her university studies.

For a moment I was overjoyed. I asked Mother and Uncle Issa's wife to approach her at once, especially since her elder sister was a close friend of Uncle Issa's wife. Then I remembered my bitter experience and knew that her answer would probably be no better than the others.

I thanked God for the grace contained even in his trials and put the matter out of my mind, so that the expected rejection would not hurt me when it came.

A few days later, we received her reply. To my surprise, it was not a refusal—but neither was it an acceptance. She asked to postpone considering the proposal for at least two months. She had only just emerged from a two-year engagement and needed time for her emotions to settle and her judgement to clear, so that she could decide wisely rather than react impulsively.

I respected her answer, and it raised her in my estimation. The difficulty was that I would now have to wait more than two months and might still be refused. Even if her initial answer were favourable, the meeting itself would still have to go well. I accepted reluctantly; I had no other choice. As the saying goes, the man who seeks a beautiful bride must be willing to pay the price.



CHAPTER FIVE

Love Works Miracles

The days passed slowly. I counted them day by day and hour by hour, waiting impatiently for Sara's answer. She was the young woman I had asked to marry, and she had requested more than two months to think and make her decision.

I kept telling myself that she would reject me, as the others had. I feared that this disappointment would be the worst of all because the wait had been so long. Yet I still hoped that God would be gentle with me. He is powerful over all things.

I thanked God that I had no free time in which to brood over my anxiety throughout the waiting period. Every day was divided between my new job and studying for the CPA. To keep to my programme, I had even stopped going to the mosque, withdrawn from social life, and reduced my sleep to less than four hours a night.

Even so, every now and then I found myself thinking about the woman I hoped would become my wife—about her qualities and character—and slipping into dreams of a beautiful life together.

At last, the two months she had requested came to an end. This time I counted not the hours but the minutes and moments. I desperately needed all my concentration and calm because the examinations were close, yet anxiety and anticipation were eating away at me.

The time came to travel to the United States for the examinations. I left with my mind divided between preparing for them and thinking about my future wife, God willing.

I sat the four CPA examinations over two days, two each day, with each paper lasting about four hours. It was exhausting, but also exciting and daunting, especially with hundreds of candidates from countries around the world in the same hall.

Most importantly, I found the examinations easy, contrary to everything I had heard about their difficulty. I thanked God for his kindness.

The following day, I was on my way home. This time, I allowed myself to think freely about the innocent, beautiful future I had imagined with her. Even when sleep overtook me, I dreamt only of her.

I returned refreshed and full of hope, expecting good news from every direction: from the new job, where I had performed well despite the demands of study; from the CPA results; and, above all, from the most important answer of my life, which I expected within the next few days.



At last, the answer came. At first I could scarcely believe it. It was a dream I had never expected to come true: Sara had accepted. For the rest of my life, 27 May 2002 would remain a day of celebration.

Yes, I had loved Sara from the first time I heard her name, even before I asked about her or saw her photograph. I felt for

her what I had never felt for any other young woman. It was as though I had known her for a very long time, as though she had always been rooted somewhere deep within me. Yet I did not admit these unreasonable feelings even to myself, afraid of the disappointment and pain that would follow if she rejected me.

Sara had lost both her parents in childhood. They died in a car accident while travelling from Muscat to Dubai, and from then on her elder sister and brother-in-law had cared for and raised her.

Her family was known for deep religious commitment, outstanding character, and remarkable intelligence. I was particularly struck by what I had heard of Sara's scrupulous observance of hijab, even in the presence of her brother-in-law, although he had raised and cared for her since childhood.

The meeting took place at her sister's house, an imposing home in the affluent district of Shatti al-Qurum. For a moment, the setting overwhelmed me. I had lived in poverty all my life, and although my circumstances were no longer bad, I certainly could not offer her the standard of living to which she was accustomed.

Mother, Uncle Issa, his wife, and I entered the house together. The meeting was more than pleasant. It took place in a warm and intimate atmosphere that clearly reflected the close bond between our two families.

At last, it was time for Sara and me to speak directly and alone. As was customary, the families moved to a nearby sitting area where they could see us without hearing our conversation.

Despite all the feelings stirring within me, I remained composed and kept a gentle smile on my face. In truth, maintaining it required no effort. The love and happiness I felt placed an innocent smile there throughout the meeting. That, at least, was what Uncle Issa told me later.

Sara was different. She was calm and self-possessed. Although innocence showed in her features and voice, she tried to approach our conversation rationally and objectively. Life had clearly matured her. She spoke as though she were older than her years; indeed, she seemed more mature than I was, more settled, and more aware of herself.

After a long conversation in which we came to know each other more closely, my attachment to her deepened, together with my certainty that she was far better than anything I had dreamt of. Then she surprised me with a question I had not expected.

“Do you know why I ended my previous engagement?”

“No. I asked, but never discovered the answer.”

“My former fiancé wanted us to live in the same house as his family. He was their only son too—like you.”

“I’m sorry, but what’s wrong with that?”

“I can’t. All my life, I’ve dreamed of a home of my own. If we lived with your mother, I’d always feel watched. I wouldn’t be free to move or make decisions in my own home—because, really, it wouldn’t be my home. I’d be a guest in hers.”

“But it would be your home too.”

“No, it wouldn’t. And I’d never try to challenge your mother’s authority in her own home. This is my condition: if you want to marry me, we need a separate home—somewhere I can be free and have a say in my own family.”

Her condition left me deeply unsettled and disappointed. She had stated it firmly, though she tried to remain gentle and restrained. Yet I could not abandon my family, even if I had to

remain unmarried for the rest of my life. My voice was heavy with pain when I replied.

“What if I told you that I can’t abandon my family? Think about it: if I left them now, how could you be sure I wouldn’t one day leave you and the family we build together?”

My words affected her. She seemed to grasp something of the bitterness and strain I carried. She lowered her head, embarrassed and troubled, and after a silence that felt very long, she answered.

“God forbid that I should ask you to abandon your family. Spend as much time with them as you want—every day. I wouldn’t even mind if we had dinner at your mother’s house every night. But our home must be separate. There’s something you may not have considered: you’re now forming another family in addition to the one you already have. You’ll have two families, not one. The two households need to remain distinct so that each can enjoy peace, privacy, and comfort.”

Her clear reasoning surprised me. I had never thought about the matter in that way, and I realised she was right. Yet I did not dare even raise the subject with Mother. I feared her disappointment and the sense that I had let her down.

“All right. Give me a few days to think, discuss the matter with Mother and Uncle Issa, and then answer you.” The pain was still audible in my voice.

“I’m sorry to place you in such a difficult position. But I want you to know that I feel very comfortable with your mother. I see in her the mother I lost as a child. Still, I’d take the same position even with my own mother, may God have mercy on her, if she were alive.”

“I understand you. I’ll answer within the next few days.” A faint smile crossed my face.

On the way home, I told Mother, Uncle Issa, and his wife what Sara and I had discussed. I was embarrassed and uneasy, but, to my astonishment, all three agreed with her. They considered her condition entirely natural and, more than that, regarded it as evidence that she was sensible and kind. Apparently, I understood little about social matters.



The engagement went as well as anyone could have hoped. We agreed that it would last three months and that we would marry in August, a few weeks before Sara began work at a government girls' school in Muscat.

My savings from the previous years were not enough to cover the wedding and furnish the new home, especially after I had spent part of them on the CPA programme and the journey to the United States for the examinations. I therefore had to borrow enough to make up the difference.

At the same time, the instalment on the new car I had bought a few months earlier, the bank-loan repayment, the rent on the new home, and the monthly amount I gave Mother consumed my whole salary. Nothing remained for the day-to-day expenses of our own home.

That did not greatly concern me. When the firm hired me, it had promised to raise my salary to 1,500 Omani rials as soon as I passed the CPA examinations, and my results were due at any time.

After a long wait, the registered letter arrived only a few days before the wedding. I went at once to the post office, full of excitement, but the results sheet shocked me.

I had passed two subjects with high marks, but failed the other two by the narrowest margin: 73 per cent in auditing and 71 per cent in business law, when the pass mark was 75.

It was not merely disappointing; it created a serious problem. I desperately needed the salary increase to cover the monthly shortfall, and this was no time for bad news. Only three days remained before the wedding. My chest tightened painfully.

I needed to absorb the shock and decide what to do. As usual, I went to Qurum Beach and sat for hours in a café overlooking the sea, turning the problem over and considering every option.

At last, I mastered my disappointment and made what seemed the best decisions available. I would resit the two examinations in November, about three months away, with more thorough preparation. I would also increase my loan by 2,000 Omani rials to cover the household shortfall from the wedding until the results arrived in February 2003.



It was Saturday, my first day back at work after our wonderful honeymoon in Turkey. Much as I regretted the end of the honeymoon, I was eager and excited to return to the life of work and striving.

I prepared tea and breakfast for myself and Sara, who was still asleep. I woke her so that we could eat together, then we left in separate cars. She drove to Al Wadi al-Kabir Government Girls' School, while I headed to my office in Ruwi, the same district in which we lived.

I was late. It was already half past eight when I left the house, and the firm's secretary called to ask whether I was coming. I assured her that I was on my way.

A pleasant surprise awaited me at the office. My colleagues had arranged a small reception to welcome me back and congratulate me on the marriage, and they presented me with a handsome watch.

I was delighted and touched by their warmth. The small celebration renewed my enthusiasm for work, especially as an important assignment awaited me: taking part in the preliminary audit of one of our most significant banking clients.

The audit was expected to take no more than a month. Yet the bank's internal-control systems were so flawed and disorganised that the assignment lasted a little over two months.

From a professional standpoint, my final report was excellent. I identified dozens of major weaknesses in the bank's controls—weaknesses that prevented us, as auditors, from relying upon those systems in carrying out our audit procedures—and recommended the necessary corrective action.

The statement that we could not rely on the bank's internal-control systems meant, quite simply, a serious problem for both the bank and the audit firm. I understood that perfectly, but I had no choice except to be truthful in my report.

A few days after I submitted it, on the day before I was due to fly to the United States for the November examinations, the partner summoned me to his office.

He congratulated me on my marriage, praised what he called my exceptional talent and ability in auditing as demonstrated by the bank report, and thanked me warmly for producing a document of genuine professional value. I was astonished. I had expected a reprimand, not praise.

I asked whether he wanted me to alter the report. He seemed surprised and offended by the question. Deep within, I thanked God and concluded that I had thought too badly of the firm and exaggerated the consequences of what I had written.

At the end of the meeting, as I stood and shook his hand, he congratulated me on the strong marks I had achieved in the first CPA examinations and confirmed that he would raise my salary as soon as I passed the remaining two papers the

following week. Then, as he put it, ‘to help the client and protect its reputation’, he asked me to add a single paragraph to the conclusion of my report:

“The bank has a set of alternative control procedures that render its internal-control systems effective and adequate. Accordingly, only limited year-end audit procedures are required to complete the audit, rather than detailed procedures.”

There was only one answer I could give. I smiled politely at the partner and said, gently but firmly:

“I can’t.” I wanted to leave him in no doubt that I would not change my report.

I expected him to become furious. Instead, he surprised me again with a calm smile.

“Never mind. Forget it.”

That afternoon, my direct supervisor told me that the partner had asked him to add the paragraph beside his own signature on the report, and he had done so. As usual, it was neither the first time nor, he believed, the last time he would receive such a request. He was deeply unhappy about it, but, as he told me, he had no choice.



My journey for the examinations lasted one week. When I returned to work, I found that paradise had turned into an unbearable hell.

The partner wanted me to resign. I could not do so before completing the two years of experience required for the CPA designation.

Nor could he simply dismiss me. I was an Omani citizen, and an arbitrary dismissal would bring him difficulties with the authorities. So he adopted what might be called a bone-crushing strategy.

He used every means he could to humiliate me, present me to the staff as a failure, and exhaust me psychologically and physically. Out of spite, he demoted me several grades on the pretext that I was incompetent and slow. He repeatedly sent me to distant areas for audit assignments, and I faced continual pressure to compromise my professional principles.

At first, every humiliating situation left me intensely upset. I could scarcely believe that what was happening was deliberate—that it came from a mind well practised in intrigue and in the art of breaking people down.

Then matters grew worse. I began to hate going to work, as though I were being driven to my death. I constantly wanted to sleep, perhaps to escape the pain that would not loosen its grip on my chest. I waited for weekends and holidays like a drowning man searching for dry land.

I was gradually collapsing and eroding from within. The effects spread into my home, which became clouded by anxiety and tension, while at work I could no longer concentrate or perform as I should.

My relationship with God remained strong. Yet on a Thursday night late in January, after I had despaired of finding a way out and pain and defeat had taken hold of me, my heart pounded as I turned to him from the depths of my being.

“My Lord, I have been wronged, so grant me victory.”

That night, while listening to Du‘a Kumayl—a supplication transmitted from Imam Ali and commonly recited on Thursday nights—I was prostrating after the evening prayer when I decided that I would not surrender. How could I, when I knew that this was an opportunity to become what God wanted me to be, to draw nearer to him and earn his pleasure? I had to remain strong, composed, and positive. That was what God wanted of me. After that, come what may.

I had no choice but to return to myself and gather my scattered pieces. After midnight, when darkness had settled, voices had fallen silent, and every creature seemed still, I rose from bed and walked quietly to the bedroom balcony.

The air was cold and the sea breeze refreshing. I filled my chest with it, as though washing away all the pain and distress that had accumulated there. Then I prostrated before God and thanked him from the depths of my heart for giving me this opportunity to prove to myself that I was walking his path. While prostrate, I descended into myself and cleared away the pain, anguish, and negative feelings that had settled there.

Then I turned back to reason and considered everything objectively. I saw that I faced a superior who would not leave me alone until he had either broken me or forced me to resign. Neither outcome was acceptable.

I had to preserve my calm and concentration until I could move to another firm after completing two years in this one—the period of experience required for the CPA designation. About one year remained.

I decided to adopt a policy of indifference towards every attempt by the partner to provoke me, preserving my inner calm whatever happened. Professionally, I would acquire as much experience in auditing and accounting as I possibly could. That meant remaining at work for long hours, averaging no less than eleven hours a day.

I also resolved to leave everything that happened at work on the firm's doorstep when I returned home, so that it would not damage my marriage. In the evenings, I would make a deliberate effort to keep my wife happy. She asked nothing of me except that I be cheerful, lively, and fully present when I was with her.

That was what I did. My state of mind improved and my affairs began to settle, although the partner continued trying to break me.

In the midst of my happiness at having overcome myself, a wonderful surprise arrived—one I desperately needed and had awaited as though it were the joker that would turn my luck around. I had passed the final two examinations.

My God, how badly I needed those results—not only to claim the promised increase, but to strengthen my position in the firm and change how the staff saw me. Even in an international audit firm like ours, only a handful held the qualification. Everyone treated it with awe, for it required not only intensive study but intellectual distinction—or so the experienced auditors around us constantly said.

In the world of auditing, the qualification was regarded as a real and reliable mark of a professional auditor. By international standards, I was now one of them. The feeling of achievement and victory was wonderful. More important still, I had regained my dignity.

The next morning, I was the first person at the office. I waited for the partner, eager to show him that I could not be broken, to demand my salary increase, and perhaps to begin a new chapter and leave the past behind.

Apparently, I did not understand people. I expected the news to annoy him, but he seemed genuinely pleased and congratulated me warmly on the achievement.

I asked him to honour his promise and raise my salary. He refused outright. According to him, I did not deserve an increase because I was negligent and my performance fell below the required standard. As evidence, he pointed to the fact that I had been demoted to a grade below that of a new graduate.

Anger and bitterness crushed me. I could not speak. I left his office without a word and drove to the beach, where I plunged into the sea fully clothed, hoping the cold water would extinguish the fire in my chest.



The situation was deeply discouraging. I had no way to cover the shortfall in our household expenses. I suggested that we move into Mother's house and save the rent, but my wife refused completely. I did not want to pressure her; a separate home had been her condition from the beginning.

I was bitterly frustrated. The only apparent solution was to move to another job with a higher salary, especially now that I had passed the CPA examinations.

What upset me most was that I needed at least two years of audit experience in this firm to master the work and qualify for the professional CPA designation, and I had completed only one.

Leaving early would mean sacrificing all the goals I had set for this stage with Uncle Issa at the farm and beginning again, perhaps within a different framework and with different objectives.

I was furious with the partner. Had my finances been secure, I would not have hated him despite everything he did. But because his actions had left me struggling to meet our needs, I found myself cursing him from the depths of my heart and praying against him.

My wife and I were driving to Mother's house for dinner. She was laughing as she told me about amusing incidents at work that day. She knew that I was lost in my worries, and she was trying to entertain me and draw me out of them with her stories and innocent laughter, which usually worked like magic on me.

This time, however, I could not respond. I was entirely absorbed in my misery. I sighed heavily and said:

“May God curse him. My Lord, take revenge on him.”

My wife stared at me, astonished to hear me curse and pray against someone. She was shocked by what I had become and pained for me at the same time.

“Muhammad! No, my dear. You aren’t someone who curses people, whatever they may have done to you.”

“You don’t understand the trouble we’re in.”

My answer wounded her. She interrupted me, tears running down her face.

“Since the day we married, I’ve lived through this struggle with you—every day and every night. And now you tell me that I don’t understand the trouble we’re in?”

Her tears hurt me. I could not bear to see my wife in pain, especially when I was the cause. I knew that my reply had been wrong. I took her hand, stroked it gently, and spoke with all the tenderness I could summon.

“I’m sorry. I was wrong. Please forgive me.”

“It’s all right, but please don’t say that again.” She wiped her tears, then added, “I have one condition before I forgive you.”

“Anything you wish. Name it.”

“Bless you, my love. My condition is that you smile, relax, and entrust your affairs to God.”

“All right. I’ll smile, laugh, and set the problems aside. But trusting God means that I still think about the challenges before me and find solutions, not that I simply ignore them. Isn’t that so?”

“Yes. But didn’t you tell me a few days ago that God wants us to face our problems positively?”

“Yes.”

“Then this distant look, the frown, and the pain that grips your chest and leaves you unable to settle aren’t positive. Am I wrong?”

“Not at all. You’re right.”

“Then don’t allow negative feelings to rule you. After we leave Mama’s house, we’ll go to the beach—your favourite place—and think about how to solve the problem. Agreed?”

“Agreed.” A great sense of relief came over me.

“What matters to me is that neither Mama nor anyone else should know about the problems we face. I don’t want to burden other people with our troubles, and I don’t want anyone to look at us with pity.”

“I agree. Don’t worry. I’ll tell no one. Now let’s go inside.”

We had reached Mother’s house. I was about to enter when my wife gently took my hand and stopped me.

“Please look happy. They need to see you happy. You’re their hero, and I don’t want them to think that I’m causing you problems. Please.”

I turned towards her, held her gently by the arms, and smiled with affection.

“I truly am happy, my dear—because you’re with me.”

We entered the house together. I was happy, and my heart beat with love.



At the beach, hidden by the darkness of night, I took her hand and drew her close, both giving and receiving warmth in the cold February air. We walked barefoot over the soft sand, breathing the fresh breeze and listening to the deep sound of the waves.

For several minutes we walked in silence, taking in the beauty and grandeur of the sea, as though emptying into its vastness the negative feelings and pain that had gathered in our chests. At last, I spoke quietly, with suppressed pain.

“Why does this happen? Why do people cheat, deceive, and lie? Why do they do evil things?”

“Forgive him. Satan is the reason; he tempts people.” She said it with a gentle smile. Her limitless goodness only made me love her more.

“Believe me, I’ve forgiven him from my heart. Perhaps God will be pleased with me.”

“I believe you. I know you well. That’s why I love you so much.”

“But Satan isn’t the cause. A person is responsible for his own actions. Satan is no more than a spectator cheering from the sidelines. Imagine a football team winning a match: is its superiority the cause of its victory, or the crowd cheering it on?”

“The team’s ability and performance are the main cause. The spectators merely encourage it.”

“Exactly. That is how it is with Satan.”

“Then why does God allow Satan to tempt us and encourage us towards what is forbidden? God forgive me—does he want us to disobey him?”

“I do not understand that either. The question has been in my mind for years, and I have not found the answer. Let us leave it for now and discuss our own problem.”

“All right. Let me first understand: what is the worst you expect, and fear?”

“The worst I feared has already happened: the partner refused to raise my salary. Now I have to look for another job and give up completing the two years of experience I need, with all that it means to me.”

“What salary do you expect in a new job?”

“With the CMA, the CPA, and the experience I have, I expect to find a managerial role in accounting or finance paying at least 2,000 rials.”

“And, as we worked out last night, we need thirteen hundred rials a month to live comfortably. Right?”

“Right. The salary itself does not worry me. What hurts is having to leave the firm and lose the goals I set for this stage, especially mastering audit work...”

“And earning the CPA designation. Right?” my wife finished for me.

“Right.”

“Wrong. You can move to another international audit firm and complete the two years there. With your experience, your qualifications, and the fact that you are a citizen, I am certain every audit firm will want you. Is that not true?”

“All right. But I don’t like jumping from one job to another, especially when I plan to move from auditing into the services sector as soon as I gain the experience I need.”

“My dear,” she said with a gentle reproach that touched me deeply, “simply because you do not want to move to another firm, you have treated the matter as though a disaster has struck.”

I fell silent and considered her words. Once again, she seemed to be right. It embarrassed me that she was always right and I was wrong. I feared that I might gradually lose her respect.

“You’re only twenty-four. That’s the age when many people are just beginning their careers, yet you’re already far ahead. You have qualifications that only a handful of people in the country possess, and you expect a salary most of your peers would not dream of. Still, you ignore all of that and see only that you may have to move to a job you don’t want.”

“Don’t you see? You aren’t just looking at the empty half of the glass. You’re staring at one tiny empty part and ignoring almost all of it that’s full.”

“All right. You’re right, as usual.”

“I’m sorry. I hope I haven’t hurt you.”

“Not at all. I value your honesty. I need it to see what my emotions and reactions cause me to overlook.”

“Ahem. Then tell me: are the ugly tactics the partner uses against you a factor in your decision to leave the firm?”

“Not at all. I overcame that after the night we talked. On the contrary, I now regard it as a challenge and an opportunity to train myself to bear other people’s harm without allowing it to affect me, my work, or my stability.”

“Then, in the end, we agree there’s no real problem worth all this worry. Correct?”

“Correct.”

“Then there’s something else I want to discuss, but I’m afraid you’ll reject it or be upset with me.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you. Promise me, before God, that you won’t take offence.”

“You have my word. Go on.”

“Tell me, how do you see our relationship? Are we merely two companions sharing a house, or partners in life? You are me, and I am you; our life is one.”

“Partners in life, of course. That’s what we agreed from the beginning.”

“Then both of us must protect the life we share, because it belongs to us both. It cannot be yours to protect while I stand by with my hands tied. Isn’t that so?” Her voice was calm but carried an emotion she tried to conceal.

“Of course. And that’s what’s happening. We...”

“No. It isn’t. I’m sorry to be so frank. Partnership isn’t just a slogan; it means sharing life in practice.”

My wife could no longer remain calm. Her voice sharpened and her face grew tense. I turned fully towards her and held both her hands with affection.

“Calm down, my dear. I’m sorry. It seems I have hurt you without meaning to. Please tell me clearly what has happened, and I promise I’ll correct it. Agreed?”

“I’m sorry. I got emotional.”

“That is all right. Now tell me what is wrong.”

“You keep saying the salary is not enough, and you completely forget that I receive a salary too, one that covers the shortfall and more.”

“But...”

“But what? Is this not my home too? Is this not our life, or is it yours alone?” she said, now plainly upset.

“Please calm down. It is our life, but I am responsible for the household expenses, not you.”

A long and heated discussion followed. I will spare you the details: as usual, my wife persuaded me. I still do not understand how she always manages to convince me, but she does.

In the end, we agreed that I would remain in my job until I completed the two years, and that her salary would cover the financial shortfall.



19 May 2003

“I’m going to be sick. Give me the bag—quickly.”

I handed her the plastic bag and pulled over to the side of the road while she vomited into it.

Since the previous evening, she had suffered relentless nausea and sickness. As soon as morning came, I took her to the doctor.

The doctor examined her, asked several questions, smiled, and requested a pregnancy test.

Impossible. We had planned to spend the first three years of our marriage without children. Yet the result was conclusive: my wife was already two months pregnant.

It was the best news I had ever heard. Was I really going to become a father? The thought filled me with joy, but also fear. It was an immense responsibility. Would I be able to carry it? Would I be like my own father?

The days that followed were slow, painful, and exhausting. My wife endured the worst symptoms of pregnancy, and I suffered with her. Nausea and sickness took possession of her until she had no strength left. She lay in bed, unable to do anything except vomit, often more than twelve times a day.

At night, sleep deserted her. On top of the nausea and weakness came painful tingling in her feet, as though pins were pricking them.

We moved into Mother's house until the difficult period passed. My wife resigned from the school because she could no longer work and also wanted to prepare for the child who was coming.

As for me, I thanked God that I had not moved to another job, for my performance reached its lowest point. I could no longer work more than the statutory eight hours a day, despite the firm's displeasure and its threats to dismiss me—as though one more threat could hurt a man already spent.

I even stopped working through lunch. I would go to the car and fall into a deep sleep, restoring enough energy to remain awake for the rest of the day. After returning home, I would

sleep for another two hours before beginning my second shift: caring for my suffering wife.

The loss of her salary threatened us with serious financial difficulty. Yet even in her condition, my wife did not overlook the problem. During one of the rare moments when she could speak in the early weeks, she made me swear before God that I would cover the shortfall from her bank account, where she had accumulated a reasonable sum from wedding gifts and what remained of her monthly salary. Her attitude made me admire her even more.

She remained in that state for nearly three months. Then the nausea, sickness, weakness, and tingling began to ease. Gradually, she could do simple things again: watch television, eat a little, sit with us and take part in conversation, and sometimes sleep through the night.

Compared with what came before, that period felt like paradise, especially because we were together in one home filled with warmth, love, and giving. We waited eagerly for our wonderful child.

By the seventh month, my wife had improved greatly, so we returned to our own house despite Mother's insistence that we stay until after the birth. My wife's sister visited every day, spending half the day caring for her and supervising the housemaid.



One moonlit night, I switched off the lights, drew back the bedroom curtains, lowered the window screens, and opened the windows so that the gentle air and moonlight could enter. The atmosphere was beautiful, calm, and deeply relaxing.

My wife was asleep while I sat on the floor beside her, enjoying the stillness with every part of me. I released my thoughts and spirit and allowed them to wander from place to

place and idea to idea without direction or restraint. I was almost completely relaxed, in a state close to drowsiness.

Suddenly, a thought flashed through me and seized all my attention: I had not listened to songs since I married. I had forgotten them altogether and had noticed their absence only now—the songs that had defeated me throughout my life, held me captive, and defied every effort and act of will I had made to escape them.

How had that happened? I was overjoyed to be free, but I wanted to understand what had changed. Something within me said that I was about to discover another of the universe's secrets. But what was it?

I knew that agitation would lead me nowhere. I calmed myself, descended gently into my memories and feelings, and retraced what had happened within me since the marriage.

I found it. It was love—the love with which my wife had filled my heart, until every part of me seemed to beat with it. In her smile, I saw all the beauty of the world; in her frown, all its misery.

My love for her had made me recoil from songs because she recoiled from them, just as she recoiled from other forbidden things.

But why had my love for God not made me hate songs, when my love for him was greater than my love for my wife or anything else in the world?

Was it because God is immaterial and absolute, so that I apprehend his greatness and love him with my mind and spirit, while my material body responds only to what is limited and tangible? My wife was a human being with whom I lived every day through all my senses as well as my mind and spirit: I saw and heard her, spoke with her, touched her, and held her hand. Did that give her a more immediate influence over me?

Perhaps. I was not certain. Maybe one day I would meet a psychologist who could explain it.

All I knew was that loving my wife had not only drawn me away from songs. Since our marriage, I had felt myself becoming kinder and more innocent, as though I had unconsciously taken on the qualities she loved and turned away from what she disliked—including songs—without effort or deliberate intention.

Could this be why God calls us especially to love the Prophet and his Household, and more generally to love righteous people and scholars—so emphatically that he commands the Messenger to ask people for love of his Household as the recompense for delivering the message: “Say, ‘I ask of you no reward for it except love for my near kin’” (Q 42:23)?

I rose quietly, tiptoed into the library, took down *The Indexed Concordance of the Words of the Noble Qur'an*, and returned to sit beside the bed. By the light of a small reading lamp I kept there, I quietly searched for verses in which the Messenger asked people for a reward. What I found astonished me.

The Qur'an repeatedly states that the Messenger asks for no reward in return for delivering the message, as in: “I ask of you no reward for it. My reward rests only with the Lord of all worlds” (Q 26:109). Only one verse appears to depart from this pattern: the verse that asks people to love the Prophet's Household.

But why their love? Surat Saba explains that the reward the Messenger asked for—their love—was for the people themselves, not for him: “Say, ‘Whatever reward I have asked of you is for your own benefit. My reward rests only with God’” (Q 34:47).

And how could love of the Prophet's Household benefit the people themselves? God did not leave the matter obscure: "Say, 'I ask of you no reward for it, except that whoever wills may take a path to his Lord'" (Q 25:57). Their love, then, was a path towards God, raising us towards him for our own happiness.

A shiver passed through me, and tears of reverence and gratitude ran down my face. My God, how gentle you are with us. Exalted are you.

But how did this work? I recalled my last discussion with Uncle Issa and the three elements he said enabled us to acquire human virtues: first, desire and longing; second, the nature of our inner psychological environment and how sound and positive it was; and third, practice and conduct.

I decided, for the moment, to set aside the faith-based convictions that already led me to love and revere the Prophet's Household, and to consider their role in raising humanity towards God as objectively as I could through those three elements.

I had often been deeply moved by a tradition concerning the Prophet's Household, widely transmitted in the books of all Islamic schools:

"I leave among you that which, if you hold fast to it, will keep you from going astray after me. One is greater than the other: the Book of God, a rope stretched from heaven to earth, and my progeny, the people of my Household. They will never separate until they return to me at the Pond. Consider, then, how you treat them after me."

I understood the greatness of the Qur'an. It is the Book of God; the whole of Islam is written between its covers. Muslims take guidance from it and derive from it the teachings and rulings of their faith. What, then, was the role of the Prophet's

Household that made them a counterpart to the Qur'an and made us duty-bound to love them and hold fast to them?

I do not know how long I remained absorbed in reading and reflection. I noticed nothing until the call to prayer suddenly rang powerfully through the room. Startled, I hurried to close the window so that my wife would not wake, but it was too late. She opened her eyes and saw me at the window with a book in my hand.

"You're still awake?" she asked, sleep heavy on her eyelids.

"I'll pray, then sleep."

"All right. Wake me when you finish so that I can pray too."

"God willing. Do you know? Last night I discovered something wonderful."

She did not answer. She had already fallen back into a deep sleep.



That morning, I was eager to tell my wife what I had discovered during the night, but we were in a hurry. I had gone to sleep late, and we needed to reach Uncle Issa's farm before lunch. Everyone else, including Mother and my sisters, was already there.

As soon as we were on the road, my wife asked:

"Tell me, what have you been trying to say since this morning?"

"Last night I came upon some wonderful ideas about Islam and God's kindness towards us."

"Now you've made me curious."

"First, tell me: why did God create us?"

"We have discussed that before. You explained that God created us so that we might draw nearer to him through our servanthood and integrated growth."

“Good. What role does the Islamic sharia play in helping us reach that goal?”

“My dear, come to the point. You’ve discussed all this with me before.”

“Please, humour me and answer the questions.”

“As you wish. The sharia is the path and method that shows us how to move through this life in order to draw nearer to God.”

“And where do we learn the sharia?”

“From the Qur’an and the sacred traditions.”

“And how do I apply the Islamic teachings found in the Qur’an and the Sunna?”

“Through practice.”

“What if those teachings are difficult to follow?”

“You use your will.”

“And if my will is weak—or simply not strong enough?”

“Then you’re in serious trouble.”

“Now imagine that the Islamic values and teachings written in the Qur’an and the traditions were transformed from ink on paper into a play or film in which those values were embodied in all their dimensions and circumstances. How much would that strengthen your understanding of them and your ability to apply them?”

“There is no comparison. It would strengthen both enormously.”

“That is one of the most important roles of the Prophet and his Household: they embodied the Islamic message, its values, and its teachings in daily life, across different circumstances. Through the stories of their lives and their conduct, they transformed words on a page into clear, living examples.”

“Wonderful.”

“That is why the Prophet’s Household deserved to stand beside the Qur’an as its living counterpart.”

“That is a beautiful idea.”

“But that is not all. A moment ago I asked what would happen if my will were not strong enough to put Islamic values and teachings into practice.”

“And I said you would be in serious trouble.”

“What if there were a mechanism that supported the will, made its task easier, and worked alongside it to plant Islamic values and concepts in our inner life, without any effort on my part?”

“That is impossible. There must be effort and struggle.”

“Of course. I do not mean that no effort is required. I mean a mechanism that helps those values enter our depths with comparatively less effort.”

“That sounds like magic.”

“No. It is real. Do you remember our discussion last week about the three elements that allow a person to acquire desired qualities?”

“Of course. I liked the idea very much.”

“You are fond of books on personal development. Have you read Stephen Covey’s *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*?”

“Twice.”

“I have not read it, but Uncle Issa quoted a passage from it that impressed me so much I learnt it by heart.”

“And what was this wonderful passage that made my dear husband memorise it?”

“If we wish to make relatively small changes in our lives, we may appropriately focus on our attitudes and behaviour. But if we wish to make a fundamental change of a different order, we must direct our efforts towards our basic paradigms.”¹

“I do not remember his exact wording, but that is certainly the idea.”

¹ Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. This repeats part of the passage quoted earlier in the novel.

“Then if there were a mechanism that changed our fundamental inner perceptions and filled them with Islamic values and concepts in all their beauty, nobility, and positivity, we would need less effort to correct our conduct. Would we not?”

“Yes, I agree. But what is this magical mechanism?”

“Love.”

“Love?”

“Yes. Love.”

“You’ve clearly been watching too many Indian films without telling me.” She laughed.

“I’m serious. Here’s the theory.”

“Go on. God help me.”

“Did we not agree that the Imams were the living embodiment, in ordinary life, of the values and divine qualities towards which Islam calls us?”

“Certainly. The Qur’an itself emphasises their purification: ‘God only desires to remove defilement from you, people of the Household, and to purify you completely’ (Q 33:33).”

“And because they embody a beauty that minds and spirits naturally love, people are drawn to them and become attached to them. Is that not so?”

“It is.”

“What Islam did was to confirm, deepen, and reinforce that love, affection, and loyalty. It made love for them a recompense commanded by God, one for which a person receives great reward, forgiveness of sins, and the highest ranks. Al-Tirmidhi, for example, relates that the Messenger took Hasan and Husayn by the hand and said, ‘Whoever loves me, these two, their father, and their mother will be with me in my rank on the Day of Resurrection.’”

“No Muslim would dispute the importance of loving them. But if we do not follow their example and acquire the values they urge us to adopt, would such love not be empty and useless?”

“That is the secret. Loving them and becoming attached to them naturally makes us desire the qualities and values they embodied and defended with their lives and everything they possessed. Do you agree?”

“Of course. That is the first element: desire.”

“Exactly—but it is not all. When we respond emotionally to the Prophet’s Household—to the stands they took and the way they defended and embodied Islamic values despite pain, persecution, death, captivity, and displacement—those values enter our inner psychological world almost without our noticing. They begin to colour the way we see life and the universe. That is the second element.”

“Wonderful. My whole body shivered when you said that.”

“Then you are convinced by this ‘magical’ method.” I winked at her.

“So, in proportion to our love for the Prophet’s Household, our identification with them and what they endured, and our response to the challenges they faced in defending divine values, we rise towards God and become better. That love and response plant those qualities within us and establish them in our depths almost unconsciously.”

“Yes. The Prophet is reported to have said, ‘Whoever loves a people will be raised with them, and whoever loves the work of a people shares in it.’”

“But wait. I do not want you to understand me as saying that love for the Prophet’s Household matters only because it is a means of planting divine values within us.”

“To be honest, that is what I understood.”

“Not at all. Love for them is sought for its own sake. Love generally—and especially love of God and of those who belong to him, including the prophets, messengers, their successors, and the Prophet’s Household—is itself among the greatest qualities that draw us nearer to God and bring happiness and divine pleasure.”

“Like prayer. It restrains us from indecency and wrongdoing, but it is also sought for its own sake because it embodies servanthood to God.”

“What, then, of the third element: practice and conduct?”

“God did not neglect that either. By nature and fitra, a person tends to imitate those they love and regard as an ideal. Islam reinforced this through many verses and traditions, commanding us to hold fast to the Prophet and his Household. God says, ‘In the Messenger of God you have an excellent example for whoever hopes in God and the Last Day and remembers God often’ (Q 33:21).”

“Then the more closely a person follows their example, the more deeply divine values, qualities, and Islamic concepts become rooted within them. Isn’t that so?”

“That is true. But if a person’s whims, appetites, and anger overpower their feelings towards the Prophet’s Household, and they repeatedly submit to those forces in practice, they may gradually become captive to them rather than guided by love. Such negative conduct will obstruct the acquisition of divine values and may instead form negative qualities within the person and shape them accordingly.”

“As the person persists in such conduct, those negative qualities grow stronger and more deeply rooted. They automatically weaken the person’s love for the Prophet’s Household and may eventually destroy it, leaving only outward appearances and the empty name of love.”

“How great God is, and how gentle he is with us.”

“Do you know that love for the Prophet’s Household is not the only mechanism God established for planting divine values and Islamic concepts within us? There is another, complementary mechanism. Neither can replace the other.”

“Really? Why do I feel as though I am discovering Islam all over again?”

“We have reached the farm. What do you say we continue on the way home?”

“No, please. Let us finish now. Pull over near the entrance until we complete the discussion.”

“As you wish.”

I pulled over at the entrance to the side road leading to the farm and continued.

“The second mechanism is worship, including prayer, recitation of the Qur’an, supplication, pilgrimage, and other acts of devotion. Islam attaches extraordinary importance to worship and strongly encourages it.”

“No one doubts the importance of worship in Islam. But how does it plant divine values within us without our being conscious of the process?”

“In two ways. First, it establishes deep within us an awareness of servanthood to God. As that awareness takes root, the self naturally begins to desire the qualities towards which God calls us. The inner life becomes purer, stronger, and more beautiful, less vulnerable to appetite and anger, and more attracted to beauty and perfection.”

“That is expressed in God’s words: ‘Establish prayer, for prayer restrains from indecency and wrongdoing’ (Q29:45).”

“Yes. Sahih Muslim also records that the Prophet compared the five daily prayers to a deep river flowing past a person’s door, in which the person bathes five times each day.”

“And the second way?”

“The various acts of worship—prayer, fasting, pilgrimage, recitation of the Qur’an, supplication, and others—fill much of the day and year. They engage us through visual, auditory, bodily, spiritual, and intellectual activity, and through many emotions: love, fear, hope, servanthood to God, mercy, solidarity with believers, and more. They contain the full range of divine values, qualities, and Islamic concepts. When we respond to these acts and practise them, those values and concepts enter our inner life and every part of us until they become part of our being.”

“Of course, that depends on how deeply we engage with these acts of worship and how present and humble we are in prayer, Qur’an recitation, supplication, and the rest.”

“Certainly. But the third element—practice and conduct—remains essential in establishing those values, qualities, and concepts.”

“The same principle applies here that you mentioned regarding love of the Prophet’s Household. The more a person persists in negative conduct, the more firmly negative qualities become rooted within them. This automatically weakens the sense of servanthood to God and may eventually destroy it, leaving only the outward form.”

“Exactly. This is why, when speaking of the sacrificial rite of pilgrimage, the Qur’an says: ‘Neither their flesh nor their blood reaches God, but your God-consciousness reaches him’ (Q 22:37).”

“Then God has established two principal mechanisms that automatically, without our awareness, plant divine values, qualities, and Islamic concepts within our inner life and unconscious mind, shaping our psychological environment. Is that right?”

“Yes. But in addition to those two divinely prescribed mechanisms, God created three elements within the human being to guide us towards him.”

“I know them: reason, will, and...”

“Fitra.”

“Yes. I knew that, but you said it before I could.”

“I know you knew it. We discussed it last week.”

“What pains me is that, despite all these forms of guidance God has placed within us, we still sin and dare to disobey him instead of giving thanks.”

“And these are not the only gifts. God has subjected everything in the heavens and the earth to our service and to preparing us for the lofty station he created for us—a station desired by the angels but not granted to them; a station through which a human being, while still in this limited world, may rise towards the Throne and draw nearer to God than even Gabriel, the greatest of the angels.”

“‘He has subjected to you whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth, all from him. In that are signs for people who reflect’ (Q 45:13).”

“Imagine: even the angels, despite their greatness and station, were placed in the service of humanity so that we might reach the station of servanthood to God. Their prostration before Adam points to that service: ‘When your Lord said to the angels, “I am creating a human being from clay. When I have formed him and breathed into him of my spirit, fall down before him in prostration.” Then all the angels prostrated together, except Iblis. He was arrogant and became one of the disbelievers’ (Q 38:71-74).”

“How, then, can Satan, despite all that guidance, gain control over the overwhelming majority of humanity and frustrate God’s purpose in creating us?”

“Who said that Satan controls the overwhelming majority of humanity?” I protested.

“The Qur’an itself tells us. Satan says: ‘My Lord, because you have led me astray, I shall make things attractive to them on earth and lead them all astray, except your purified servants among them’ (Q 15:39–40).”

“That is what Satan wished and what his diseased mind imagined. But God refuted him: ‘This is a straight path leading to me. You will have no authority over my servants, except those among the wayward who choose to follow you’ (Q 15:41–42).”

“God is telling Satan that he has no authority over his servants—that is, over human beings. This is the rule and the original condition.”

“Satan gains authority only exceptionally, over those among the wayward who follow him—people whose negative practices gain such power within them that ‘wayward’ becomes an accurate description of what they have become.”

“Where do you find all these beautiful ideas, my dear?”

“They are not mine. They are found in the works of our scholars; I am merely passing them on. Shall we go into the farm now? We are late.”

“Yes. I am tired too. Let us go.”

Suddenly, a wonderful idea flashed into my mind. I stopped the car and turned fully towards my wife, thrilled by the discovery.

“Do you know? Satan has not merely failed to frustrate God’s purpose in creating the universe. On the contrary, he plays a supporting role in bringing human beings towards the goal for which they were created. Yes, that makes complete sense.”

“I do not understand.”

“In other words, Satan’s existence and his attempts to tempt and deceive people make a greater number of them better than they might have been without him. His continual efforts to corrupt human life awaken reason, will, and the hidden powers of the self, driving people to defend themselves and their lives in this world before the next.”

“As a result, more people become worthy of Paradise, and more attain stations they could never have reached without the challenges and provocations through which Satan tried to lead them astray.”

“It is like the vaccine we give our children to protect them against diseases they are likely to face. A vaccine is, in origin, a weakened form of the microbe. We introduce it into the body so that different forms of resistance arise against it, strengthening the immune system. Right?”

“But many people still make mistakes and commit sins.”

“True—just as people who receive a vaccine may develop symptoms such as fever. Those symptoms arise because their bodies are resisting it. Something similar happens when the self produces different forms of resistance against Satan’s temptations.”

“We judge people from a narrow perspective. If someone commits one or more forbidden acts—lying, God forbid, listening to songs, or something similar—we label the person morally corrupt and wayward, and imagine that Satan has taken complete control.”

“But we do not look at all the other good things the person does, things from which Satan could not turn them away and which are far more numerous than their mistakes. We overlook their effort in study, their toil to support their family, their service to relatives and community, their kindness and good humour with people, and the countless

other positive, commendable actions pleasing to God that Satan would have wished to prevent but could not.”

“When we see an extraordinarily beautiful work of art with one flaw, it is not right to declare the whole work ugly and repulsive. ‘A good deed is rewarded tenfold’; a bad deed is not multiplied tenfold. Is that not what Islam teaches us?”

“I want to understand this point more deeply, but I am tired now. Shall we go into the farm and continue another time?”

“Yes, my dear. At once.”



I was sitting in the office of the director of human resources. Outwardly I appeared calm, but my heart pounded, my whole being was restless, and my hands would not stop moving under the pressure of anxiety.

I was waiting for the director to arrive and sign my contract with a newly established semi-governmental organisation. The position was financial affairs manager, with a monthly salary of 3,160 Omani rials. Over about two years, I would be trained to become the organisation’s chief financial officer. I was to begin after serving three months’ notice at the audit firm—just after completing the two years for which I had struggled so long. It was a position beyond anything I had dared imagine.

The offer itself was not what unsettled me. I had left my wife in the maternity ward, waiting for the child who had already tested us enough before his birth.

Sara’s labour pains had begun after midnight the previous night. I took her straight to hospital and remained awake beside her until morning, when I called Mother and Sara’s sister to tell them.

I was anxious about my wife and about the child who had taken hold of my heart before I had even seen him. Perhaps it

was because he had revived within me the whole meaning of fatherhood: warmth, tenderness, love, and the beautiful memories woven into every part of me. Only this time, I was the father. What a wonderful feeling.

The telephone beside me rang. I instinctively reached for it, then remembered that the call was not for me. I was only a guest in the room. I left it ringing, rose from the chair, and paced back and forth.

At last, the director arrived. He greeted me with an uncharacteristic coldness. He sat down, took a long drink from the tea that had gone cold on his desk, then told me that the board had decided to appoint someone else to the position.

The news struck like lightning, and for a moment I stood frozen. Before I could speak, my mobile phone rang. It was Mother. I answered quickly, but her voice was choked with fear and tears despite her effort to remain composed. The baby had died, and my wife was in a critical condition.

I did not know what to say. The room began to turn around me. Numbness spread slowly through my body, the phone fell from my hand, and I collapsed unconscious in front of the terrified director.

Suddenly, I woke. My God—it had been a dreadful nightmare. My wife slept peacefully on my left, while my son, Nabil, lay in his cradle on my right, sleeping as deeply as his mother. Praise be to God. Everything was well.

I rose, went to the bathroom, performed ablution, and prayed the night prayer, which I had neglected for a long time. Then I sat on the balcony and considered my situation.

Today I would complete my two years at the firm. More than three months had passed since I began looking for another position. I had applied for over two hundred jobs, without success.

I could not understand it. With my experience and qualifications, I should have been an attractive candidate—an asset to any employer. Yet the opposite seemed true. All manner of hopeless candidates were being hired—but not me. What was happening?

Some told me that I was envied. Friends said that the evil eye had struck me. Another suggested that jinn were involved, while a fourth believed that the expatriate finance director at my first company was following me and sabotaging every application I made.

In my judgement, it was none of those things. It was my reputation, preceding or following me wherever I applied.

I had held two jobs, and in both I had faced serious conflict with management and been asked to resign. In both, I had shown exceptional strength and firmness. To be honest, would I myself want to employ a strong-willed person with a reputation for conflict?

And now, what was I to do? There was scarcely a job left for which I had not applied.

“My God, come to my aid. I have exhausted every means.”



CHAPTER SIX

The Bitterness of Exile

17 April 2004

After months of exhausting attempts to find a suitable position, all I had managed to secure was a job as a senior auditor with an international audit firm, at a salary of only 1,500 Omani rials.

The firm was relatively small compared with the other major international audit firms. Its managing director was eager to increase the office's revenue and profitability in the hope of being promoted to partner. The firm also needed to recruit an Omani because its Omanisation ratio—the required proportion of Omani employees—was too low. He was therefore pleased when an Omani holding the CPA designation applied for a position: I would help raise the ratio and, as an Omani professional, could help him develop local business and increase revenue.

Since my existing salary was only 1,000 rials, however, my bargaining position was weak. He offered me just five hundred rials more.

At last, my life returned to something like normal. I began to enjoy the stability and calm of which I had long been deprived. At first, it bothered me that the firm's procedures and professional standards fell short of those at my previous firm, but I soon adjusted and grew accustomed to the new environment.

Things went smoothly. I gave the managing director considerable help in meeting many of the country's decision-makers. My presence at his side—as an articulate Omani professional with the CPA designation—helped him greatly in developing the business and increasing the firm's revenue.

That period of stability and success did not lull me into complacency. Life had taught me that another challenge would eventually come. All I could do was prepare for it by strengthening both my professional profile and my position within the firm.

I decided to use this period of stability to begin an MBA programme. But at which university? The choice required careful research: I needed a reputable programme that suited my circumstances.

After a long search, I found what seemed the right programme at the well-known Heriot-Watt University in the United Kingdom. The MBA consisted of nine modules that could be studied either on campus or at a distance, and the examinations could be taken at centres in many countries, including Oman.

Even so, I wanted to study on campus in Edinburgh, in the United Kingdom.

At first, the idea seemed impossible. How could I pay the tuition and living costs? And that was before I considered whether the managing director would grant me a full year's unpaid leave. Why would he agree when he needed me so badly to bring more clients to the firm?

Two qualities for which he was well known had made him unpopular with almost everyone in the office: extreme stinginess and resentment of other people's good fortune. Any financial support from the firm for my MBA therefore seemed out of the question.

Yet something deep within me made me certain that he would agree—not merely to unpaid leave, but to a full year's leave on full salary.

I prepared a request for one year's paid leave to pursue the MBA and kept it with me, waiting for the right opportunity. The atmosphere in the office did not encourage me to submit it. I feared he would mock me harshly.

At last, the opportunity I had been waiting for arrived. I helped him secure a meeting with the chief executive of a major client he had been eager to see. During the meeting, the Omani chief executive praised me warmly in front of him, urged him to support Omanis generally and me in particular, and ended by promising to assign some work to our firm.

The managing director was delighted with the outcome and grateful to me. I did not waste the moment. I prayed to God, sought the Prophet's intercession, and went into his office as soon as we returned. I handed him my request and explained that the degree would help the firm attract more work and create a favourable impression in the country by showing that it invested in developing Omani employees.

He did not hesitate for long. Still buoyed by the pleasure of the successful meeting, he took his pen and approved the request by signing both copies of the letter—one for the accounts department and one for me.

I was so happy that the earth seemed too small to contain my joy. My wife and I both desperately needed a change of scene after everything we had endured. I was also eager to pursue the MBA and understand the secrets of management and strategy.



Several months had passed since I joined the firm, and everything was going well. I was gaining ever greater respect and appreciation within the office. Such a period might have been enough to make another person feel secure, but not me—not after all I had encountered in life.

A voice deep within me kept telling me to prepare for what the coming days might bring, because things would not continue like this for ever. Was it the voice of reason, drawing on my bitter and turbulent experiences, or merely anxiety and the devil's whispering, seeking to exhaust me and disrupt my thinking? I did not know. But there was no harm in preparing and continuing to develop my abilities, so long as I maintained the same way of living: working hard, with strong resolve and intense focus, while remaining calm and happy. Whenever I was with my family or at a social gathering, I left that whole world behind and was fully present with them in mind and heart.

From the beginning of December, I noticed a change in the managing director's treatment of me. He began watching for my occasional mistakes, magnifying them, reprimanding me severely, and trying to damage my reputation in the office.

I was bewildered. I could not think of anything I had done to offend him. On the contrary, I had supported him greatly in achieving his marketing objectives.

I saw no alternative but to speak frankly with him, although I disliked such conversations and found them deeply uncomfortable.

I knocked on his door and entered. He was finishing a telephone call, laughing with evident pleasure. He gestured for me to sit, so I took the chair on the right-hand side of his desk, feeling tense.

He ended the call and turned towards me, his expression suddenly serious.

“Yes. What do you want?”

“I have noticed that the way you treat me has changed for the worse lately. Have I done something to upset you?”

“You have been making more mistakes, and your overall performance does not meet the required professional standard.”

“But that makes no sense. You were satisfied with me and my work for eight months. How have you suddenly discovered that my performance is below standard?”

“The problem is that you speak well, and your words mislead people about your true abilities. I trusted you and did not review your working papers before. But when Anouk, the audit manager, reviewed some of your files last month to complete the final stages of the audits, we found a large number of serious errors.”

“Excuse me, but that is not true. Anouk did meet with me last week to discuss one client’s file. Every point he raised was superficial or merely presentational except for one missing procedure. He asked me to carry it out, and I did.”

I fell silent for a moment, then continued, deeply frustrated.

“You know that such issues are routine in auditing, especially when no audit programme has been agreed in advance for each client. That is why the audit manager reviews every file at the end of each stage, to ensure that the assignment has been completed properly.”

“Your mistakes are far too numerous. In any case, it is good that you raised the matter, because I intended to speak to you about it within the next few days.”

He was silent for a moment, then opened a drawer, took out a packet of cigarettes, lit one, and began smoking slowly, as though he were preparing to say something especially important or difficult.

I understood what he wanted to say. I had become familiar with conversations of this kind. My mind was working rapidly, turning the matter over from every angle and deciding how I should respond. Before he could speak, I began.

“I promise to sit with Anouk and review all my files so that I can identify every mistake. I will correct them in my own time, and I will be more careful and precise in future.”

“I suggested that to Anouk, but he had a different view.”

“And what is it?” I asked, bracing myself.

“He believes that you are not suited to the auditing profession. Despite your intelligence, your way of thinking is not appropriate for audit work, and he does not believe you will develop in the profession. We therefore agreed to ask you to look for another job that suits you better.”

My mind was working like a turbine—fast and forceful—as I tried to determine the right response.

“I know myself and my abilities well. With all due respect to both of you, I disagree completely. I believe I am very good at auditing.”

I said it firmly. Then I lowered my voice, determined not to show the slightest sign of defeat or weakness.

“In any case, that is not the issue between us. It is clear that you want me to leave the firm, for a reason I do not understand.”

“No, it is not like that.”

“Please let me finish. Then correct me if I am wrong.”

I interrupted him firmly but calmly. I leaned back in the chair, allowed a calm smile to settle on my lips, kept my gaze cool and steady, lifted my chin, and continued.

“You want me to leave, and I have no objection if I find a suitable position with a good salary. Help me find that position, and I will leave immediately without creating any problems. The alternative is that you try to dismiss me, which you know very well you cannot do. If you try to harm me or damage my reputation inside or outside the office, I will mount a counterattack against you and the firm. You know what I am capable of. Are we agreed?”

I was so firm, calm, and strong that I surprised even myself. The managing director, by contrast, was visibly frightened. His tone changed completely, and a gentle, innocent smile appeared on his face.

“No, Muhammad, it is not like that. I would never forget what you have done for this office. You are like a friend and a brother to me, and we do not want resentment between us. Take your time finding a suitable job, and I will help you in whatever way I can.”

“I am sorry. I apologise for becoming agitated. I misunderstood you.”

My naturally gentle manner had returned.

“There is no harm done. We are brothers and friends, and misunderstandings always happen between those who care for one another.”

“Very well. In that case, I will need time to search for a job and attend interviews. Could you relieve me of my assignments for a while? But wait—I’ve forgotten something.”

“What have you forgotten?” he asked with visible concern.

“Do you not remember that I am travelling to the United Kingdom in January for a full year to pursue the MBA? I cannot move to another job before I return. In fact, completing the MBA will help me greatly in finding the right position.”

“That is impossible. You must leave the office now, within the next two months at the latest. And who told you that I had agreed to let you take a whole year off?” he said angrily.

“You did agree. You signed my request. I have enrolled at the university and paid the registration fee.”

“Yes, I remember. I do not know what came over me that day. It is not like me to approve something of that kind. I have never done it in my entire life,” he said in a low voice, almost as though he were talking to himself.

“Perhaps. But you approved it, and that is further evidence that you were extremely pleased with my work. What happened to make you turn against me?”

“I told you: your performance is poor, and you are not suited to auditing,” he said angrily as he took another cigarette from the packet.

“Very well. That is your opinion. I promise that I will begin looking for another job even before I return from my studies, so that, God willing, I can resign as soon as I return home.”

I rose as I spoke and extended my hand. He shook it, looking almost stunned.

Two days after that meeting, an administrative circular arrived from the head office announcing that the managing director had been promoted to partner.

Only then did I understand why he wanted to be rid of me. He had achieved his long-sought goal of becoming a partner. The firm had become widely known, and the managing director—rather, the partner—no longer needed me for marketing. On the contrary, he may have begun to see me as a medium-term threat to his own position because I was an Omani, well qualified, and well connected.



17 January 2005

My wife slept in the seat beside me on the plane, her head resting on my shoulder, while I thought about our situation and reconsidered for perhaps the twentieth time whether travelling to study had been the right decision. I was anxious about what awaited my little family and me, especially since what remained of my monthly salary would scarcely be enough for us to live on.

I had borrowed the tuition fees from the bank, sold my car, let our housemaid go, and given up our rented home to reduce our monthly expenses. I used the small amount I received for our furniture to pay part of the cost of the air tickets.

I thanked God that my friend Maher worked in Glasgow, a city not far from Edinburgh. We had therefore decided to live there. He had helped me greatly: he had reserved a small apartment at a relatively low rent and promised to help me find a small, inexpensive car as soon as we arrived.

We took the train from London to Glasgow and arrived in the evening. It was bitterly cold, and rain fell heavily, as it so often did there.

My wife and I walked side by side as we left the station. I pushed the luggage trolley, while she pushed the pram carrying our one-year-old son, Nabil. We walked in silence and sadness, as though we were taking part in a funeral procession.

We should have been delighted, yet each of us was held captive by the unsettled emotions within.

I was intensely alert, full of expectation. For the first time, my feet were touching European soil—‘God’s paradise on earth’, as people called it. I felt awe and admiration because of everything I had heard about the beauty of its landscape, the sophistication of its cities, the civility of its people, and the refinement of their thinking. Was all that true, or was the media simply doing what we had come to expect of it—turning reality on its head? I did not know. Yet wonder and admiration prevailed, especially because I was eager to begin studying and learning about management.

At the same time, my chest tightened with fear of the unknown and concern for what my wife might suffer far from home. Although we had been away from home for only one night, I already felt homesick and unsettled by the distance. Travelling for two or even four weeks is tourism: it is enjoyable and renews the spirit. Travelling for many months is something entirely different.

My wife, however, was consumed by a single, overwhelming sense of estrangement and longing for home. It shut out everything around us. Depression and sorrow weighed upon her chest and filled her heart, as though a mountain were pressing down upon her.

We soon found Maher waiting at the exit. I embraced him warmly, both out of affection and in the hope of easing some of the homesickness that was burning within me.

He was happy to see us, and his almost angelic face carried its usual warmth. Yet I noticed a faint heaviness in his expression. We soon discovered why. The problems had begun again—or at least that was how my wife and I felt.

Maher was supposed to collect the key to our apartment from the agent the previous day. Because of an error in the paperwork and administrative process, however, the apartment had been rented to another tenant, who had already moved in.

We would now have to stay in a hotel until we found another suitable apartment. We did not have enough money for a hotel, and my wife, embarrassed at imposing on Maher, firmly refused his offer to let us stay temporarily in his home. Our only remaining option was a basic guesthouse with a shared bathroom serving all the rooms on each floor.

Maher could not help us with the search because he had to leave on an urgent two-week work assignment. We would have to depend on ourselves to find both an apartment and a car.

The following morning, I had to travel to the university in Edinburgh, leaving my wife and our son alone in the room. She was overcome by fear and a bitter sense of isolation. During my entire absence, she could not bring herself to use the bathroom because she was afraid to leave the room and frightened of leaving Nabil alone even for a moment.

When I returned from the university, our son was asleep, but my wife was almost overcome by grief and tears. I sat beside her and stroked her hand gently. She began to sob with pain, bitterness, and anguish.

I reassured her that, God willing, matters would ease. It was only one year, and it would pass; soon we would return to our families and our country. I reminded her of what God has prepared for those who remain patient, until she gradually began to calm.

My heart ached, and hot tears ran down my face from the pain and compassion I felt for the bitterness and exhaustion she was enduring. I promised not to leave her alone again until we found a suitable apartment and moved into it, even if that affected my studies.

She noticed my tears, lifted her head tenderly, and wiped them away with her delicate fingers. Then she dried her own tears, apologised, and promised not to become so distressed again. With spontaneous sweetness, she rose, took me by the hand, and asked me, with a warm smile, to accompany her to the bathroom door. She could wait no longer.

We were supposed to go out and search for accommodation, but she was emotionally exhausted. I suggested that we visit the city centre instead, explore our surroundings, and gain a better idea of where to look for a home.

She liked the city centre very much and felt noticeably better and less isolated than she had in the guesthouse on the outskirts.

On the third day, we began our search for accommodation. It was tiring and emotionally painful, especially because the search stirred the blade of homesickness already lodged in my wife's heart and deepened her anguish.

On the morning of the fourth day, while we were eating our "free" breakfast in the dining room, the owner of the guesthouse approached us. He seemed to be in his late forties. Despite his serious expression and hard features, he appeared kind.

He spoke frankly. Curiosity had led him to observe us during the previous days. He had been struck by my wife's careful observance of hijab, our courteous way of dealing with people, the fact that we already had a small child despite our youth—as he put it—and, above all, the sadness on my wife's face.

His smile was gentle and his manner reassuring, so I told him openly about our difficulty in finding an apartment and a car. Our story appeared to move him. He offered, there and then, to devote his time to helping us find both.

We accepted his generous offer. As soon as we finished breakfast, we set out in his car through the city, moving from one property agent to another and from one garage to the next.

The search continued for two days and ended in partial success. Praise be to God, we found a suitable car for five hundred pounds and bought it immediately. We also found an apartment in the city centre that suited us very well, but its rent was three hundred and fifteen pounds more than we had planned.

The increase itself was not the main problem. The problem was that it left us with only about two hundred and forty pounds a month for food, drink, outings, fuel, and every other conceivable expense. We did not merely need to manage carefully; we needed a miracle.

I did not want to rent it, but it was the cheapest apartment we had found in the city centre. Faced with my wife's desire and the pleading look in her eyes, I could not refuse, especially after she assured me that she was entirely willing to endure a hard, frugal life in exchange for living somewhere she felt safe and where the pain of being far from home might be eased.



Making ends meet requires two things: a realistic plan for your expenses and the will to keep to it. Planning was not the difficulty. Keeping to the plan was genuinely painful because it meant a long list of hard restrictions.

We spent nothing in restaurants, cafés, or neighbourhood grocery shops. We shopped only at hypermarkets, and even there bought only goods offered at exceptional discounts—promotional items or products close to their expiry dates.

We ate two modest meals each day: breakfast and dinner. At lunchtime and during outings, we ate bananas because they were among the cheapest and most filling fruits available. I grew fond of bananas during those days in Glasgow; whenever hunger became intense and our stomachs rumbled, especially in the bitter cold, they were our refuge.

What would have made the situation far worse was dwelling on our hardship as though it were a calamity and giving in to self-pity. We therefore decided, almost instinctively, not to become prisoners of those negative feelings.

I had to divide my time among caring for my wife and son, studying, and housework. On ordinary weekdays, as soon as I returned from university, we left the apartment and walked around the city streets, markets, parks, and other places of leisure. We did not return until after seven in the evening.

Fortunately, the kitchen opened onto the living room, where we spent the rest of the day until my wife and son went to sleep around midnight.

We sat together watching Arabic programmes and news on television while I prepared dinner, washed the dishes afterwards, played with my son, and then took him to bed and settled him until he fell asleep.

Only after my wife had gone to sleep did I begin the fourth part of my day: studying. I spent the rest of the night, until four in the morning, reading, reviewing, and working through the course materials.

A whole year dragged by, exhausting and heavy with sadness and tears. I did not feel homesick myself; my wife and son were with me, and my studies absorbed me. But every part of my wife ached with homesickness and longing. Her eyes grew hollow; whenever I looked into them, the sight pierced me like a blade.

I tried hard to keep her occupied and help her forget her homesickness, but it was like trying to cool a fire by fanning its flames.

There were times when she appeared happy and joyful, and our journeys gave us many moments of adventure and excitement. Yet inwardly she bled with pain, anguish, and bitterness. Sorrow had become her relentless companion. Not even all the love she carried for me and our son could distract her from it or from the bitterness of exile.

Her anxiety about the future made matters worse. The partner wanted to dismiss me, and my previous attempt to find work had failed spectacularly despite all my experience and qualifications.

One day, while we sat on the grass beside Loch Lomond, she spoke in a voice filled with sorrow and despair.

“Why?”

“Why what?” I replied gently.

“Why all this suffering? Why do we leave one disaster only to enter another? Since I married you, I have moved from one problem to the next, as though the gate of hell had opened before me. I lived my whole life as an orphan, but I was comfortable and lived quietly and securely. Then I married you, and my life became hell. Why?”

Her words set the reel of memory turning in my heart and mind. I remembered everything I had faced since my father died, and remembered asking those same questions for a whole year until I reached the truth.

But what could I say to her? She knew every detail of what I had endured and how it had affected me, because I had told her about it many times.

“It is destiny. We should accept it and thank God for it.”

“No. It isn’t destiny. We say that to deceive ourselves and escape from facing our mistakes.”

“What do you mean, my love?”

“I’m not your love! It’s just another way of deceiving yourself—of soothing your conscience.”

“Why are you saying that? I don’t understand. It’s true—I really love you.”

“The situation we’re in wasn’t caused by destiny. It was caused by your wrong decisions, which took no account of me. You could have pursued the MBA while we remained comfortable and settled at home. But you insisted on studying here, regardless of the suffering I’d have to bear. You’re selfish. You love no one but yourself.”

“And why do you need an MBA at all? You’re already over-qualified and don’t need it. But you’re selfish, obsessed with collecting certificates and boasting about them.”

I was stunned by her words. They hurt me deeply, but my pain for her and for the despair and frustration she felt was greater. I feared the thoughts beginning to enter her mind. I was her only support in life. If those dark thoughts and the devil’s whispering found their way into her heart and mind and gained control, she would lose everything.

I moved closer and took her hand, but she pushed me away and began to weep bitterly.

I remained composed, but I did not know what to do. I had never faced such a situation before. It was clear that, for the moment, my wife's mind was closed to any reasoning I might offer. Whatever argument I made, she would answer with another—or would not answer at all.

I had only one weapon left, but it was powerful and directed towards her heart. If I could open her heart and win it back, I might then be able to speak to her mind and reason with her.

I had to cry. Yet I could not fake emotion. I had to let myself feel the sorrow and brokenness so that my tears would be genuine. When I began to cry, I was soon overtaken by it. It seemed that my subconscious had been carrying suppressed pain and had found in my tears an opening through which to release all the suffering accumulated within me. I wept sincerely, with such bitterness and grief that my sobs became audible.

My wife could not bear to see me cry. She began calming me and apologising for having hurt me with her words. I tried to stop, but it took considerable effort.

I apologised to her for all the pain I had caused and reassured her that our circumstances would improve. I reminded her that God was with us, that he would reward our patience, and that he would not abandon us.

At last, she gradually began to feel reassured. Yet I knew that the reassurance was temporary and that she would soon return to the same state unless I answered her questions.

She adjusted her position, curled into herself, pressed close to me, and rested her head on my chest, as though searching for support and for the security she felt she had lost—though at the time I could not understand why.

“Do you really believe that I’m the cause of the problems we face?” I asked with great tenderness.

“That’s what the devil whispers to me. Don’t be upset with me,” she replied gently, with apology in her voice.

“I won’t be upset. You have every right to your view. But will you let me answer your questions?”

“Yes. I need that. I love you, and I have no one but you. I don’t want the devil to come between us.”

“Very well. We’re now facing three problems: being far from home, our difficult financial position, and the fear that I’ll lose my job. Are these the problems for which you believe I’m responsible?”

“No. I’m not speaking about our financial difficulty. I know that I caused it by insisting that we rent in the city centre. Besides, it isn’t a serious problem.”

“Then let’s talk about being away from home. Remember, we both wanted to travel—to change our surroundings and rest after the difficulties we had faced before travelling: your pregnancy and the problems I had been experiencing at work. Isn’t that so?”

I spoke very gently, taking care that my words carried no trace of attack or blame that might provoke her.

“But I didn’t know that I’d feel so lonely and alienated. And our situation then was secure, not threatened as it is now.”

“I’ll explain shortly why our situation isn’t threatened at all and why these are merely unfounded fears.”

“Do you call the partner’s determination to dismiss you at any cost merely an unfounded fear?” she interrupted.

“I’ll answer that after we finish discussing your homesickness. Returning to that point: like you, I didn’t know you’d feel this way. I thought travelling would give you relief. I swear by God that, had I known it would hurt you, I wouldn’t have travelled. I’d have pursued the MBA at home.”

“Really?”

“Of course. I’d give my life for one smile from your beautiful lips,” I said, holding her hand in both of mine and stroking it gently.

“I’m happy to hear you say that.”

A broad, innocent smile spread across her beautiful face. Then she continued.

“But why must you pursue the MBA? You don’t need any more qualifications.”

“I do need it. Given my experience, the positions suitable for me now are management roles in finance. But I have no management qualification, and that will be a real obstacle to finding such a job. Moreover, although I could take the programme at home by distance learning, I would benefit far less than I would by attending lectures and discussing the material with lecturers and fellow students.”

She sighed deeply. Tears ran down her cheeks as she spoke.

“Perhaps you’re right. But being so far from home is terribly painful. I’m tired, and I miss home.”

I wiped away her tears with my fingertips.

“Please don’t cry.” After a brief silence, I added, “If you don’t stop, I’ll cry too. I can’t bear to see you weeping.”

“All right. I’m sorry. I’ll stop. Tell me, then: how can you say our situation isn’t threatened?”

“Under Omani labour law, the firm can’t simply dismiss me. That would amount to unfair dismissal and drag the firm into problems it doesn’t need.”

“Are you certain?” she asked with intense concern.

“Of course. You’ve seen for yourself that he hasn’t been able to dismiss me and that he had no choice but to honour the year of paid study leave he had already granted.”

“But he won’t accept your remaining in the firm. He’ll plot against you until he finds a way to remove you.”

“That won’t happen, God willing. When we return home, I’ll speak to him and ask him to use his contacts to help me find a suitable alternative position instead of prolonging a conflict between us. As you’ve seen, he dislikes trouble.”

“I hope so with all my heart. I have no strength for problems and conflicts,” she said sadly.

I needed to draw her out of the gloomy atmosphere that was weighing upon her. I could think of no better way than to revive her hope in the future.

“I expect that my salary in the new job will be much higher than what I earn now. The first thing we’ll do is buy a plot of land and, God willing, build our home on it.”

A smile of contentment and happiness appeared on her face, as though hope had revived a heart weighed down by despair and fear.

“Really? Will we build our home as soon as you move to the new job?” she asked, her voice full of hope but still fragile.

“Certainly. In fact, God willing, we’ll build two villas and rent one of them out.”

She was silent for a moment, then lifted her head from my chest and looked at me as though pleading for security.

“Your words are comforting, but I’m afraid.”

“Don’t be afraid. Put your trust in God.”

“I believe in God, and I trust him. I know that he won’t abandon us. But I don’t understand why he doesn’t help us and bring us relief.”

“Have you not heard the saying, ‘When God loves a servant, he tests him’?”

She raised her head again in surprise, and I continued.

“Does God not say: ‘Do people think they will be left to say, “We believe,” and will not be tested?’ (Q 29:2)?”

“But why?”

“Because the trials and challenges through which God tests us are among the clearest expressions of his kindness and mercy, drawing us nearer to him.”

“How? Do we believe in torturing ourselves to reach God?”

“Not at all. On the contrary, we must strive to free ourselves from pain and enjoy the pleasures of this world within reasonable limits.”

“I can’t reconcile what you’re saying. It sounds self-contradictory.”

“The pains and pleasures we experience, and the positive way in which we engage with them in daily life—seeking to overcome the pain and attain the pleasure—are what deepen the beautiful human feelings, meanings, and qualities within us. They give us knowledge, drive us towards work, reform, and creativity, sharpen our resolve, and increase our capacities.”

“Those pains and pleasures also lead us to turn to God for help in meeting our needs, or to thank him for the blessings and kindness he has shown us. In that way, our awareness of our servanthood to God takes deeper root.”

“Then the pain I feel now is not wrong? How can that be? Is it not contrary to contentment with God’s decree and destiny, which is one of the foundations of faith?”

“Wait. You have mixed different matters together.”

I paused for a moment, then continued.

“Yes, we should be content with trials and with God’s decree and destiny. But it must be an active contentment, not a passive one.”

“I don’t understand.”

“It means that we should neither panic nor despair. On the contrary, we accept the trial and can even find joy in it, because we know that, so long as we respond positively and strive actively to overcome or remedy it, it draws us nearer to

God and develops us. Through this, our capacity to enjoy the delights of Paradise increases.”

“But none of this changes the fact that trial is painful. That very pain—like pleasure—is the heat through which the self and spirit are refined.”

“All that is required is that we do not allow pain or pleasure to exercise even the slightest control over us or over the beautiful meanings and settled qualities we possess.”

“Good. The idea is beginning to become clear, but I need more time to digest it.”

My wife shivered in the cold. I took off my coat and wrapped it around her as she drew herself in against the chill.

“Let’s sit in the car. You’ll be warmer there.”

“No, please. Let’s stay here. The place is beautiful, and I don’t want to leave.”

“Very well, as you wish.”

We were silent for several minutes, contemplating the beautiful view. Its beauty flowed through me and filled me with delight, especially because I knew that none of it could compare with the beauty God had prepared for us in the worlds to come.

I felt inner tranquillity and gratitude to God. I knew that God was with me, as he is with every human being on earth and, indeed, with every creature in the universe, watching over and caring for each. Glory be to my Lord. How deeply I loved him.

“Contentment with God’s decree and surrender to it do not cancel the experience of pain. They are not opposites on the same plane; in philosophical terms, their relationship is vertical, not horizontal.”

“What does that mean?”

“It is not like tasting the sourness and sweetness of lemon juice at the same moment. It is more like feeling strain, fatigue, and pain while playing football with friends or swimming—activities you enjoy even though they tire you and make your body ache.”

“That’s a beautiful meaning. But how can I respond to trials so positively in practice?”

“The external event—whether trial or blessing—ends with its occurrence. It has no value except through how you respond to it. You may look at the sea and feel joy, or look at it and feel fear. That depends on what already lies within you and on how you think.”

“Train your mind and inner life to respond positively to trial, even if at first you have to adopt that response deliberately, almost as though you were acting a part. With time, it will become automatic and part of your natural way of meeting hardship.”

“Hmm. Perhaps.”

“Remember that, however long these trials and blessings last, they are no more than a moment in the span of your eternal existence. The way you respond to them is what remains and shapes the measure of your happiness or misery for ever. The true blessing or calamity is what comes from you, not what happens to you. Isn’t that so?”



6 April 2006

Although I carried a cheque for a large sum in my pocket—nearly eighteen thousand rials, representing my salary for the coming twelve months—I felt sorrow moving through my veins and weighing upon my heart.

I closed the office door quietly behind me, lost in thought and bewildered by what had happened. I descended the stairs slowly, asking myself, “And now, what is the next step?”

I paused on the final step, then sat where I was and allowed the reel of memory to turn.

After I completed the MBA, the partner became deeply afraid that I might take his place in the office. His overriding concern was therefore to remove me at any cost, and the open confrontation between us began.

More than once, I came close to bringing him down professionally. Each time, he escaped by a narrow margin, but that was enough to make him tremble at the prospect of what I might do.

A faint smile came to my face as I remembered how frightened he had been in our penultimate meeting, when he summoned the regional partner for the Middle East to negotiate with me.

I told them that dismissing me would amount to unfair dismissal and that I had a family to support, so I could not resign without another position in hand unless they compensated me with a full year’s salary. They rejected the demand firmly at first, but eventually gave in, afraid perhaps that I might raise it to two years.

And so, 6 April 2006 was my final day at the firm.

Once again, I was back at square one: searching for a job.



CHAPTER SEVEN

The Conspiracy

June 2006

I had begun looking for work even before I returned from Britain in November 2005. Now it was June, and still nothing had come of it. I had tried desperately, knocked on every door, and submitted hundreds of applications, all to no avail—as though I were trying to scoop water with a sieve.

My wife lived every moment of that long search with me. Despair soon began to take hold of her, especially because this was not the first time I had been unable to find a job.

Fear of the future gnawed at her heart. The bitterness of need and the fear of disgrace in the community smothered every sense of happiness. She was weighed down by sorrow and anxiety.

There was no obvious reason for my failure to find work. Qualified Omani professionals were scarce and in high demand. This only strengthened an idea that had begun to

seep into my wife's subconscious while we were in Glasgow: perhaps the problem lay in me, in my personality, and perhaps even in my poor performance.

One day, while I lay on the bed and she arranged the clothes in the wardrobe with quiet, mechanical movements, I said:

"Trust in God. He will set matters right, God willing."

She did not answer and remained absorbed in what she was doing. I rose, took her hand, and asked gently:

"Are you upset?"

"You promised me security and dignity. Again and again, you made me dream of a lovely little home we would build for ourselves. Where are those promises now?"

She spoke in a broken voice. Her tears ran silently down her cheeks, but they burned with pain.

I tried in vain to persuade her that this was fate, but every attempt failed. How could it have succeeded when I was not fully convinced myself? How could God's will decree one failure after another for me if I deserved to succeed?

But why did I see it as failure rather than success in a divine trial that tested my resolve, persistence, and trust in him? Does God not say, "[We will certainly test you with a measure of fear and hunger, and loss of wealth, lives, and fruits. Give good news to those who are patient](#)" (Q2:155)?

People say that nothing moves in our countries without personal connections and influence. Yet even that had not helped me. I sought assistance from everyone I could, including people in senior and influential positions, but still nothing came of it.

I had exhausted every avenue. There was no alternative but to look in neighbouring countries. Neither my wife nor I had forgotten the bitterness of exile, but the fear of being humiliated by need left us no other choice. I remained firm—I had to,

in order to protect my family—but my wife was close to collapse and almost resigned to fate.

I began searching seriously and determinedly for a job in the United Arab Emirates, taking care to keep the search from my wife so that I would not add to her pain. It was far from easy. Even after two months of relentless effort and hundreds of applications, I had not received so much as a single telephone call from anyone.

The weather was hardly suitable for going to the beach, especially in the morning. June was the hottest month of the year. Yet the sight and sound of the sea were a magical balm that eased my pain and revived me whenever I grew weary.

I sat facing the sea at Candle Café, listening to its gentle voice and losing myself in its timeless rhythm. My mind drifted back to the distant years when my father was still alive, and the memory filled me with comfort and happiness.

I remembered an overnight trip I had once taken with my father to a friend's farm in Al-'Aqdah, in the Al-Batinah region. The farm stood in a fairly isolated place among sand dunes, almost two kilometres from the main road.

Late that afternoon, while everyone was swimming in the pool, I slipped out of the farm without telling anyone and set off for the grocery shop on the main road to buy some soft drinks.

I walked a long way through the dunes along a route I thought would take me to the road. After more than half an hour, I realised I was lost. I decided to return to the farm and turned back.

More than an hour later, I discovered that I had lost my way completely. I no longer knew which direction led to the road and which to the farm.

I spent perhaps another hour trying to find my way through the dunes, but without success. As the sun began to sink towards the horizon, fear and despair took hold of me.

At last, I stopped where I was and addressed God in complete surrender: “My Lord, I have done everything I can and still cannot find my way. I now place my trust in you. Guide me to the farm by the shortest route.”

I closed my eyes and walked wherever my feet carried me, remembering God, pleading with him, and glorifying him. I do not think more than a few minutes had passed before I found myself at the farm gate. I prostrated in gratitude, then ran inside. My father and his friends were just preparing to leave the pool for prayer; they had not even noticed that I was missing.

Tears filled my eyes as I remembered the incident. Once again, I turned to God as one who had despaired of the world and surrendered to his Lord, certain that I would be answered: “My Lord, I am lost again. I have done all that lies within my power. Guide me to what you want from me. I place my trust in you, for you are the one I trust in every distress. My Lord, for the sake of Muhammad and the family of Muhammad—your blessings be upon them—do not let this day end before you answer me.”

I remained at the café for nearly an hour. As I was preparing to leave, I saw Amer walking towards the sea. I leapt from my seat, ran towards him, and called his name. He turned, and his face brightened when he saw me. We embraced. Many years had passed since our last meeting.

I remembered how he had suddenly disappeared after the debate between us in our first year at college.

That debate had been the direct cause of his return to guidance. I had recently learnt that Amer had changed greatly since then. He was no longer the careless, irresponsible young man he had become; he had returned to his former religious devotion, more committed than before.

In the past, he had been angry with fate because of all he had suffered. His reaction had been to plunge into disobedience, almost as though he were trying to draw God's attention in the hope that his mercy might reach him.

Yet his conscience and subconscious mind, both formed by love of God and purity, had ached beneath his immersion in amusement and sin. He had been restless and changeable, like someone searching for deliverance from the wilderness in which he was trapped. When he saw me crying in the prayer room, my tears stirred something deep within him. He provoked me in the hope that, after losing hope in himself, he might find a way out through me. By God's decree, that was what happened.

Not long afterwards, Amer's mother died of cancer. His stepmother refused to take him into her home, so he moved to the United Arab Emirates to live with his maternal aunt. She cared for him devotedly and loved him as she had loved his mother. She was a religious woman, as were her husband and their son, Suhaib, who treated Amer as a brother. Amer thus found himself in a stable home where he could continue his life in peace. From then on, however, we lost contact.

We sat together for a long time at the café, exchanging news and laughing loudly as we recalled amusing incidents from the past, especially the debate and all its comic details.

I told him what had happened to me. He was deeply affected and promised to do everything he could to help me find a position suited to me. In addition to his job at Shell, he helped his aunt's husband manage his private investment company,

which had enabled him to build a strong and extensive network among decision-makers in the Emirates.

I thanked him for his concern, but inwardly I placed little hope in him. I had lost hope in people.

Less than two weeks after I sent Amer my CV, the head of human resources at a prestigious organisation in the United Arab Emirates called to invite me to an interview. A panel chaired by the chief executive would interview me for the position of development affairs manager, with a total salary of about 3,000 Omani rials.

I did not tell my wife about the interview or the possible job. She was suffering from depression, and nothing had yet been decided. I did not want to hurt her.

I persuaded her that we should spend two days in the Emirates for a change of scene. When the time came for the interview, I excused myself by saying that Amer had invited me to lunch. It was the first time I had felt compelled to hide the truth from my wife.

The interview went extraordinarily well. I could tell that I had impressed them, and a few days later the chief executive telephoned me personally. He said how pleased he was to have chosen me, expressed great confidence in me, and told me that the board had approved my appointment as deputy chief executive for development affairs, at a salary a little above 6,000 Omani rials.

I ended the call in astonishment, gripped by conflicting feelings. I was delighted by the offer, and even more delighted that I had been appreciated. At the same time, I was apprehensive. I had no experience in this field, had never prepared a strategic plan, and, most importantly, was anxious about how to tell my wife and afraid for her.

What an irony of fate! I had strained every nerve to obtain a job that would give me security and dignity, yet found nothing

despite the many vacancies—as though employers were avoiding me because I had scabies. I had begun to doubt myself and even to wonder whether the universe truly moved according to natural laws. Then, by an astonishing turn of providence, I met an old friend, and through him God arranged for me—in record time—a position I would never have dared to dream of.

Why, then, strive and toil at all? I might as well sit comfortably at home, trusting in God, until fate—or what we call luck—knocked at my door. When the appointed time came, it would surely find a way to reach me.

But why deceive myself? Was it not my striving and persistence that moved my friend to respond to my story and make such an effort for me?

And was it not my continuous striving that had given me the depth and abilities which impressed the chief executive and the panel so greatly? Had I simply remained at home, would I ever have acquired them?

Most importantly, was not this toil and relentless striving—with all the strength and depth they built within me—the path of ascent and journey towards God? Does God not say, “O human being, you are surely toiling towards your Lord, and you shall meet him” (Q 84:6)? Was that not reason enough to drive me to strive and toil?

“What’s wrong? What are you thinking about?” my wife asked as I sat on the balcony, gazing towards the distant horizon, completely absorbed in my thoughts and imaginings.

“What?” I said, plainly flustered.

“What’s wrong? Why are you so flustered?”

She sat beside me on the balcony, a captivating smile on her face.

I answered quickly, as though unburdening my heart:

“I’ve got a job in the Emirates, with a very high salary.”

The news hurt her deeply. Her features changed, settling into deep sorrow. In a broken, pleading voice that shook me to the core, she said:

“I can’t bear living away from home again.”

“And I can’t bear your pain. But what can I do? How will we live and provide for Nabil? Would you accept our becoming a burden on other people and living on their charity?”

She lowered her head, tears pouring down her face. I tried to lead her into the room so that no one would see us on the balcony, but she wrenched her hand from mine, looked up at me with eyes full of blame and reproach, and said, “You are the reason.” Then she rushed into the room, sobbing.

I could not follow her at once. I remained on the balcony for a while, gathering my strength and composure, and prayed that God would help me. I was about to undertake a difficult task that would stir up many emotions within me. Then I rose and went into the room to comfort my wife and calm her.



My wife could not face living abroad again. She chose the pain of separation and remained in Oman. I would return home every Wednesday immediately after work and travel back to the Emirates before dawn each Saturday.

This was the first time I had worked in an organisation of such size. It employed hundreds of people and occupied a large, multi-storey building. It was also my first managerial position. All my previous experience had been in professional roles within firms whose employees numbered only in the dozens.

I feared that I might not be suited to the position. On my first day, the imposing building, the great number of employees, and the excessive deference they showed me—none of which I had known before—filled me with apprehension. I

was also afraid that I might not live up to the chief executive's expectations.

The chief executive was exceptionally sharp-minded, wise, bold, and eager for change. He was a successful manager, but not a specialist in strategic planning, leading change, or risk management, so he had recruited me to help him in those areas. That astonished me, because I was not a specialist in them either and had never practised them before. What had he seen in me that made him appoint me deputy chief executive? I did not understand.

Despite my lack of experience, I had complete confidence in my ability to perform. I was determined to achieve a great deal in a short time and to a high standard. That was exactly what happened. Within a few months, the results of my work began to show: costs fell, and services improved markedly in both quantity and quality.

Everyone—including the chief executive—was surprised by these remarkable results except me. From the beginning, I had known clearly what I was doing. I carried out my task boldly and to the fullest, without the slightest doubt or hesitation, as though I were walking through the passageways of Sur al-Lawatiya that I had known since childhood—as though I were a seasoned professional.

It made no sense—I knew that. I myself was surprised by my abilities in leadership, strategic planning, and leading change. I was astonished by how much I seemed to know about areas of management in which I had never worked and about which I had never even read.

Was this the subconscious mind and its creative power—what happens when you draw close to it and it draws close to you, until you understand and love one another and move together as one person, in harmony and confidence? Or was it divine inspiration and support, bestowed by God upon

servants who turn to him sincerely, knowing that they have no Lord but him and loving his aid because it comes from him? Was it both? Or were the two perhaps one reality, like two sides of the same coin?

What made my task difficult was the limited managerial knowledge and ability of some members of the senior leadership team. I therefore had to engage them in discussions about basic management concepts, such as the need for the organisation to have a clear strategic vision and mission to guide its course.

I explained that any entity which possesses reason and will must have clear goals towards which it moves, and that those goals must arise from its strategic vision and mission in life. Otherwise, its existence would be purposeless and meaningless.

Because I had long periods of free time, the echoes of those discussions reverberated within me and shaped the way I viewed life and the universe.

One afternoon, after official working hours, I was lying back on the sofa in my office before beginning work again. I found myself wondering: what would I say if someone asked me the same question about the Muslim nation?

What is the vision of the Muslim nation, and what is its mission in life?

For a moment, I thought the question strange and new. Then a shiver passed through me as a verse came to mind: “Did you think that we created you in vain, and that you would not be returned to us?” (Q 23:115).

God himself guides us to think in this way. He teaches us that the absence of purpose is a form of futility, even if it were attributed to God. He therefore denies that his own act of creation is futile by affirming that creation has a purpose: return to God. Glory be to you, my Lord. How magnificent you are!

The Islamic vision, then, is centred on this: “The universe and all creatures—foremost and greatest among them the human being, as God’s vicegerent—are in a continuous and eternal movement of return towards God; in other words, towards perfection and nearness to him, which naturally bring the greatest possible happiness and strength.”

If this is Islam’s vision, what, then, is its mission in life?

I do not know how long I remained absorbed in the question, but dozens of Qur’anic verses and hadiths passed through my mind.

I remembered God’s words: “God is the protector of those who believe; he brings them out of darkness into light. As for those who reject faith, their protectors are false powers, which bring them out of light into darkness” (Q 2:257). I remembered as well: “It is he who sends down clear signs upon his servant to bring you out of darkness into light. God is indeed most kind and merciful to you” (Q 57:9). I also recalled the verses commanding the Muslim community to call people to good: “Let there be among you a community calling to what is good, enjoining what is right, and forbidding what is wrong. Those are the successful” (Q 3:104). And I remembered Imam Husayn’s words to his enemies on the day of Ashura: “If you have no religion and do not fear the Resurrection, then at least be free people in your worldly life.”

I reflected on these words and on the Islamic vision of life. I realised that we possessed the greatest mission we could offer humanity—a fitting banner for our magnificent Islamic civilisation.

Our Islamic mission is simply to worship God by cultivating the world and toiling within it in pursuit of sustenance, security, happiness, and freedom, in accordance with the Islamic path; and to make the world a safe, healthy, and

constructive environment in which all beings can grow, develop, and draw nearer to him.

Our mission is centred on helping the human being simply as a human being—even one who does not affirm God’s oneness—to grow and develop, and on freeing people from every form of injustice and corruption: ignorance, poverty, psychological or physical illness, or servitude to other human beings or creatures. What a magnificent mission.

Enthusiasm swept through me. I stood, picked up my phone, and began recording my thoughts aloud as I paced back and forth across the room, afraid that they might slip away.

When I finished recording, I needed to discuss the ideas with Amer, so I called him.

“Hello, Amer. Are you busy?”

“I’m at work. Is everything all right?”

“It’s an idea I urgently need to discuss with you.”

“An idea—and urgent?” he said with mock disbelief.

“I promise I won’t keep you long.”

“All right. Where are you now?”

“I’m in Abu Dhabi. I can be with you in an hour and a half. What do you think?”

“I’ll wait for you at Ibn Battuta Mall, but don’t be late. I haven’t eaten anything since morning.”

“I’m hungry too, and I haven’t had lunch. I’ll be with you in less than an hour and a quarter.”

I ended the call, got into my car, and drove towards Ibn Battuta Mall in Dubai, completely immersed in my thoughts.



Amer liked the idea greatly. He began to repeat it slowly and thoughtfully as he stirred the sugar into his tea. After a period of silence, he said:

“The idea truly is beautiful, and the mission is magnificent. It carries peace and goodness for the whole world. Sadly, however, it will not be realised until the era of Imam al-Mahdi—may God hasten his reappearance.”

“It has been the mission of all the divinely revealed religions since the beginning of creation. That is why God mentioned it in the revealed scriptures and in the Psalms. Imam al-Mahdi is the last of the divinely appointed successors, and the message of Islam will be fulfilled through him. Yet working for its fulfilment and preparing the way is a cumulative effort to which all the prophets, messengers, Imams of the Prophet’s Household, and reformers throughout history have contributed.”¹

“True. That is the meaning of what we recite in Du‘a al-Nudba: ‘Where is the one who will gather the scattered ranks of righteousness and contentment? Where is the one who will seek redress for the prophets and the sons of prophets? Where is the one who will seek redress for the blood of the one slain at Karbala...?’”

“You know, I think about this often, and I feel that I am falling short in my duty towards Imam al-Mahdi. I contribute nothing to hastening his reappearance or supporting him.”

“And how can you contribute to hastening the Imam’s reappearance?” Amer asked in surprise.

¹ An allusion to the Qur’anic verse: “We wrote in the Psalms, after the Reminder, that the earth shall be inherited by my righteous servants” (Q 21:105).

“By spreading goodness and righteousness throughout the world, so that it is ready to embrace Imam al-Mahdi’s revolution when he appears. This is what we call the culture of awaiting Imam al-Mahdi.”

Amer fell silent in thought. Then he nodded in admiration and said:

“How wonderful for this to be our vision in life. No vision could be greater or more beautiful than seeing yourself as part of the whole of humanity and striving for its advancement and perfection.”

He closed his eyes and fell silent again for a few moments, as though gathering his thoughts. Then he asked:

“Tell me: how do we know that Imam al-Mahdi was actually born and exists in our own age?”

“The Messenger of God said: ‘I leave among you that which, if you hold fast to it, will keep you from going astray after me. One is greater than the other: the Book of God, a rope stretched from heaven to earth, and my progeny, the people of my Household. They will never separate until they return to me at the Pond. Consider, then, how you treat them after me.’”²

“According to this hadith, there must be an Imam from the Prophet’s Household in this age and in every age, and the Prophet commanded us to hold fast to him. Who, then, is the Imam of this age if not Imam al-Mahdi?”

“But why assume that he is the twelfth Imam of the Prophet’s progeny and has remained alive since that distant time? Why could the line of Imams not have continued, with Imam al-Mahdi being, say, the 112th Imam?”

“Because Muslim history, by common agreement, records no more than twelve Imams—let alone 112, as you suggest.”

² Reported in Sahih Muslim, al-Tirmidhi, Musnad Ahmad, al-Hakim’s al-Mustadrak, Sunan Abi Dawud, and dozens of other works, through chains judged authentic according to the criteria of al-Bukhari and Muslim.

I said it with a laugh, then continued:

“And because it is reported in Sahih Muslim, Sahih al-Bukhari, and other authoritative collections—the wording here is from Muslim—that Jabir ibn Samura said: ‘I went with my father to the Prophet and heard him say, “This affair will not end until twelve caliphs have passed among them.” He then said something I could not hear clearly. I asked my father, “What did he say?” He replied, “All of them are from Quraysh.”’”

“That is in addition to hundreds of reports from the Imams of the Prophet’s Household themselves, affirming that they are twelve and specifying their names and details.”

“You’ve got me there.”

“As usual.”

I said it with a smile and winked at him. He smiled in return, then asked:

“All right, then. Tell me: what role is Imam al-Mahdi playing in the movement to reform the world? Could he really be sitting idle while he sees the world in turmoil around us, waiting for people to prepare it for his blessed uprising? If so, what purpose does his presence serve now?”

“A good question—but it is more an answer than a question.”

I removed my kumma³ and placed it on the table beside me. Amer looked at me questioningly, and I continued:

“Notice that advancing humanity and its culture, so that people are ready to embrace the Islamic message, is an extraordinarily difficult, profound, and comprehensive goal.”

“The strategic risks and challenges surrounding that goal are equally grave and complex. One is what you mentioned a moment ago: the world is in turmoil, full of conflict and strife. Throughout history, all those with vested interests and all the

³ A traditional Omani cap.

world's arrogant powers, in their many forms, have sought to control it and serve their own interests, even if that meant its ruin and corruption."

"Indeed. I agree."

"Then would it not be futile, and contrary to the simplest principles of management, for God to will the achievement of this goal through the natural order, amid all these immense dangers, without appointing an infallible leader, guiding him with wisdom, and granting him certain special capacities that enable him to fulfil his mission?"

"Indeed."

He said it with a distant, thoughtful expression. I continued:

"This proves not only that the leadership exists, but that it is active and working vigorously to prepare the whole world for the fulfilment of Heaven's message. Otherwise, the arrogant powers would have filled the earth with corruption and destruction."

Amer fell silent, turning my words over as he played with the cup in his hand. I remained quiet to give him space to think. After a few moments that felt long, he took a sip of tea and replied:

"I agree, but these remain rational conclusions. Are there religious texts that prove the matter?"

"Certainly. Imam al-Mahdi says: 'As for the benefit derived from me during my occultation, it is like the benefit derived from the sun when clouds hide it from sight. I am a source of security for the people of the earth, just as the stars are a source of security for the people of heaven.'"

"He also says: 'We are fully aware of your affairs, and none of your news is hidden from us. We know of the humiliation that has befallen you since many among you inclined towards what the righteous forebears had kept far from and cast the

covenant taken from them behind their backs as though they knew nothing of it. We neither neglect your care nor forget you. Were it not so, hardship would descend upon you and your enemies would destroy you. So fear God—majestic is his glory—and assist us in rescuing you from a tribulation that has loomed over you...”

“Why, then, do we not see Imam al-Mahdi?”

“Imam al-Mahdi is like any leader: the extent of his contact with his followers, and of their direct access to him, depends on the management model in use—especially the degree to which decisions and activities are centralised—in light of the strategic objectives to be achieved, the surrounding risks, and the resources available.”

“You mean that the Imam follows a decentralised style of management?”

“Certainly. The Imam is responsible for the strategic management of the Islamic message. He has entrusted the operational management of daily affairs—issuing religious rulings, adjudication, financial administration, and other matters—to religious scholars. He intervenes directly only in exceptional circumstances, when the strategic consequences are of the highest importance.”

“What is your evidence for that claim?”

“Several religious texts indicate this. Imam al-Sadiq is reported to have said: ‘Look to whoever among you narrates our traditions, studies what we have declared lawful and unlawful, and knows our rulings. Accept him as an arbiter, for I have appointed him as an authority over you.’”

“There is also the report from Imam al-Mahdi: ‘As for the events that occur, refer them to the transmitters of our traditions, for they are my proof over you, and I am God’s proof over them.’”

Amer objected calmly:

“What you say is sound in practical terms. Given the complexity and extreme danger of the matters connected with Imam al-Mahdi’s movement, and the breadth of a goal that encompasses the whole world, his activity must necessarily be conducted in the utmost secrecy.”

“Exactly. The Imam meets directly with everyone whom his responsibilities require him to meet, but such meetings generally remain highly secret unless there is a strategic reason to make a particular meeting known—perhaps most often to strengthen the morale of believers.”

“What, then, are the results and achievements of the Imam’s movement?”

“Achievements of this social, economic, and political kind are never the product of one isolated factor. They arise from the combined action of several critical success factors⁴.”

“There is therefore no single achievement that can be attributed exclusively to the Imam’s leadership. Such achievements result from several factors working together, one of the most important of which is the capable leadership embodied in Imam al-Mahdi.”

“That is true of every institution and programme. Achievements depend on the combined action of resources and the critical success factors appropriate to each outcome, not on the chief executive’s ability alone.”

“Precisely. Taking that into account, I can say that the success of the forces of the Axis of Resistance in confronting the Western and Zionist colonial powers in the Middle East, and in inflicting defeats upon them despite the imbalance of power, their own limited resources, and the world’s hostility towards them, is one of the clearest results of Imam al-Mahdi’s movement.”

⁴ Known in management as critical success factors (CSFs).

“You’ve sent a shiver through me,” Amer replied, deeply affected.

He closed his eyes and remained silent for a few moments. Then he continued with emotion:

“Realising that the Imam of your age lives on this earth alongside you and leads the global movement of reform gives a person immense strength and confidence, along with a desire to devote oneself to him completely.”

“That is what we believe,” I said with pride.

“It is a beautiful and magnificent belief. Its effects on a person and on the way one sees life—and, in turn, on both the individual and society—are extraordinary. You truly make me regret the years of my life that have passed without my contributing anything to support Imam al-Mahdi.”

“It is not too late, and the matter is simple. Do everything within your power to make the world a better place.”

“Contribute whatever you can. Persuade those around you to help spread happiness, knowledge, science, health, freedom, security, awareness, and every noble human value throughout the world in all its diversity. In doing so, you will be among the Imam’s greatest supporters, helping his cause and hastening his public reappearance.”

Amer suddenly looked at his watch, as though remembering an appointment he had forgotten.

“Thank God, it is still only half past six. Listen, I must go. I promised my aunt that I would take her shopping immediately after prayer.”

“The subject is fascinating, and I enjoyed it greatly. We’ll continue later, because there is much I still do not know about Imam al-Mahdi’s revolution.”

He said this as he rose and held out his hand to shake mine.

Amer left in a hurry, leaving me almost dazed where I sat. Before long, I sank back into thought and replayed our discussion in my mind. When the time for prayer came, I went to the prayer room, then set off home.



January 2008

The days passed in relative calm and comfort. By January 2008, I had been with the organisation for about a year and a half. During that time, feelings of safety and stability had found their way into my wife's heart. She began to settle, and her anxiety, sorrow, and depression eased. Only the pain of our weekly separation troubled her, and even that was the lesser evil.

We had managed to save a considerable amount from my salary. With it, we bought a plot of land in the Al-I'lam district of Muscat, where most of our relatives lived, intending to build our home there in the near future, God willing.

For some time, we had allowed our hopes and dreams to revive. My wife's dreams centred on my returning home to a respectable, stable position and on a small, modest house that would shelter us.

My own dreams centred on buying a small property combining residential and commercial units, which would provide enough monthly income for us to live on and allow me to devote myself to religious study and to serving the message of Islam.

I could not understand which of these dreams fate found so distasteful that it refused to let us enjoy them. Recently, I had begun to sense a change in the chief executive. He had grown cold towards me and, unlike before, no longer responded to the reform projects I was carrying out.

I realised that something had gone wrong, although I could not discover what it was. I also sensed that my time in the organisation was drawing to an end.

I racked my brains, trying to understand what was happening, but without success. I chose to remain patient and watchful, while anxiety and distress twisted within me. I feared what another dismissal might do to my wife.

I tried to hide my anxiety and appear normal so that I would not hurt her. Yet she could see into my depths and recognise the feelings burning within me without my saying a word. This left her tense and anxious, like me, waiting for an unknown fate she could not name—as though awaiting a death sentence.

The twenty-third of January fell on a Wednesday. I went to work early so that I could leave before the end of the working day and return home for the weekend. Unusually, it was raining, and I took it as a good sign.

I was in an important meeting in my office when the chief executive summoned me urgently. My heart began to pound. I knew the moment of dismissal had arrived. Nothing here could speak in my favour or protect me. I was only an expatriate and could be removed immediately with a stroke of the pen and one month's salary.

I knocked on the meeting-room door before opening it. The chief executive was sitting with his legal adviser, Salem, speaking quietly. The moment I entered, he raised his head towards me. His face was full of pain and sorrow. From a distance, he gestured for me to sit, without shaking my hand, returning my greeting, or even smiling at me.

I was deeply unsettled. Inwardly, I asked God to be gentle with me, then sat in silence, surrendered to fate's judgement without knowing the reason.

My confusion did not last long. The chief executive nodded to his adviser. Salem understood the signal and pressed the play button on the black voice recorder beside him.

My voice emerged from the machine. The recording was unclear, but clear enough for me to recognise my voice. Because of the poor sound and my intense distress, I could make out little of what I was supposedly saying. Yet I understood enough: I heard myself uttering obscenities as I insulted the chief executive and the organisation's board, and confessing to a friend in the organisation that I was planning to embezzle money by exploiting the changes I was introducing.

I sat aghast, my face drawn, as I listened to this nonsense.

"Is that not your voice?" the chief executive asked sorrowfully, as though hoping I would deny it.

"It is my voice, but I did not say those words. I could never have said them—or even thought them."

"You said the same kind of thing to me personally," the legal adviser replied.

My mouth fell open in astonishment. The legal adviser had been one of the people closest to me in the organisation, and I had trusted him deeply. The chief executive gave me no chance to answer. He lifted his head and said with visible anger:

"Many senior employees have testified against you and described your suspicious conduct."

"But you know that it is in their interest to remove me because of the changes I am making."

"Ha! Now you are trying to make me doubt my best employees. Enough of your deceit. Get out of the organisation. I never want to see you here again."

"But—"

"Shut up!"

He shouted it in my face, then continued harshly:

“I trusted you as I have trusted no one else. I took a chance on you. And how did you repay me? You stabbed me in the back.”

“I swear by God, none of this happened—”

“You truly disgust me.”

He rose forcefully from his chair and moved towards the door.

“Salem, make sure he leaves the organisation immediately and never returns. Collect all his keys before he goes.”

He opened the door and was about to leave when an idea flashed through my mind. I moved towards him and called out quickly:

“Have the police investigate the recording so that we can discover the truth.”

But my words went unheard. The chief executive ignored me and closed the door behind him. He had pronounced his judgement and carried it out without giving me any opportunity to defend myself.

The chief executive wanted to humiliate me and strip me of my standing. It seemed that I was the last to learn of the conspiracy woven against me. Eyes filled with gloating and revenge followed me as I left his office.

Yet, bitter as the injustice felt, happiness began to flow through me in equal measure. I saw in what had happened a singular kind of trial, unlike any I had known before—a trial that drew me nearer to God. I praised and thanked him from the depths of my heart.

As I walked out of the building, something happened that I had never known or even heard of before—something that seemed to lie outside the order of this universe.

Everything around me in this world vanished from my sight. I found myself wandering through a strange and

wondrous expanse that I cannot describe, yet it was beautiful in every sense of the word. There was no one there but me. I was moving towards God, and I was nothing but happiness, beauty, and strength. The feelings were unlike anything I had known before: a surge of power and warmth I had never experienced.

It lasted only a few moments, from the time I left the chief executive's office until I reached the outer door of the building. Yet the happiness, surge of power, and tranquillity I felt continued to blaze within me and enfold me for many months afterwards.



CHAPTER EIGHT

The Ascent into the Abyss

January 2008

Here I was, back at square one, as though I were playing Monopoly.

As usual, my wife and I agreed to keep the matter secret even from our families, both to spare them pain and to prevent the news from spreading through the community and becoming the subject of endless gossip.

I knew that I would be opposed in any job for as long as I held fast to my principles and values—assuming I managed to find another job at all.

We needed a plausible explanation for my return home after everyone had learnt that I was working in the United Arab Emirates. We therefore decided that I would open my own management consultancy and training office, in strategic partnership with a small but distinguished international firm that I had managed to contact at short notice.

It was a difficult decision, especially because I had no capital. I had used the savings from my last job to buy a plot of

land, and we did not want to sell it. Land prices were rising, and we feared that we might never be able to buy another plot.

We did not even have enough for the household expenses, let alone the costs of an office. A few days before I was dismissed, however, I had applied for a bank overdraft facility of fifteen thousand rials to buy my wife a new car.

We decided to draw the full amount and live on it as frugally as possible until God opened a door of provision for us.

There was no clear prospect before us, and I had little expectation that the office would succeed. Yet I remained calm and reassured, still affected by what I had experienced on the day of my dismissal. I knew that everything had unfolded under God's gaze, that this was another trial like those before it, and that he could open the doors of provision whenever and however he willed.

My wife, however, was deeply afraid that circumstances might force us to seek help from our families, or that people would discover the hardship we were enduring.

She was sitting cross-legged in a corner of the bedroom, curled in upon herself and weeping silently, when an idea suddenly occurred to her. She rose quickly and came towards me, wiping her tears with the edge of her sleeve.

She called my name. I turned towards her, full of compassion, and she suggested that we visit Imam Husayn, peace be upon him, in Karbala and seek his intercession with God for relief from our crisis. I agreed gladly.

I picked up the telephone and called my mother to ask whether she and my two sisters wished to come with us. She was beside herself with joy, especially because the time for the specially recommended Arbâeen pilgrimage was approaching.

That same day, my mother told my uncles and aunts of our plan. Uncle Issa called and suggested that we travel together. I accepted at once, overflowing with happiness, for I loved him dearly.

Our flight left for Baghdad International Airport on the morning of 24 February, four days before Arbæen.

I sat between my wife, who had taken the window seat and watched the aircraft lift off with the innocent delight of a child, and my son Nabil, who insisted on sitting by the aisle so that he could tease my two sisters in the neighbouring row. Tamer, my cousin, sat in the row ahead.

I badly needed a journey like this. For the first time in several years, I had an opportunity to be close to my wider family. The years had passed quickly, and my troubles, anxieties, and battles had kept me apart from them.

I turned towards my wife and found her asleep. I leaned back, held her hand, and drifted once more into my thoughts.

I remembered the travel agent asking, out of curiosity, why we were going to Iraq despite the danger. I had answered naturally, "To visit Imam Husayn," assuming that he knew who Imam Husayn was and understood the story behind the pilgrimage. To my surprise, he knew nothing about either.

Ashura is an enduring human epic. It embodies some of the noblest meanings of generosity, dignity, sacrifice, reform, and freedom in human history. Yet we have done little to introduce it to the world, as though it were the private cultural inheritance of the Shi'a alone.

The travel agent asked in surprise:

"Who is Imam Husayn?"

"Have you never heard of him, or of the Day of Ashura?" I asked, even more surprised than he was.

He shook his head. The answer pained me. I felt guilty for how little we had done to make Imam Husayn known, and I began to tell him the story:

“In the year 61 AH, in the seventh century CE, the Islamic world was ruled by Muawiya ibn Abi Sufyan, who worked relentlessly to turn Islamic government into hereditary rule passed from himself to his descendants.”

“That is what happened. After Muawiya died, his son Yazid seized power unjustly. Imam Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, refused to pledge allegiance to him, saying: ‘Yazid is a corrupt man, a drinker of wine, a killer of innocent life, and openly sinful. One like me does not pledge allegiance to one like him.’”

The travel agent interrupted me as he handed over the tickets:

“Here are your tickets. Listen, you have made me eager to hear the rest. Let me invite you for a cup of tea in the kitchen, and you can tell me the story—but I have only fifteen minutes for my tea break. What do you say?”

I was in a hurry, but I could hardly refuse. We went together to the kitchen, where I continued while he prepared the tea and listened closely.

“When Imam Husayn refused to pledge allegiance, Yazid ordered that he be killed. The Imam’s answer was decisive, and the Shi’a have repeated it through the centuries as a declaration of dignity: ‘The impostor, son of an impostor, has left us between the sword and humiliation—and humiliation is far from us.’”

“The decline of the Muslim community, the rule of tyrants, and people’s growing habit of submission led the Imam to launch a movement of reform. He wanted to awaken the conscience of people throughout history, calling out: ‘If you

have no religion and do not fear the Hereafter, then at least be free people in your worldly life.”

“Sorry to interrupt, but how many spoons of sugar?”

“Two.”

“Imam Husayn’s words are remarkable,” the agent said as he handed me the tea, “but people rarely rise merely because of advice, even when it comes from the greatest of human beings.”

“The Imam knew that. He knew that awakening a nation required a great event in which dignity and courage would be embodied. That is why he set out, declaring: ‘I rose only to seek reform in the nation of my grandfather, the Messenger of God. I intend to enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong.’”

“He knew that, to stir the conscience of humanity, he and those with him would be martyred and his family taken captive. He offered himself to God and to humanity, and made his intention clear so that none would follow him except those prepared for martyrdom: ‘Whoever is willing to give his life for us and has prepared himself to meet God, let him set out with us.’”

“How extraordinary. He began his movement knowing that he would be martyred?” the agent asked in astonishment.

“Yes. He knew it, but he also knew that the day of his martyrdom would be the day of victory—the great triumph. He said: ‘Whoever joins us will be martyred; whoever stays behind will not attain the triumph.’”

“We have less than five minutes. Please tell me quickly what happened and how the tragedy unfolded,” he asked, eager to hear the rest.

“Yazid’s army, thirty thousand strong, surrounded Imam Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet, peace be upon him, together with his family and companions at Karbala for three

days and denied them water. On the tenth of Muharram, they killed Imam Husayn and seventy-two members of his Household and companions, among them children, while they were thirsty, in a scene of appalling violence: they beheaded them, raised their heads on spears, and drove horses over their honoured bodies, crushing them beneath their hooves.”

“How terrible.”

“The ordeal did not end there. The women and children of the Prophet’s Household were taken captive, bound upon camels, and driven in public humiliation from Kufa in Iraq to Damascus, passing through the major cities along the coastal route, while the heads of Imam Husayn and his companions were carried beside them on long spears.”

The agent was deeply affected. Pain, shock, and disbelief were plain on his face.

“Those people were animals—savages.”

“Dad, I need the toilet,” my son said, shaking my shoulder.

I opened my eyes, smiled at him, kissed his cheek, and took him to the toilet.

In the aisle, a flight attendant asked us to return to our seats and fasten our belts as quickly as possible because the aircraft was preparing to land. I promised that we would.

I was profoundly moved as we descended towards the land of the holy ones. Conflicting feelings pulled at me. I longed to visit the Imams, especially Imam Ali and Imam Husayn, yet I also felt deeply guilty for how little I had done to support their cause and that of Imam al-Mahdi—may God hasten his reappearance.

I knew that Imam Husayn’s message was meant to awaken the world, and that he had offered himself and his family as offerings to God for that purpose. Indeed, he had longed for that day—the day promised to him, whose details had been disclosed to him when he was still a child.

I remembered the sermon he delivered before leaving Mecca for Kufa: “Death has been inscribed upon the children of Adam like a necklace upon a young woman’s neck. How intensely I long for my forefathers, as Jacob longed for Joseph. A place of death has been chosen for me, and I shall meet it. I can almost see the desert wolves tearing my limbs apart between Nawawis and Karbala, filling their hollow bellies and hungry stomachs with me.”

A shiver ran through me, and hot tears ran down my cheeks—tears for the suffering of Imam Husayn and for my own failure to fulfil my duty towards the bearer of his message in this age, Imam al-Mahdi.

I asked myself whether I would truly have supported Imam Husayn on the Day of Ashura when he called for help, or whether I would merely have wept for him afterwards, excusing myself because of my responsibilities towards my family—just as I was now doing in relation to Imam al-Mahdi.

With complete sincerity, I made a covenant with God: if he provided me with enough to fulfil my religious responsibilities towards my wife, children, mother, and sisters, I would devote myself to serving him and supporting Imam al-Mahdi. If he gave me more than I needed, I would give all the excess in his path and in the service of humanity.

I made the promise with all the sincerity and anguish in my heart, and begged him not to make me one of those described in the verse: “Say: If your fathers, your children, your brothers, your spouses, your kindred, the wealth you have acquired, the trade whose decline you fear, and the homes in which you delight are dearer to you than God, his Messenger, and striving in his way, then wait until God brings about his command. God does not guide the defiantly disobedient” (Q 9:24).

The aircraft touched down. I opened my eyes and found my wife awake, looking at me happily. She, too, was filled with joy and longing to visit the Imams and remain for a time in the sacred places.



Baghdad International Airport was packed with visitors from every part of the world. The crowds were so vast that I imagined we might remain there until the following day, especially as many travellers had arrived without first obtaining entry visas for Iraq.

Despite the confusion caused by the numbers, I was astonished that it took us no more than an hour and a half to complete the arrival formalities and leave the airport.

A coach was waiting in the car park. Uncle Issa, the leader of our group, had arranged for the hotel where he had booked our rooms in Najaf to collect us from the airport.

The road to the hotel was heavily congested with great waves of visitors arriving to pay their respects to the Commander of the Faithful, Imam Ali, before continuing to Imam Husayn in Karbala.

I saw my wife shedding quiet tears and knew that she was absorbed in grief for Imam Husayn. She asked softly:

“I do not understand why Imam Husayn did not leave the women in Mecca. Why did he take them to Karbala when he knew that they would be taken captive?”

“How do you know that he knew they would be taken captive?”

“He said so himself when his brother Muhammad ibn al-Hanafiyya asked him not to leave for Kufa. Imam Husayn replied: ‘The Messenger of God came to me after I left you and said, “God has willed to see you slain.”’ Ibn al-Hanafiyya said, ‘We belong to God, and to him we return,’ then asked, ‘If that

is so, why are you taking the women with you?' The Imam answered, 'God has willed to see them taken captive.'"

"You are right. He took them because his uprising would not have achieved its purpose without the role of the captives—especially Lady Zaynab, peace be upon her—in spreading its message and aims, and in telling Muslims of its tragedies and acts of courage. Umayyad propaganda had concealed the truth and persuaded people that Imam Husayn and his companions were rebels against religion."

"I shiver whenever I read or hear of Lady Zaynab's stand on Ashura and during the journey of captivity."

"Lady Zaynab embodied the great human values gathered in Imam Husayn's uprising. In every movement, word, and breath, she conveyed them with strength, spontaneity, warmth, and truth. They entered people's hearts, shook them awake, and moved them to rebel first against what was corrupt within themselves, and then against injustice and corruption throughout history."

"One moment on Ashura moves me more than I can say: when she lifted the body of her brother Husayn—beheaded and torn apart—looked towards heaven, and said, 'O God, accept this offering from us.'"

"It moves me too. I am equally struck by her certainty and firmness when she stood as a captive before the great tyrant Yazid and shook him to the core with her resounding address: 'Though calamity has forced me to speak to you, I hold you in contempt, regard the reproach you deserve as immense, and find much to rebuke in you... Plot your schemes, exert your efforts, and do all you can. By God, you will never erase our memory, extinguish our revelation, or reach the end of our cause. Your disgrace will never be washed away. Your judgement is weak, your days are numbered, and your gathering

will be scattered, on the day when the caller proclaims: God's curse is upon the wrongdoers.'"

I had scarcely finished speaking when we reached the hotel. Like most hotels in Najaf, it was simple and very modest, but it stood close to the shrine of Imam Ali and overlooked it from the side of the Shaykh al-Tusi Gate.

The women decided to remain at the hotel with the children and rest, while Uncle Issa, his son Nader, and I went to visit the shrine of Imam Ali.

The sanctuary was so crowded that we seemed to merge into a single body, swaying together from side to side as the crowd carried us towards the resting place of the Imam.

I surrendered myself to the movement of the crowd and grew still with reverence as I contemplated the greatness of the man before us—a man of whom it was said that a single stroke in battle equalled the deeds of humankind and jinn until the Day of Judgement. What, then, of the rest of his life and deeds?¹

What kind of giant was he? What certainty and sincerity filled that heart? His greatness bewilders the mind until it can do nothing but bow before his majesty and holiness.

We spent that night in Najaf visiting the Commander of the Faithful. After the dawn prayer, everyone boarded the coach for Karbala except me. I had decided to join the walking pilgrims.

¹ An allusion to the saying quoted in the Arabic original as the Prophet's: "Ali ibn Abi Talib's single combat with Amr ibn Abd Wudd on the Day of the Trench is greater than the deeds of my community until the Day of Resurrection." Sources cited in the Arabic original: al-Mustadrak 'ala al-Sahihayn; al-Khatib al-Baghdadi; and Fakhr al-Din al-Razi's al-Tafsir al-Kabir.



Every year, millions of visitors—known simply as the walkers—come from across Iraq and from countries around the world to make their way to Imam Husayn in Karbala on foot. In these vast, peaceful processions, they express their solidarity with the Master of Martyrs and renew their loyalty to the line of the message represented in their age by Imam al-Mahdi.

These may be the longest processions in human history, both in distance and duration. The shortest route, from Najaf to Karbala, extends for more than eighty-two kilometres and usually takes about three days. Some routes exceed four hundred and fifty kilometres and take more than two weeks; some pilgrims even arrive on foot from beyond Iraq.

They are also the largest: I do not believe the world has ever known a comparable human gathering. The number of walkers can exceed twenty million, turning the road from Najaf to Karbala into a flowing river of people for several days. Many who reach Karbala leave again that day or the next, producing another great current in the opposite direction.

What truly distinguishes the procession, however, and makes it so beautiful and noble, is the nobility of the emotions surrounding it. The road burns with love, goodness, and spirituality of a kind the world has never known.

At the same time, these processions have offered more sacrifices and martyrs than any others in the world. Takfiri terrorists from extremist Salafi groups have repeatedly targeted them with bombs, yet the danger has only deepened their resolve and their love for Imam Husayn.

I quickened my steps towards the main road leading to Karbala. The streets were crowded with pedestrians, as millions from within and beyond Iraq had come to Najaf to visit Imam Ali on their way to Imam Husayn.

After a few hours, I reached the main road. I continued at a slower pace so that exhaustion would not prevent me from completing the journey of nearly eighty kilometres.

What I saw astonished me. Despite its width, the road was so crowded with walkers that I sometimes had to slow down.

Millions advanced with remarkable energy and spirit. Sorrow mingled with longing, love, and eagerness, carrying them towards Imam Husayn.

Their eyes were clear and bright with love and loyalty. When you looked at someone, they would often meet your gaze with an innocent smile that captured the heart. It felt as though I had entered another world, where angels walked upon the earth.

I had imagined that they were defying death at the hands of terrorists, the cold that made my own body shiver, and the length and hardship of the road. I soon realised that they scarcely noticed any of it. Love for Husayn had filled them so completely that everything else seemed small, and their spirits appeared to carry their bodies towards their master.

They walked like lovers over a stony road as though it were silk. For some, even that did not feel like sufficient solidarity with Husayn's suffering. Their love urged them to go further, and they walked barefoot while carrying heavy packs.

The journey was demanding and required strength and will to endure the road and weather. I was therefore deeply moved to see walkers of every age, from children to the elderly, among them women, people who were ill or disabled, and some who travelled barefoot.

What love and devotion did these people carry within them? How small I felt beside such dignity. Yet what brought me most powerfully to tears was the sight of those who called themselves the servants of Husayn's visitors.

Along both sides of the entire eighty-kilometre road, they laid out everything they had spent the whole year preparing from their savings and daily sustenance.

Those whose poverty prevented them from offering food or goods still found a way to serve. They massaged the tired feet of the walkers or provided whatever other help they could.

They came from every province and city in Iraq for the honour of serving Imam Husayn's visitors. They competed eagerly to offer what they had; some stood in the middle of the route and pleaded with pilgrims to eat at their stall or rest in their tent.

Because they cared deeply about the comfort of the pilgrims they served, they understood their needs on the road, and almost every service a pilgrim might require was available, even the immediate washing and ironing of clothes.

Clay ovens stood along the road, baking fresh, hot bread. Stalls offered many kinds of food, while stands serving hot tea were so numerous that parts of the route resembled a great open-air café.

Behind them stretched nearly three million hospitality tents and rest stations along the route, where visitors could sleep, rest, pray, or eat.

All of this might have seemed natural in a country receiving such a vast seasonal flow of visitors. What was extraordinary was that the economic rules we had learnt appeared not to operate there.

The volunteers received no payment for their services. They did not even recover the cost of the food, drink, or shelter they provided. Everything was free, and they seemed joyful and grateful that the visitors had accepted their service.

During those few days, they spent what amounted collectively to billions of dollars from their own pockets, out of love for and solidarity with Imam Husayn and a desire to support and spread his message.

More astonishing still, this money came from the daily bread of a people living with severe poverty. They saved throughout the year, then repeated the same act every year, as though nothing in this world mattered more to them than serving Husayn's visitors and giving themselves to his love.

Fatigue overcame me as the prayer time approached, so I turned right into the nearest rest station, a medium-sized tent beside the road.

The temperature inside was comfortable. I removed my woollen jumper, placed it on top of my bag in a corner, lay beside it, and covered myself with a thick woollen cloak. I fell into a deep sleep and woke to the call for the noon prayer.

I went to perform ablution. The water was painfully cold, and I had nothing with which to dry my face and arms. I hurried back to the tent, where a religious scholar had begun leading the congregational prayer, and joined the rows.

As soon as the prayer ended, the hosts spread the lunch cloth and distributed plates of rice and fish.

My piece of fish was rather dry. A young man sitting opposite seemed to notice that I was struggling with it. Without touching his own portion—a generous, well-cooked piece—he placed it on my plate.

I thanked him and tried to return it, but he refused firmly. Afraid that I would hurt him if I insisted, I accepted and began to eat. He watched me with a beautiful, innocent smile and a look of gratitude.

The moment reminded me of something that had happened the year before, when my wife and I visited Imam Husayn for four days outside the recognised pilgrimage seasons. We went to the shrine as soon as we arrived in Karbala, at about eleven at night.

We intended to spend the whole night there in prayer and worship, but after almost three hours my wife grew exhausted and her back began to hurt. We decided to return to the hotel and rest after the journey.

We were at a loss as we left. My wife could not walk far, and the hotel was more than fifteen minutes away on foot. We asked God to make a way for us, although we could not imagine what such relief might look like.

We stood outside the shrine. The shops were closed and the street almost empty; it was a quarter past two in the morning.

As we looked helplessly from side to side, a boy of about eleven approached, pushing a wheelchair. He asked whether he could take one of us to our lodging.

My God, how generous and merciful you are! The answer was beyond anything we had imagined. My wife sat in the chair, and we set off towards the hotel.

The moment affected me deeply. The answer to our prayer had come almost at once, and I felt as though God were saying: My servant, I am with you. You are under my care, and the matter is in my hands. Even when every means fails and hope disappears, trust me; I will not abandon what is truly good for you.

What affected me even more was the boy himself. What will and energy drove him to seek his livelihood after midnight, when so few people were likely to need his service? How long had he searched for a customer before finding us?

What poverty forced him to wander alone through the cold night in search of his daily bread, hoping to find a passenger while others slept in their beds?

I remembered The Little Match Girl. My eyes filled with tears, and I prayed for him. I decided that I would give him a generous sum when we reached the hotel.

Under the streetlights, I studied his face. It was innocent, gentle, and sweet, yet his appearance gave no sign of misery.

When we reached the hotel, my wife went inside ahead of me. I took out some money and offered it to the boy, but he refused.

I assumed that he wanted more, and the thought disappointed me. I took out a larger amount and extended it towards him. Again he refused and said with gentle innocence:

“I want my reward from Imam Husayn on the Day of Judgement.”

Emotion caught in my throat, but I held myself together and answered gently:

“May God accept it from you, my dear. Your intention is pure and sincere, and Imam Husayn will surely reward you in the Hereafter. But this is provision that God has brought you in this world, in addition to your reward in the next.”

He looked at me pleadingly and asked me not to make him take the money.

I held his hand, opened his fingers very gently, placed the money in his palm, and said with an encouraging smile:

“It is a gift from Imam Husayn. Would you turn it away?”

Tears ran down his cheeks as he pleaded again:

“I do this to share in Imam Husayn’s suffering and seek his reward. Please, do not spoil my deed.”

I could no longer contain myself. My tears fell as I returned the money to my pocket, kissed his head, and said softly:

“No. Do not be afraid. I will not spoil it.”

He left happily, thanking me.

My God, were these angels you had sent us in human form to teach us dignity, nobility, and greatness?

More astonishing still, they did all this while feeling that they had fallen short. Each one seemed willing to be cut to pieces for the sake of Imam Husayn's visitors.

The memory rekindled resolve in my heart. Filled with love, I rose and quickened my steps towards Karbala.

The road also told the story of the suffering and deprivation endured by this proud people. It felt as though I were walking through one of the poorest and least developed countries in the world.

I wondered how Iraqis could live in such poverty when their country ranked among the ten countries richest in natural resources—resources worth trillions of dollars—even before religious tourism and its many other sources of wealth were taken into account.

How could it be otherwise, I thought, when global Zionism—embodied in the United States—had mobilised its resources, its network of neighbouring states, and its supporters within Iraq to destroy the country from the inside and ruin its infrastructure so that it could not rise again?

They understood well the danger that a strong, capable, and independent Iraq would pose to Zionist power because of the Iraqis' passionate loyalty to the Imams of the Prophet's Household. At its simplest, that loyalty meant refusing to submit to anyone but God, in the spirit of Imam Husayn's call: 'Be free people in your worldly life,' even if their blood were shed and their women taken captive, as had happened to Imam Husayn. Indeed, they saw this as true solidarity with him and with his mother, Fatimah al-Zahra, the Prophet's daughter. They sought that sacrifice so that, on the Day of

Judgement, they could proudly offer it before the Prophet as a token of their love and loyalty to his Household.

Global Zionism had already learnt how difficult it was to confront this faith and culture in its struggles with Iran and Hezbollah, which had stood against its influence and colonial ambitions in the Middle East. What it feared most was the entry of a strong, independent Iraq into the resistance to Zionism—especially because Iraq possessed a deep Arab civilisation and therefore a broad strategic reach through cultural influence across the Arab world.

From that perspective, Iraq had to be destroyed and the will of its people to endure and resist had to be broken. I saw this as a process begun when the accursed Saddam seized power decades earlier and continued directly after the occupation of Iraq in 2003.

The American-Zionist occupation of Iraq entrenched a sectarian quota system in the governance of Iraq and smothered every opportunity for the country to recover.

It also systematised administrative corruption and established it through a network of agents and officials, ensuring that Iraqis remained hungry, unhappy, poor, and deprived of development.

To prevent honourable Iraqi officials from addressing these tragic conditions and rebuilding the country, it used every resource and ally available to destroy trust among Iraqis and inflame sectarian conflict in a country that had never known sectarianism. Iraqis would then be occupied with slaughtering one another rather than resisting Zionism.

Nor did it stop there. With utter brutality, it channelled tens of thousands of takfiri terrorists and mercenaries into Iraq through its network of neighbouring states to kill and bomb innocent people and to continue acts of sabotage, especially against oil pipelines, electricity networks, and power stations.

I saw all of this as an attempt to break the Iraqi people's strength and will permanently—to turn the Iraqi into a frightened, powerless, impoverished person, stripped of values, will, and awareness, concerned only with safety and daily bread.

To secure that outcome, they shackled the will of honourable Iraqis to change their circumstances by placing Iraq under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, imposing a heavy constraint upon Iraqi sovereignty and upon its political and economic ability to resolve its problems and pursue development.

To my mind, it was like fastening a man to a wooden chair with iron chains so that he could not escape, then setting the chair ablaze beneath him, making him drink a deadly poison, shooting him, and finally hurling explosives at him—all to make absolutely certain that he was dead.

But could that truly work? Could the Iraqi people be destroyed after the spirit of Husayn had entered their own and become inseparable from it?

My memory returned to the first Arbæen after the fall of Saddam's regime on 9 April 2003. Saddam had forcibly banned the walking procession for almost thirty years. Yet only days after his fall, an estimated five million visitors set out on foot towards the shrine of Imam Husayn.

Those millions advanced without regard for the dangers around them or for the complete interruption of state services.

They moved without central leadership or direction, yet love for Husayn and the nobility it inspired kept their ranks ordered. They completed the pilgrimage and returned without causing confusion, disorder, or disturbance.

It was an ardent love of another kind, whose intensity, beauty, and splendour the world had never known—a love whose fervour we had not heard of even in the tales of lovers. It entered the self, took hold of it, and raised it until the lover saw nothing but the beloved and sought nothing else.

Love, pain, hope, devotion, loyalty, sincerity, dignity, nobility, greatness, madness, balance, and awareness met there without limit. Prevailing human culture could neither measure nor fully explain it. Had its enemies understood it, I thought, they would have understood the secret of their defeat in the July War despite their overwhelming military superiority.

Even I, raised within this culture, found myself lost in admiration for their loyalty. I allowed my spirit and senses to drink freely from the spring of their love and humanity.

These people could not be crushed; the walking processions were proof. I was certain that before long they would drive American forces from Iraq, free themselves from the restrictions of Chapter VII, repel extremist terrorists, overcome poverty and deprivation, and help prepare the way for the state of Imam al-Mahdi and the defeat of global Zionism.

Was it this love and devotion that led Imam Ali to move the capital of his state to Kufa? Was it why Najaf was chosen as his resting place? Was it why God chose Karbala as the setting for one of the greatest days in human history, Ashura?

And was it the same reason that would lead Imam al-Mahdi to move from Mecca to Iraq, make it the capital of his state, and launch from it his vast army, which would defeat global Zionism and free the world from tyranny, oppression, and enslavement?

The atmosphere inspired dignity, courage, nobility, and purity. My body trembled and my tears flowed. I found myself weeping out of love for Imam Husayn, longing for Imam al-Mahdi, and waiting for him.

Lady Zaynab's words to Yazid—may God's curses be upon him—spoken while she stood captive in his court, continued to echo within me: "Plot your schemes, exert your efforts, and do all you can. By God, you will never erase our memory, extinguish our revelation, or reach the end of our cause."

Three days after I began walking, I finally reached Karbala at half past seven on the evening before Arbaeen and made my way to the hotel where my family had arrived ahead of me.

It was one of the most moving journeys of my life. The days were few, but they had been entirely for God, in support of Imam Husayn and Imam al-Mahdi. Love, loyalty, and the desire to serve the awaited Imam had spread through my depths and every part of my being.

With every step and every moment, my breath seemed to join millions of breaths around me in a single pledge to support him and remain upon his path, however great the sacrifice or severe the challenge.



I was extremely tired on the night I reached the hotel, so I remained there to rest and recover enough strength to commemorate Arbaeen through mourning and ziyara the following day.

On Arbæen, Karbala was so crowded that movement through the city was painfully slow. Although our hotel was close to the sanctuary, it took me nearly an hour to reach it.

I spent many hours in the shrine visiting, praying, weeping, and listening to elegies and mourning recitations. Afterwards, I walked thoughtfully along the avenue between the shrine of Imam Husayn and that of his brother, Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas.

Thoughts and lessons moved through my mind. Glory be to you, my Lord—how great you are. Husayn had died alone and far from home in Karbala, while the propaganda of the accursed Umayyad regime spent decades trying to conceal what had happened and distort both his name and that of his father, the Commander of the Faithful. What had been the result?

Now millions came from every part of the world to visit him and renew their promise to support him and to stand with truth wherever it appeared. Nearly fourteen centuries had passed since Ashura, yet it remained alive and powerful in the conscience of the world, as though it had happened only yesterday.

Since then, Husayn had continued to stir the human conscience, inspiring freedom and refusal to submit to oppression. One uprising after another had emerged against tyrants in the Muslim world until resistance became a deep cultural presence in the life of the Muslim community. Its echo had reached beyond Muslims as well, awakening others and illuminating paths of freedom. Was Gandhi, the leader of India's liberation from British colonial rule, not reported to have said, "I learnt from Husayn how to achieve victory while oppressed"?

In the modern age, global imperialism had conquered continents and countries. Those powers had taken America from its Indigenous peoples, Canada from the Inuit and Métis,

and Australia from its Aboriginal peoples. Nor had conquest been enough: the original inhabitants had been humiliated and subjected to racial discrimination and persecution.

When those powers came to the Muslim world, however, they encountered a barrier of dignity and refusal whose foundations had been laid by Imam Husayn on Ashura, the universal day of truth. They had not even completed their occupation of a small country such as Palestine, let alone taken control of the whole Muslim world from the Nile to the Euphrates as they had planned.

Then came those who carried Husayn's banner and the banner of the Imam of the age. They freed Iran from tyranny and foreign domination, then liberated Lebanon. They went on confronting global power in all its strength, cunning, and reach, armed with little more than dignity, faith, and refusal to submit. Their small numbers and weakness in the eyes of others did not stop them; they only strengthened their belief. They raised the slogan, 'Every land is Karbala, and every day is Ashura,' and achieved one victory after another: '**Victory comes only from God**' (Q 8:10).

Each year, more than three hundred million Shi'a Muslims and others, wherever they live, commemorate Ashura with their whole hearts, continuing a tradition that has endured for almost fourteen centuries.

The mourning extends through Muharram and Safar. Night after night, gatherings recall the suffering, courage, and lessons of Ashura. People weep for Imam Husayn, his family, and his companions, and for the violation of truth in its clearest form, while renewing their covenant to continue upon his path.

Nor is the remembrance limited to those two months. Throughout the year, it continues through visits to Imam Husayn and through gatherings held on religious and social occasions.

A sense of greatness and tranquillity flowed through me. My body shivered, and I sat in a quiet corner, curled in upon myself and absorbed by the vast crowds of mourners around me.

I remembered a question Amer had once asked when we were discussing Imam al-Mahdi:

“Why did the Imams of the Prophet’s Household want Ashura to be commemorated in every country and every generation, until it became the foundation of our Islamic movement in their line? Wherever you go, east or west, you find Ashura remembered in one form or another.”

“They wanted that because this path has always been the path of rejecting idolatry and every form of bondage, from the time of our father Adam. It is also the path of loyalty to all God’s friends, and to freedom in all its meanings.”

“Really? How?” he asked in surprise.

“Do we not say whenever we visit Husayn: ‘Peace be upon you, heir of Adam, God’s chosen one; peace be upon you, heir of Noah, God’s prophet; peace be upon you, heir of Abraham, God’s friend; peace be upon you, heir of Moses, the one to whom God spoke; peace be upon you, heir of Jesus, God’s spirit; peace be upon you, heir of Muhammad, God’s beloved’? This establishes within us the understanding that God’s path and the mission of the prophets have been one throughout history: to elevate the human being and lead him towards God.”

“I like the rootedness and hope in that view of life.”

“The movements of the prophets were uprisings against deviation from God’s path and submission to the many forms

of bondage. Imam Husayn's uprising likewise sought to awaken the world across the course of history and kindle a warmth in human hearts that would stir the conscience and drive people towards reform, whatever the sacrifice and self-denial required. These feelings become a covenant we renew when we visit him: 'I am at peace with those who are at peace with you, and at war with those who are at war with you.'"



10 March 2008

Those two weeks had been among the most beautiful of my life, but they passed quickly and the time came to return home.

I did not know what awaited me, but I was eager to begin operating my office, which at that point consisted of little more than a laptop and an official registration with the Ministry of Commerce and Industry.

We reached Dubai Airport from Najaf at night. There I received a call from my foreign partner. We were close, he said, to securing a very large consulting project, and the final interview with the committee—four government undersecretaries and five directors-general from several public bodies—was scheduled for nine the following morning.

My presence was essential because I was the Omani partner. Our flight from Dubai to Muscat, however, was not due to leave until eight the next morning, making it impossible for me to reach the interview in time.

I discussed the matter with my wife and decided to drive back that night. She insisted on coming with me. The journey would take about four hours, so we went straight to a car-rental company, hired a vehicle, and arranged to return it in Muscat.

We were exhausted. My wife fell asleep soon after we crossed the border, and before long drowsiness began to close my own eyes. I pulled into a petrol station and slept for almost an hour. When I woke, I felt a little more alert. I washed my face with cold water, did a few exercises, bought a cup of tea, and continued the journey.

I reached the interview on time, although the fatigue was plain on my face. I had not had an opportunity to groom my beard or even put on a traditional Omani turban (mussar).

Our competitor was one of the largest firms in the world, while our own company was tiny and unknown. My strategic partner and I had delivered a fairly ordinary presentation in a Muscat Municipality building. The competing firm, by contrast, brought seventeen experts and senior managers, booked a grand hall, and hosted a dinner at one of the country's most luxurious hotels.

I had no hope that we would win. To my surprise, however, the committee told us that it had decided to give us another opportunity. We could submit a revised proposal addressing the points raised at the meeting and return with a stronger team, whose members had to be present for the presentation. If the revised proposal met their requirements, they said, the tender would be awarded to us because I was an Omani citizen and had demonstrated a high level of professional competence.

The decision astonished me. For the first time, I felt the advantage of being a citizen. I thanked the committee warmly, and my strategic partner and I began preparing the revised proposal and organising the next presentation.

The days passed, the awaited meeting arrived, and it went as well as we could have hoped. At last, an official letter came from Muscat Municipality awarding us the tender.

It opened the door to prosperity. Our profit from the project far exceeded my expectations, and one assignment followed another as though each link in a chain were drawing the next behind it.

I rented a spacious office in an upmarket building in Al Khuwair, recruited a large team that eventually reached eighteen employees, and began spending lavishly on marketing, especially digital marketing tools.

I repaid the bank overdraft and applied to Bank Muscat for a housing loan to build a beautiful, spacious, and comfortable home on the land we had bought.

The profits from that year and the next would have been enough to fund the construction, but I took the loan to protect us from any possible shortage of cash during the building work.

Months passed like a dream. We forgot the hardship we had endured, and I began to imagine that fate had erased suffering from our record for ever and that the dark days were gone, never to return.

At first, I remembered God often and thanked him constantly for his blessings and abundant provision. As the projects multiplied and the profits grew, however, I gradually became intoxicated with triumph and self-admiration. I began to feel that I had achieved everything through my own ability, intelligence, and extraordinary determination.

That exhilaration made me forget the promises I had repeatedly made to devote myself to serving God. Instead, I decided to expand throughout the Gulf, then across the Middle East, and eventually around the world.

Whenever I remembered my covenant with God, I fled from myself and argued that expanding internationally was itself a form of service to him: I would provide humanity with high-quality services it needed, and surely a strong believer was better and more enduring than a weak one.

Nor, I told myself, had I forgotten God or charitable work. Proud of myself, my faith, and my generosity, I resolved to give half of my profits to the poor and to good causes, while spending the other half on myself and expanding my property. I quietly ignored the promise I had made to give everything beyond my needs in God's way.

To achieve still greater success, I became increasingly concerned with appearances: my clothes, the car I drove, the pen and wallet I carried, and everything of that kind.

Luxury gradually entered every part of my life. From time to time, my conscience tormented me, but I turned away from it and distracted myself with success. I deceived myself by thanking God with my tongue and prostrating whenever I achieved another victory. I took pride in my decision to donate half my profits—something, I told myself, that only sincere believers like me could manage.

The sense of power and the thrill of success slowly robbed me of myself. I began to lose the sweetness of intimate prayer and conversation with God, as though it were being taken from me—as though God had turned away.

I understood what was happening, but I had allowed desire to take control of my will and could no longer stop the descent. With time, I even lost my sense of how dangerous the slope had become.

My wife told me repeatedly that I had changed and was losing the innocence and purity of spirit that had once marked me. Some friends said the same. I was sure they were exaggerating; I was still the person I had always been.

What they saw as an obsession with appearances and a new way of life was, I insisted, simply the necessary pursuit of provision, which God himself commanded. Besides, had I not decided to give half of everything I earned to the poor? How many ordinary people did that now?

My wife often repeated the verse: “Say: Shall we tell you who are the greatest losers in their deeds? They are those whose efforts are lost in the life of this world while they think that they are doing good” (Q 18:103–104). I began to think that she was gloomy by nature and never tired of sadness or negative feelings.

Had she not longed for us to travel so that I could study for an MBA? And when God answered our prayer and we went to the United Kingdom, had she not spent the whole period weeping, grieving, and complaining?

I began to think—God forgive me—that she was discontented by nature and would never accept what God had decreed, even when he blessed us and opened wide doors of provision.

More than a year and a half passed after I opened the office. I continued to deteriorate even as my admiration for myself grew. At last, I felt as though a foul smell were rising from within and filling my breath, yet I remained unable to halt the decline, as though I had sold myself to the devil.

By the Night of Decree in September 2009, I had reached the height of disgust with myself. A fierce longing to return to God burned within me, but I felt helpless. Desire and self-admiration had bound me in chains until I had become their prisoner.

Yet I could see a faint light in the distance—a hope that my Lord might still rescue me despite myself and despite how low I had fallen.

That night I prayed while grief crushed my heart and my tears would not stop: “My God, what is wrong with me? Whenever I say that my inner state has been set right and I

have drawn near to a place among the repentant, a trial comes upon me, causes my foot to slip, and stands between me and your service, my Master.

“Have you driven me from your door and removed me from your service? Have you seen me making light of what is due to you and so cast me away? Have you seen me turning from you and therefore rejected me? Have you found me among the liars and refused me? Have you seen me ungrateful for your blessings and deprived me? Have you found me absent from the gatherings of the learned and abandoned me? Have you seen me among the heedless and made me despair of your mercy? Have you found me at ease in the gatherings of the idle and left me among them? Have you disliked hearing my prayer and distanced me? Have you requited me for my offence and wrongdoing? Or have you repaid me for my lack of shame before you?”

I wept for a long time and implored him, by the grace he had always shown me, his immense goodness, and the kindness to which he had accustomed me, not to leave me to myself.

That night I turned away from the world as never before and spent it prostrate before God. From my depths, with every atom of my being, in brokenness, pain, and anguish, I begged him to purify me and bring me back to him—or else to take me from this world, even if he cast me into Hell. I could no longer bear to go on living in disobedience to him. I would rather face death, even Hell itself, than the shame of disobeying him. He was my Lord!

I knew that nothing short of a great trial could purify me and change me despite myself. I knew that this was what I was asking God for, if it would make him pleased with me—indeed, if it would only stop me from disobeying him.

If I did not stop disobeying him and return to him, I deserved every torment and every curse—even to be cut apart with saws, piece by piece.



CHAPTER NINE

And Life Goes On...

September 2009

The secret of my ability to face the challenges I had encountered throughout my life was the constant feeling that God was with me. Whenever I turned to him and read the Qur'an, I felt that God was speaking to me personally.

God had given me an optimistic, positive disposition that naturally found happiness and reassurance, no matter how difficult the circumstances, trials, or hardships I faced.

I understood that the trials and misfortunes we pass through are part of our ascent towards God: they purify us, strengthen our being, and in that way draw us nearer to him.

I therefore met everyone around me with a positive spirit, especially my own small family—my wife and children. I gave without limits or conditions, expecting nothing in return. It made me happy simply to be able to give and sacrifice for them.

All of that was turned upside down.

It began the day after that Night of Decree, when I caught a cold that brought depression with it. I felt it grip my heart: a severe pain in my chest unlike anything I had known before, and a deep sorrow that battered my whole being, darkened my view of life and everything around me, and left me feeling suffocated.

I telephoned a doctor who was also a friend. He told me that this was rare, but that it did happen and could last for days, months, or even years. I would have to be patient, he said, unless I chose to take Prozac. Because of its side effects, I decided not to take it and preferred to be patient.

The depression affected my performance at the firm, and my mistakes multiplied. At home, I began causing problems, raising my voice, and losing my temper over the smallest things. My wife suffered because of me, but she bore the bitterness and kept my condition private. Her only hope and prayer was that God would heal me.

As usual, I turned to God. Yet I felt that he was not answering me—that he had grown distant. In times of crisis, I had become accustomed to opening the Qur'an and feeling that it spoke to me and showed me what to do, but this time I found no sign.

I supplicated, but no answer came. I spoke to him in intimate prayer, yet my heart heard no reply, as though God had cut me off.

I was frightened—terrified. I did not know what to do or where to turn, for I had no Lord but him.

While I was in that state, the effects of the global financial crisis of the previous year began to cast a frightening shadow over the firm. Organisations with which I had contracts cancelled their agreements for the coming years. I was left only with the contracts already under way, most of which were close to completion.

No one knew how long the crisis would last—perhaps two years, perhaps three, perhaps much longer.

I had to reduce my expenses to the lowest possible level. I let a number of employees go, especially those on higher salaries, and moved to a smaller office.

Even then, the income covered only part of the outgoings. Liabilities accumulated: employees' salaries, instalments on the business loan, amounts due to suppliers and service providers, and the office rent. I remained careful, however, to pay the housing-loan instalments, fearing that the bank might stop financing the construction of our house.

Creditors and others to whom money was due began calling at all hours to demand payment. At the office, heads turned towards me, and the employees' eyes followed me whenever I entered or left my office, pleading for their overdue salaries—or even part of them. At home, my wife asked for money for the household.

Most of those demanding payment were not courteous. I began hearing a steady stream of insults and hurtful words unlike anything I had heard before. Yet I had no choice but to remain patient and try to calm them, for they were asking for what was rightfully theirs.

Already depressed and burdened by loneliness and estrangement, I felt every telephone call and every harsh word like a knife driven into me. The pleading looks of my employees felt like burning arrows piercing deep within me and filling me with bitterness and sorrow. When I returned home, I felt as though I were stepping into a furnace because I could not provide for the household.

I asked Uncle Issa for a loan, only to discover that the financial crisis had left him in an even worse position than mine.

On one occasion, the office almost stopped functioning altogether for lack of cash. That would have placed me in an extremely difficult position with clients who had trusted me personally. It would also have worsened my finances and made it impossible for me to meet my obligations.

For the first time in my life, I found myself forced to approach close friends who were wealthy and who, thank God, had not been badly affected by the crisis. I needed a modest loan against a post-dated cheque due from one of my clients.

It was the hardest thing I had ever done, but the obligations of the office left me no alternative.

I knocked on one door after another and met only disappointment, each refusal accompanied by a different excuse that seemed empty and unconvincing.

Everyone abandoned me, though I had regarded them as people I could rely on in hardship.

The situation became critical, and the strain of searching for a way out nearly drove me out of my mind. At last, an idea came to me. I immediately telephoned one of the friends who had refused me before and asked him to lend me five thousand Omani rials for three months against a post-dated cheque. I offered to pay him fifteen per cent interest, provided that we structured the contract in an Islamic form. He agreed at once, and I escaped that immediate crisis.

My supplication to God became more urgent. I pleaded with him to relieve me and grant me ample provision with which I could lift these burdens. Yet no answer or sign came.

At home, my behaviour became harsh and aggressive. I picked quarrels with my wife over trivial matters and rebuked my son whenever he made a mistake—sometimes even when he had done nothing wrong.

My wife tried to understand me, stand beside me, and advise me with gentleness. At first I responded. But as the

same pattern recurred, the pain in my chest intensified and I sank deeper into depression, distress, and self-pity. Her gentleness then began to make me even angrier with her, especially when she asked for household money although she knew I had none.

The constant quarrels at home made my wife withdraw from me and avoid me whenever she could. That made me still more exhausted and depressed, because I loved her deeply and could not imagine life without her.



September 2010

Almost a year had passed, and my circumstances had continued to deteriorate. At first I tried to resist, but I watched myself being drawn steadily towards the abyss. I lost trust in everything and everyone—even in God. I stopped supplicating and gave myself over to fate, letting it cast me wherever it pleased.

The depression deepened. I felt every part of me collapsing, and all the strength and ability I had built seemed to disappear as though they had never existed.

The landlord brought a claim against me for unpaid rent, and the bank sued for the overdue business-loan instalments. Financial demands came faster, more insistently, and in harsher terms, until I no longer had the courage to go to the office. Yet pride would not let me remain at home, and I also wanted to escape the problems with my wife. I therefore spent most of my time alone on the beach, away from people's eyes.

I could not close the office and declare bankruptcy because several assignments remained unfinished and were due by the end of 2010. The clients who had commissioned them had placed their trust in me, and I could not let them down. They

also brought in some income, which I used to pay the employees who carried out the work, settle the electricity, telephone, and internet bills, and meet part of the older claims.

With whatever strength remained, I struggled at least to preserve our livelihood. When I finally found myself unable even to do that, I sold my car and gave the proceeds to my wife, asking her to use them carefully for the household. From then on, I travelled by taxi or on foot.



9 February 2011

More months passed while I remained in that state, surrendered to brokenness, depression, estrangement, despair, disappointment, loneliness, and every form of defeat and retreat. I felt that nothing sound remained in my inner being. I was human wreckage—nothing more than flesh, blood, and bone.

Even so, and although I had stopped supplicating and speaking intimately to God, I knew that the matter remained in his hands. I knew that one day his mercy would reach me. But when, and how? I did not know.

It was morning. I lay on my back on Qurum Beach, my kumma over my eyes to shield them from the sun. I felt nothing; every feeling seemed to have left me. I had reached the bottom—the worst there was—and now had nothing left to lose. I had lost myself, lost my Lord, lost my wife's respect, and lost my office. I had lost everything. If I continued to descend, I would lose my son as well and ruin my family for ever.

I had to hold on. More than that, I had to begin again from nothing. But how? I could barely think. Even if I found the answer, I had neither the will nor the resolve to act.

My heart quivered violently with agitation. I felt like a wet leaf in the wind. I needed warmth and affection; I could bear no more.

I rose with immense difficulty, as though lifting a mountain, and began walking home. Tears fell freely as I walked, and I hoped their release might quiet the turmoil in my heart. The walk was long, and by the time I reached the house I was in a pitiful state.

When I opened the door, my wife was horrified by what she saw. She ran to me and embraced me. It was exactly what I needed. I broke down and wept with all the bitterness and sorrow inside me until exhaustion overcame me and I sank into a deep sleep.

When I woke, she was sitting beside me, crying silently as she stroked my head. Her tears hurt me deeply. I held her gentle hand and begged her to stop, because I could not bear any more.

She stopped crying, then asked in a broken but loving voice: “Do you really care about me?”

“Of course. You’re everything I have in this world.”

“Then are you going to abandon me and leave me alone in this life?”

“I’ve never abandoned you. But what can I do? How can I fight fate?” I answered, defeated and weak.

“It isn’t fate. Have you forgotten what you used to tell me? It’s God’s will, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it’s God’s will. I simply don’t understand why God is doing this to me.”

“God does nothing to us but good. Isn’t that what you used to tell me?”

“I know very well what I used to say. Please don’t repeat it to me,” I replied sharply.

“Very well. Then tell me what your son Nabil means to you. Have you thought about him? When did you last play with him? When did he last see you smile? Do you want him to grow up a criminal, hard of heart?”

Her words shocked me. I asked with sudden concern:

“How is he? Has my condition affected him?”

“Of course. He has become very irritable and anxious.”

“What should I do?” I asked in pain.

“Forget everything that has happened over the past two years. Turn the page and begin again. You still have much to do. Trust in God and believe that he won’t disappoint you.”

“But I trusted him before, and he abandoned me.”

“No. You were the one who abandoned him. God, exalted be he, held on to you firmly and didn’t allow you to leave him, because he loves you and wants you.”

“I don’t understand,” I said, bewildered.

“You abandoned God, your promises to him, and your striving on his path when he provided for you and the world opened its arms to you. You ran towards it, exulting in your successes and admiring yourself. Had God not rescued you, you might have become one of the heedless. So he brought you back to him by force and defended your spirit and purity as a mother defends her child.”

“But now I’m torn apart, and my spirit is rotten,” I said in pain and regret.

“You’re torn apart, that’s true, but you aren’t rotten. You’re in the abyss, but God has cured you of the rot that was taking hold of you. He has taught you a lesson you needed: never to fall into self-admiration. That lesson will protect you in future from being dazzled by the world and by your successes in it.

“Listen to me. Leave God’s affairs to him; he knows his servants fully. You should do what is yours to do, as far as you’re able—but gently, so that you can recover yourself and your calm.”

“Do you truly believe that?”

“Without question. You used to tell me many of these things, but I couldn’t fully understand them then. What we have lived through over the past two years has helped me understand much of what you were trying to teach me.”

“I’ll do that, but I’m exhausted. I still don’t understand what happened to me.”

“For the past two years, I’ve been thinking about what happened and what has continued to happen. I have a tentative explanation.”

She fell silent, as though waiting for me to ask her to continue. I was too tired and had no desire to hear anything. I was convinced that nothing anyone said could console me or lighten the weight I carried.

When she saw that I remained silent, she continued. I had no energy even to ask her to stop.

“Do you remember how pleased you were with yourself and your achievements before the collapse began?”

I nodded, embarrassed, and she continued:

“I think your pride in your successes and in yourself drove you to pursue success desperately, even at the cost of taking some religious rulings lightly and being drawn into the life of the affluent.”

“Perhaps. I don’t know.”

I shifted uneasily. Her words were beginning to trouble me.

“Do you remember telling me that, years ago, shortly after graduating from university, you fell into self-admiration after achieving some spiritual successes?”

Her question caught my attention.

“Yes, I remember it well. What are you suggesting?”

“It seems to me that the problem of self-admiration and pride lies deep within you. You might have freed yourself from it gently had you kept the promise you made to God while visiting Imam Husayn and devoted yourself to serving the faith and conveying its message, setting aside the self and its hunger for success. Instead, you sank further into pride and self-admiration and rooted them more deeply through your excessive pursuit of success, even at the expense of some of your most important values and principles.”

I interrupted her in pain:

“Was I truly like that?”

“You tell me. Do you not agree?”

I bowed my head in shame, tears of regret gathering in my eyes.

“God gave you room to recover yourself and return to him. Instead, you retreated further as time passed, until your condition became deeply entrenched and self-admiration and a life of luxury took possession of you. Direct divine intervention was therefore needed to rescue you from the state you had reached.”

I answered with deep sadness:

“Yes. I remember. I also remember that, in a moment of awakening on the Night of Decree, I asked God to bring me back to him, whatever the cost.”

“It was God, exalted be he, who inspired that moment of awakening in you.”

I could no longer contain myself. My weeping grew louder, and my wife began to weep as well.

We cried for a while. Then I gathered myself and asked her to continue, because I now needed more than ever to understand what had happened.

She wiped her tears with tissues from beside her and went on:

“Don’t forget that pride and self-admiration are among the worst afflictions that can strike a human being and drag them to the lowest depths. Remember that it was self-admiration that brought Satan so low and drove him to rebel against God, though he had once been among the most devoted of God’s creatures.”

“Oh...”

Anguish tightened my chest, and a sigh rose from it so hot that it seemed to burn me. I closed my eyes and asked in pain and brokenness:

“But why did it have to be so harsh? Was there no gentler way to heal me?”

“Are you going to start doubting God’s wisdom and his kindness to us again?” she asked reproachfully.

“That isn’t what I mean. I’m simply so tired.”

I said it and began to weep again.

“I’ve spent a long, harsh, and painful period thinking back over everything you and I have been through since I first met you. I’ve thought about your repeated moves from one job to another and the way life kept thwarting you, obstructing the success you deserved. Do you know what conclusion I reached?”

I raised my head and looked at her questioningly.

“It seems to me that the most logical reason was to protect you from the clutches of self-admiration.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Notice that every time you took a new job, you excelled. It seems that God’s kindness towards you always reached you first—before self-admiration could arise and you could become proud of yourself. For one reason or another, you’d then be forced to resign and begin searching for another job.

“Every success you achieved was followed by failure, perhaps to protect you from self-admiration. That pattern might have continued for the rest of your life. But then this dangerous affliction—and the blameworthy tendencies within you that led towards it—would have remained buried in your depths, waiting for an opportunity to emerge and take control, as it eventually did.

“And that is apart from the harm and pain it would have caused you after death. Perhaps his wisdom therefore required that the affliction be uprooted from you completely.”

I asked in astonishment:

“Could that really be so?”

“With all the self-confidence and strength you possessed, you left yourself no way to treat the self-admiration within you except by pulling it out by the roots. That required a special kind of surgery—extremely harsh and painful. That’s what happened to you.”

I shook my head from side to side, tears falling down my cheeks, and said with regret:

“My God... how wrong I was to think ill of him.”

My wife answered with pain and anger, rebuking me:

“I do not want to hurt you, but you were gravely wrong to think ill of God. He showed you so much of his kindness and never once abandoned you, yet how quickly you suspected him. Do you remember his care and protection, day after day since childhood, or do you need me to remind you? The moment you felt that he had touched your pride and livelihood, you rose in defence of yourself. Pride in yourself took hold of you, and you abandoned supplication and stopped turning to him instead of trusting him and thanking him.

“Tell me, was that not shameful of you? Do you not know that our disobedience does not harm God, nor does our obedience benefit him, and that everything he brings about in our lives is for our sake?

“Was that not what you kept explaining to me and trying to make me understand? Why, then, did you think ill of him at the first real shock you faced, as though the Almighty acted for some personal purpose rather than for your sake?

“I can understand what happened to you, and I can excuse your mistakes. What I cannot accept is that you should think badly of God after everything he has done for you and after all that you know of him.”

I sat weeping silently and bitterly as my wife reminded me of truths I had known with certainty but had neglected. She did not stop reproaching me.



Though my wife's words made me despise myself, they also revived my heart and renewed my hope. I decided to fight with whatever strength remained in me, for my family and for my Lord.

It was exceedingly difficult. I had lost most of the faculties and abilities God had given me. The power of self-suggestion was gone, along with the willpower, strength, steadiness, maturity, and wisdom I had once possessed. I had become a mere scarecrow of a man.

Then an idea flashed through my mind. I held on to it as a drowning person clings to a piece of wood and made it a guiding light through that critical period.

The idea was that a human life in this world—even if it lasted hundreds of years—counts as zero when compared with a person's true life, which stretches on without end. Mathematically, any finite number, however large, counts as zero beside infinity.

Likewise, any pleasure or happiness in this world, however great, approaches zero beside the bliss of Paradise, which is virtually without limit and exceeds worldly happiness by trillions of times.

Conversely, any torment or misery in this world, however great, also approaches zero beside the torment of Hell, which is virtually without limit.

If that is so, it is sheer folly to condemn oneself to a Hell whose torment has neither limit nor end, and thereby lose a happiness whose wonder has neither limit nor end, all for a momentary pleasure that counts as zero—or merely to avoid a passing pain that counts as zero during a worldly life that itself counts as zero.

In the middle of that night, after my wife had fallen asleep, I spread my prayer rug and performed the night prayer. I asked my Lord to forgive the wrong I had done him and repented sincerely. I thanked him for his kindness and asked for his help and right guidance in whatever pleased him.

Then I prostrated before God and thought about my circumstances, trying to plan what remained of my life so that I could rescue myself and my family from being lost.

My ability to act and manoeuvre had diminished sharply. Weakness and exhaustion paralysed me, while depression and brokenness held every part of my body, mind, and spirit captive.

I therefore needed to stem the bleeding and cut off the sources of pain, then take as few steps as possible—choosing the most effective ones—to restore stability and calm to my heart and my family. I formed a plan and began implementing it the next day, trusting in God.

I woke early and reached the office before the other employees. I went into my room, closed the door, and waited for everyone to arrive.

My chest felt heavy, and I was tense and afraid as the employees entered one after another for the urgent meeting I had called.

Their faces showed anticipation and worry. Three of them had not received their salaries for three months; the others had gone without them for four. I told them plainly that I had decided to wind up the firm immediately, since all outstanding assignments had been completed in January.

The news did not surprise them. They knew it would happen sooner or later, and all of them were already looking for other work. What they were waiting for was their overdue pay.

They said they would waive their end-of-service benefits and their pay in lieu of one month's notice, but they wanted the salaries owed for the preceding months. I agreed to transfer those salaries to their bank accounts the next day from an amount I expected to collect from a client that afternoon.

After bringing the meeting to a successful close, I felt a small measure of confidence return. I telephoned an accounting firm and asked it to begin the immediate liquidation of my office, which was registered as a limited liability company. I gave it a list of the amounts due to me and the liabilities I owed.

Business calls from creditors, clients, and others continued to pour in. Every call caused embarrassment and intense stress, but I could not simply ignore them. I therefore agreed with the office secretary to pay half his salary for the next two months in return for answering the calls, dealing with what he could, and forwarding only those that were important and beyond his ability to resolve.

I asked him to begin clearing the office the following day and to sell all its furniture. I handed him my mobile telephone, gave him my new number, and told him to keep it secret even from the other employees. He was to contact me only when necessary.

Before leaving the office for the last time, I signed the bank instruction transferring the employees' salaries as we had agreed. I also arranged for the remaining amount collected—a reasonable part of my own overdue salary—to be transferred to my personal account, and asked the secretary to submit the instructions to the bank.

As I went down the stairs, I telephoned the contractor and arranged to meet him in half an hour. I took a taxi and set off to meet him.

The house had finally been completed a few days earlier. All the finishing work was done except for the electricity connection.

Under the construction contract, it should have been ready the previous June. The contractor had failed to meet his obligation, placing me in a difficult position because I had expected the rent from the house to cover the bank instalment and the household expenses.

I had planned to demand the substantial delay penalties we had agreed upon. The amount would have helped greatly in the crisis I was facing, and that was why I had arranged the meeting.

On the way, however, I realised that the delay had been caused solely by changes in local rules governing expatriate labour. They had forced the contractor to release most of his workers because they were not officially under his sponsorship.

The fault was still his. Yet I thought that he, too, might be suffering from circumstances much like mine. My heart softened towards him, and I decided to forgive him.

I asked the taxi driver to turn round and take me home. Then I sent the contractor a brief message apologising for not coming because an urgent matter had arisen.

That morning I had written down the numbers of several well-known property-letting agencies in our area. I began calling them to look for a tenant for the house and arrange viewings over the following two days.

My wife followed each step over the phone, encouraging me and making clear how pleased she was. Her support strengthened and motivated me.

When I reached home, I searched online for suitable work and submitted applications wherever I could.

The nearly four months before I found a job dragged by, filled with anxious waiting.

I promised God that I would treat my wife and son gently and give them the care they deserved. I was able to keep that promise and return to being the husband and father I had always been.

I felt ashamed before God for having thought ill of him. I searched for something I could offer him as part of my repentance, asking for his forgiveness, pardon, and generous forbearance, and proving to myself that my love for my Lord was sincere.

I had also promised God that I would recover myself and rebuild what had collapsed within me. But I was in a psychological state in which the usual methods I had once used to manage and develop myself were no longer effective.

I returned to the twenty minutes of solitude I had once kept each night, reflecting on my affairs and drawing nearer to myself. During one of those periods, these thoughts moved through my mind.

I desperately needed strength and calm from the source that never runs dry and never ceases to give. So I decided to make those twenty minutes each night a period of solitude with my Lord, reflecting on myself while prostrate before God—the state in which a human being is nearest to God.

I rose from my chair and prostrated before God, thinking about my situation. I recalled the words, “You will never attain righteousness until you spend from what you love” (Q 3:92), and God’s words to his Messenger: “Stand in prayer through the night, except a little—half of it, or a little less, or a little more—and recite the Qur’an in a measured way. We shall cast upon you a weighty word. Rising at night is more deeply felt and more fitting for recitation” (Q 73:2–6). I resolved to keep the night prayer and rise for it in the pre-dawn hours, during the final third of the night.

Calm began to enter my heart little by little, and with time I came to take delight in the night prayer.

I added self-accounting to those twenty minutes of prostration. Its effect on me was remarkable: it gave me happiness and allowed the negative energy within me to be released before it accumulated.

While prostrate, I would tell God about the good things I had done that day. I would feel joy, as a child delightedly tells his father what he is proud of. That joy felt like the reward I sought for what I had done.

Then I would tell him about everything I regretted doing or failing to do that day, even when it was not wrong in itself. I would express regret, apologise, and promise to be more careful next time. It brought great relief and protected me from the accumulation of negative energy within.

After several months of maintaining the night prayer and the twenty-minute prostration, the pleasure I found in the prayer began to take another form. It gave me happiness and strength almost like what I had felt years earlier when I was thrown out of the chief executive's office.

I no longer needed to remain prostrate for long in order to feel peace and tranquillity. A few seconds of prostration before God were enough to fill me with joy, simply because I was a servant of God and because he, in all his majesty, was my Lord. What more could I want?

In June 2011, I was appointed financial and administrative adviser to the chief executive of one of the Sultanate's large government companies, on a very high salary.

Everything was wonderful, except that one thought troubled me and kept me awake: my whole life still revolved around myself. I had still not been honoured to be among those who strive in God's cause, though "God has favoured those who strive over those who remain behind with a great reward" (Q4:95).

I loved Imam al-Mahdi deeply and knew that he loved me. Yet I had not been honoured to be among his supporters and soldiers. When we are gathered on the Day of Resurrection, his faithful supporters and soldiers will be the ones close to him, his devoted companions—not people like me who are merely among the many who love him.

Perhaps my mistake had always been to wait until I had free time before I began striving in his cause. But if that time never came, I would be the greatest loser.

I decided not to waste a single moment of my life. I asked God, if my appointed time was near, to prolong my life until I could accomplish whatever I might lay before him, so that he might count me among those who strive in his cause, among the soldiers of Imam al-Mahdi—may God hasten his reappearance—and those who prepare the way for his state.

But what could I do? I turned the question over from every side. In the end, I saw that the best place to begin was to tell people about my experience, in the hope that it might benefit them. That night I resolved to do so, and began writing *The Journey of a Toiler*.



25 January 2014

I was sitting on the balcony of my home overlooking the whole city. I could see the sea and watch life moving and surging beneath me, while I wrapped myself in a cashmere shawl against the cold.

I thought about all the people moving in every direction. Each was absorbed in their toil and struggle with life, shaping through it the story of their existence and the story of their nearness to God. But how many of us feel this, or even know it?

My thoughts then moved far away, to the global political stage of recent years. Our Arab and Muslim peoples had paid heavy prices and made great sacrifices in seeking freedom from the dominance of global arrogance. In response, global arrogance had deployed, and was still deploying, everything at its disposal—even measures reserved for desperate times—to preserve its control over the region. Yet it had failed badly.

I saw Egypt reclaiming its dignity and stolen will; Iraq removing all American troops from its territory and finally

emerging from the restrictions of Chapter VII of the UN Charter; Syria—‘the steadfast pillar of resistance to global arrogance’—remaining firm and prevailing despite the forces of evil and darkness arrayed against it; and international sanctions on Iran beginning to be lifted as countries hurried to court it and seek commercial partnerships.

I had never doubted for a moment that this would happen, sooner or later—not because of political analysis or any knowledge of the unseen, but because of my certainty in the Qur’an and its words: “O you who believe, if you support God, he will support you and make your feet firm” (Q 47:7).

In my own life, more than two and a half years had passed in stability. I had moved from one position to a higher one without any notable trial. Was this the ease that comes with hardship, or the calm before the storm?

I had shown exceptional ability in my work as an adviser and was promoted in January 2012 to head of the company’s Strategic Affairs Sector. In March 2013, I was offered the position of chief executive of a government institution, with an extraordinary salary, and I accepted at once.

My thoughts returned to the time when I had worked for the international audit firm. What would have happened if I had inserted the paragraph the partner wanted in my report? Would my life have been more stable and comfortable, instead of the suffering my wife and I had endured?

But if I had agreed, would the matter have ended there? Or would I have been asked to do the same—and perhaps more—again and again, until I became accustomed to it, my conscience no longer troubled me, and I lost myself?

Many people like to call that “being realistic about life”. Under that label, we commit many wrongs and set aside many of our values and principles with a cold heart.

I remembered the words of a devout acquaintance who held a senior position and was known for maturity and knowledge. When I consulted him about my circumstances years earlier, he told me that, with the way I chose to live, I should find a corner in the mosque, devote myself to worship, and work as the deputy imam—because real life was incompatible with my way of living.

The balcony door opened, and my wife came towards me smiling, carrying our seven-month-old daughter, Fatima.

As she sat beside me, I took our daughter from her and asked:

“What do you think? Am I a successful man?”

She turned towards me with a surprised smile, and I continued:

“Yesterday, after Friday prayer, one of my friends, a recent graduate, asked me, ‘How can I become successful like you?’”

“What did you tell him?” my wife asked curiously.

“I asked, ‘How do you know that I’m successful?’ He answered, ‘You’re educated, you hold a senior position, and you’re financially comfortable.’”

“All of that’s true. But that’s not success.”

“That’s exactly what I told him. I asked him to meet me by the mosque after next Friday’s prayer so that we could discuss the matter, after he had reflected seriously on what success meant to him.”

“You know,” she said, laughing, “if we went back only a few years, and your friend knew about the trials we endured and how often you were dismissed from jobs, he would have considered you a failure.”

“You’re right. But had I submitted to the partner early in my career and lied in my report, I’d have taken a shorter road to high office, power, wealth, and fame. I’d have become a model of ‘success’ in people’s eyes.”

“Success cannot lie in gaining high office, power, wealth, fame, and the like. Otherwise, most of God’s prophets and reformers would have been failures, while corrupt people such as Qarun would have been successful.”

“Then what is success, in your view?”

“According to the self-development books I read, success lies in calm, contentment, and inner happiness. But I have another view.”

“Wow... wonderful. What is it?” I asked with genuine admiration.

“If that definition were right, then idle, lazy people of limited horizons whom God had enriched from his bounty would be among the most successful of all, while people of high ambition would be failures because they’re rarely calm or satisfied with the relative successes they achieve. What do you think?”

“I agree. How can anything we achieve in this worldly life be counted as success when the whole world counts for nothing beside the full span of human existence?”

I paused to pour tea for both of us, then continued:

“Success is not tied to attaining senior positions, power, wealth, fame, or the like. Nor is it tied in itself to our experience of happiness, pain, or other inward feelings. It is tied exclusively to whether God is pleased with us and to our nearness to him. Every other measure indicates success or failure only to the degree that it reflects that nearness.

“For example, the inner unrest and pain you experience are not, by themselves, signs of success or failure. If they arise from obsessive thoughts or fear of the future, they are signs of failure.

“But if they arise from your response to the condition of other people and your pain for them; from sorrow for Imam al-Mahdi and a longing to support him; from yearning for God

and a desire to meet him; or from distress at your own weakness and passivity, then they are signs of success, so long as they drive you towards growth.”

“I agree, my love. That is why the Qur’an says: ‘You will only be paid your rewards in full on the Day of Resurrection. Whoever is kept away from the Fire and admitted to Paradise has triumphed. The life of this world is nothing but the enjoyment of delusion’ (Q 3:185). It is also why Imam Ali cried out in triumph when the sword struck the crown of his head while he was prostrate before God: ‘By the Lord of the Kaaba, I have triumphed.’ But...”

She paused, as though considering what she wanted to say, then continued:

“What worries me is that, although God’s pleasure and nearness to him are a clear goal, they are difficult to measure. That makes it difficult for a person to measure how far they have succeeded.”

“That is not so. Does God not say, ‘Rather, the human being is a witness against himself’ (Q 75:14)?”

“Really? How?”

“There are two ways to take stock of yourself and assess how far you have succeeded. It is best to use both regularly.

“The first is the familiar method: observing what we do, whether positive actions such as worship, the pursuit of knowledge, reform, and the like, or negative actions such as sins, following desires, or neglecting what ought to be done.

“The second is to observe the blessings in our lives. God’s blessings upon us fall into two principal kinds. The first are existential blessings: a sense of servanthood to God, knowledge, resolve, capability, wisdom, love, beauty of spirit, certainty, reassurance, inner calm, and others like them. The second are the passing blessings of this world: wealth, status, position, fame, and the like.

“If you observe God’s blessings upon you and find that they belong to the first kind, know that you are well and drawing nearer to God, even if you are denied the second kind and continue moving from one worldly hardship to another.

“But if you notice that the blessings of the first kind are beginning to weaken and diminish, be careful. It means that you are moving away from him—especially if the second kind is increasing. That may mean you are in very grave danger and have brought yourself to such a state that God has left you to yourself and to the world.”

My wife interrupted:

“As happened when your successes at the office began to multiply, before God came to your rescue through that trial?”

Before I could answer, her telephone rang. It was my mother, asking her to come early with the children to help. The monthly family gathering was being held at my mother’s house this time.

My wife went inside with our daughter to prepare for the visit. I remained on the balcony, contemplating the life around me. Then I turned to my computer and began putting the final touches to my novel, *The Journey of a Toiler*.



Where Should You Continue Reading?

The project imposes no single reading order. If you began with this novel through the door of human experience, move to *The Islamic Intellectual Framework* to understand its worldview foundations, and to *Human Becoming in the Islamic Worldview* for the governing definitions, laws, and models. That reference book includes, at its beginning, a Reader's Guide to the project and its books, and, at its end, the reference glossary. Consult it for the map, terms, and reading paths.

A Quick Map

- 1 The Islamic Intellectual Framework — the worldview foundation and home of the broader cosmic account.
- 2 Human Becoming in the Islamic Worldview — the governing reference text, including the Reader's Guide and reference glossary.
- 3 The Immortal Self — the home of the human model and its trajectory.
- 4 No Limits — the reader-facing gateway to the laws and the home of comparative critique.
- 5 Live Happily — the gateway to contemplation and lived engagement.
- 6 The Journey of a Toiler — the gateway to narrative embodiment.

A Message from the Author to the Reader

These books began with a question that has remained with me: How can a person understand the self, move through life, and journey towards God without becoming detached from reality, work, and responsibility? In each book I have tried to approach one aspect of that question: at times by establishing foundations, at times by explanation, and at times through application, contemplation, or story.

I do not present these works as closed answers, but as a human endeavour within the Islamic worldview: one that seeks clarity and accepts review. I hope the idea remains the protagonist, the evidence its servant, and language a path by which it reaches the reader's mind, heart, and action.

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Corrections and Review

This book forms part of an intellectual project open to review and development. Material corrections and details of the latest edition or digital version are published in the official library at <https://abbasalhumaid.com/library/>. Documented observations may be submitted through the contact form on the site, identifying the book title, edition, page, passage, and nature of the observation. The author is grateful for scholarly and editorial comments that increase accuracy and clarity.

About the Author

Abbas Al Humaid

Abbas Al Humaid is an Omani writer, researcher, and strategy adviser. Questions concerning the human being and purpose have accompanied him from his early years: How does a human being take shape? How do knowledge, faith, and action become conscious movement towards God? How can a person unite depth of meaning with precision in action? His path in reading, writing, and work grew from these connected questions.

In 2023, he was honoured by the confidence of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq, Sultan of Oman—may God protect and preserve him—through a Royal Decree appointing him to the State Council of the Sultanate of Oman for the 2023–2027 term. This high national responsibility marks a significant stage in his career. He contributes to the Council’s work, particularly through the Economic and Financial Committee, by examining public issues and policies and offering strategic perspectives in support of national development and stronger economic and institutional performance.

He studied Islamic sciences and philosophy in traditional circles, then pursued a professional career spanning nearly three decades in accounting, audit, consulting, strategy, management, and institutional transformation. He spent more than two decades in partnership and leadership roles within international professional-services firms and led projects in strategy, transformation, restructuring, and governance in Oman and beyond.

Alongside his national role, he leads Merit Group and Merit Academy in the United Kingdom. Through these professional and educational platforms, he shares the substance of his experience with leaders, individuals, and institutions and contributes to the development of strategic, managerial, and professional capability.

His international professional credentials in accounting, consulting, and management include CPA, CFE, CMC, and CMgr.

This professional experience has never been separate from his intellectual concerns. He came to see that spirit and strategy, despite their apparent distance, meet in one question: How does purpose become a path, vision become action, and the human being move from one state to another? His writing therefore seeks to connect contemplation with work, the idea with its effect, and worldview with human movement in life.

He founded the Islamic Theory of Origination Project as an interpretive intellectual project situated within the Islamic worldview. It studies human becoming, existential movement, growth, conduct, and purpose-bearing responsibility, connecting intellectual foundations with human experience and practical application. His writings extend across Islamic worldview, the human being and growth, Qur'anic contemplation, literary narrative, management, and strategy.

Abbas Al Humaid writes as an independent researcher engaged in interpretive reasoning, distinguishing sacred text from human understanding and religious foundations from interpretive constructions open to examination and review. His writing is grounded in clarity of thought, accurate attribution, respect for the reader's intellect, and openness to criticism and correction.

He makes the digital editions displayed in his online library freely available in the hope that knowledge will travel further and dialogue around it will widen. What he asks of the reader is not quick agreement, but honest reading, examination of ideas, and correction where correction is due: the idea is the protagonist, evidence serves it, and language is the path.

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Books in the Islamic Theory of Origination Project

The Six Books

- 1 The Islamic Intellectual Framework — the worldview foundation and home of the broader cosmic account.
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- 3 The Immortal Self — the home of the human model and its trajectory.
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- 5 Live Happily — the gateway to contemplation and lived engagement.
- 6 The Journey of a Toiler — the gateway to narrative embodiment.

Reader's Guide and Reference Glossary

Human Becoming in the Islamic Worldview includes, at its beginning, a Reader's Guide to the project, its books, and its reading paths, and, at its end, a simplified reference glossary of its terms. These are parts of the reference book itself, not a separate volume or a seventh book within the six-book project.

Online library: <https://abbasalhumaid.com/library/>

THE ISLAMIC THEORY OF ORIGINATION PROJECT

The Journey of a Toiler offers a literary and human embodiment of the project's concepts. It transforms questions about God, existence, toil, trial, and meaning into a living narrative, connecting the intellectual worldview with the situations of everyday life and the transformations of the self.

