

THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY
OF AN IRAQI MUSLIM

SON OF KARBALA

FOREWORD BY SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR

SHAYKH FADHLALLA HAERI



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Book Description / About the Author

Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri was born in the Iraqi holy city of Karbala, sacred to the whole Muslim world. Educated in Europe, living in the USA, working for many years in the oil industry, he has developed a unique perspective on the social and political history of the region. Interwoven with episodes from his own life, and meetings with prominent politicians, theologians and Sufi masters, he traces the collapse of the old way of life as dictators, often propped up by western commercial interests, destroyed the social fabric that had held the people and their traditional Islamic culture together for centuries.

In this autobiography the atmosphere of an Iraq in transition is brought to life with all its sights, sounds and political realities. But the author's personal concern and quest has always been spiritual rather than political, so the national and cultural upheavals are used as a backdrop for his own journey of self discovery and search for truth. For everyone interested in the events that created modern Iraq, in how Muslims view their own history and in how the message of Islam meets both individual needs and that of the world today, this is a timely and thought-provoking book.

A new dawn has also appeared in spiritual travelogues with the publication of *Son of Karbala*. It deserves a place among the great spiritual odysseys of our time, right next to Gurdjieff's *Meetings with Remarkable Men*, which is at once resembles and exceeds in its honesty and clarity.

Professor Bruce B. Lawrence, Duke University, Durham NC

About the Author

Acknowledged as a master of self-knowledge and a spiritual philosopher, Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri's role as a teacher grew naturally out of his own quest for self-fulfillment.

He travelled extensively on a spiritual quest which led to his eventual rediscovery of the pure and original Islamic heritage of his birth, and the discovery of the truth that reconciles the past with the present, the East with the West, the worldly with the spiritual – a link between the ancient wisdom teachings and our present time.

A descendant of five generations of well-known and revered spiritual leaders, Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri has taught students throughout the world for over 30 years.

He is a gifted exponent of how the self relates to the soul, humankind's link with the Divine, and how consciousness can be groomed to reflect our higher nature.

The unifying scope of his perspective emphasizes practical, actionable knowledge that leads to self-transformation, and provides a natural bridge between seemingly different Eastern and Western approaches to spirituality, as well as offering a common ground of higher knowledge for various religions, sects and secular outlooks.

He is a prolific author of more than thirty books relating to the universal principles of Islam, the Qur'an, and its core purpose of enlightenment.

Acknowledgements

In writing this book, all members of my immediate family have participated in varying degrees. Several relatives confirmed and reminded me of past events, others helped in transcribing and editing the manuscript. In addition, a number of my students and friends have helped at various stages of the writing. My special gratitude goes to those who spent much time and effort in shaping this book.

I am deeply indebted to my family, friends, associates and students, who have enriched my life in form and meaning. My heartfelt love and acknowledgement goes to all those who have touched my life (in any way) and my sincere apologies to those whom I have hurt or upset, knowingly or otherwise.

Foreword I

The name “Karbala” is etched in the consciousness of present day Westerners through presentation in the mass media of bloody scenes, fearsome battles and tragic destruction of the past few years following the invasion of Iraq by America and other coalition forces. But for Muslims, and especially Shi`ites, it is associated with another and very different kind of bloody event, one that took place nearly fourteen centuries ago and involved the spilling of the blood of “the prince of martyrs”, Imam Husayn ibn `Ali, the grandson of the Prophet of Islam. It was here that Husayn met his death while seeking to present the authenticity of the Islamic message and the administration of justice on the basis of the truth that Islam teaches. His body was buried in the desert where he and other members of his family were killed. And from this event there came into being the city of Karbala, built over the centuries around the mausoleum of the supreme martyr of Islam. The dome and minarets of the tomb of the Imam still dominate the city’s landscape.

Subsequently, Karbala became a major center of pilgrimage and religious activity, visited by countless pilgrims from all over Iraq, Persia, the Indian subcontinent and many other lands. Over the centuries the faithful have also tried to be buried near Imam Husayn and many bodies of pious Muslims have been brought from near and far to Karbala, for that purpose. Moreover, the city became a major center of Islamic learning where many migrated to sit at the feet of masters in its schools and also in Najaf nearby. Even the earth of Karbala is considered to contain special blessings and to this day devout Shi`ites put a piece of that earth before them on the ground during the daily prayers and place their forehead on it during the act of prostration so as to be able to touch the earth near where the body of Imam Husayn is buried.

Being a major religious center and site of pilgrimage, Karbala retained its traditional character longer than Baghdad and was still to a large extent dominated by traditional Islamic culture until the mid – 20th century. It was in this still Islamic ambience that Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri was born and brought up. Like many distinguished families of Karbala, his family was both Persian and Arab having some members who lived in Iraq and others who lived in Persia, where the family is said to have originated. The riveting autobiography that follows describes in moving

prose and with a strong sense of narrative the life of an exceptionally gifted member of the religious and social aristocracy of that city.

We read about this early years set in a completely traditional family and social context followed by the gradual penetration of modernism and Westernization into his life. We read about his attraction to the West, going to England to study, his spiritual and intellectual crisis, his return to Iraq as a Westernized Muslim and his return to the West. Of greatest interest is how he re-discovered Islam while he was in the West and especially the fact that this transformation took place through the agency of a Hindu and with the help of Sufism. This process has become prototypic for many a Muslim and depicts an early example of what can be observed among many Muslim students coming to the West these days. But it was less common when Shaykh Fadhlalla experienced it.

As someone who is somewhat older than Shaykh Fadhlalla, and who underwent a very similar transformation a decade earlier than him, I can vouchsafe the authenticity of such a life transforming process. Reading this biography reminds me very much of my own life. I too was born in a distinguished Shi`ite family in Persia and my father in fact knew Shaykh `Abd Allah Ha`iri, a famous Sufi master, who was a great uncle of our author. I still recall that as a child I was taken by my father to meet this master. He put me on his lap, smiled and recited prayers for me. His son, Hadi Ha`iri, the greatest authority on Rumi in his day, was like my uncle and one of my important teachers in Sufi literature. I too was to go at a young age to the West, become immersed in Western culture, in my case American rather than British, become attracted to Hinduism through which the metaphysical and mystical dimensions of Islam were to open to me and I subsequently re-discovered the integral Islamic tradition. It is even more remarkable that in Shaykh Fadhlalla's case as in mine there came into being a meeting at the highest level between Shadhili spirituality and Shi`ism, something that has been rare in Islamic history. I can therefore speak from personal experience about the authenticity of the salient features of Shaykh Fadhlalla's life and works and can bear witness to the importance of his variegated and diversified life for a better understanding of the dynamics of the encounter between Islam and the West in the mind and soul of many Muslims today.

Shaykh Fadhlalla has adorned his autobiography with many Qur'anic citations and the events of his life has been described in such a way that they have become imbued with moral and spiritual character and serve as ethical and religious lessons. His autobiography is therefore not only engaging in itself and revealing as far as the life of an important contemporary Muslim personality is concerned, but it is also emblematic of the life of a deeply rooted present day Muslim thrown into the chaos of the modern world but able finally to find his moorings and return with even greater certitude than before to the world of faith. His work can in fact be a guide for many a Muslim confronted with a similar situation.

Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri has already written a member of valuable books and especially penetrating works on the Noble Qur'an. He has also guided numerous young spiritual aspirants, both Muslim born and of Western origin, in America, Europe, Africa and Asia. Moreover, he has carried out very valuable acts of philanthropy and continues to do so. I pray for him to have a long and continuously fruitful life in service to God and His creatures. His life demonstrates the fact that to "God belong the East and the West" and that wheresoever we turn "there is the Face of God".

Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Bethesda, Maryland, U. S. A.

Dhu'l-qa`dah 1426 AH

December 2005

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Foreword II

“Son of Karbala”, the memoirs of Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri, are an extraordinary testament to the man, place and time. At one level it is a fitting tribute to one of the most significant shrine cities of Islam, and also, and more importantly, a record of the passing away of an entire way of life. At another level, it is the fascinating story of a true seeker after wisdom and enlightenment, and the paths that he had to tread, and the incredible people that he met, before he emerged as one of the recognized modern masters of authentic spirituality.

Karbala, after the Second World War, mirrored the decline of traditional society that was occurring elsewhere in Iraq and indeed throughout the Muslim World. The fragility of its age-old structures were all too evident as the emergent generation abandoned nearly all of its legacy and replaced it with a crude modernism devoid of any civilizing virtue. A close-knit, organically connected and mutually supportive culture was unable to cope with the allure of materialism, an ever-expanding state, and the siren calls of false ideologies. The author describes in lyrical terms the warmth and common decency that pervaded human relations in the Karbala of his childhood; the sense of responsibility that governed people’s every actions; and the sinews of mutual obligations that provided the safety net for the poor and the weak, and that combined power and privilege with a profound consciousness of service to society’s disadvantaged. His family occupied the commanding heights of Karbala’s society, combining an elevated status in the religious hierarchy of the city, with a wide recognition of their authority as hakims, or masters of the inner dimensions of Islam. Shaykh Ahmad Haeri, the author’s father, was an accomplished practitioner of alchemy. He was sought out for his spiritual advice and guidance from as far a field as India. Through his intense spiritual practices and devotions, he was able to reach very high levels of inner awareness and consciousness, one of whose by-products being an ability to discern patterns in events which were beyond the normal capacities of humans. Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri must have inherited these qualities from the long line of his illustrious predecessors.

As the tides of change began to overwhelm his native town, the young Fadhlalla adapted, though not uncritically, to the ways of the new order. He continued his higher education in Britain and then joined the fast-expanding oil industry of Iraq, where he rapidly rose in the organization of

the major foreign-owned oil company, the Iraq Petroleum Co. But correctly sensing that the politics of the country were about to become more tyrannical and violent, he left Iraq, and established himself as a successful oil consultant and entrepreneur. It was while on one of his numerous business trips in the Middle East that he came across the figure who would challenge his way of life directly and rekindle in him the passionate yearning for the truth that would set the pattern for his future. Swami Chinmaya, an Indian spiritual master, confronted Fadhlalla with the great questions of life and the significance of all authentic traditions in mapping the path that can lead to self-realization and true knowledge. After a number of years in the company of Chinmaya, Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri was encouraged by his guru to return to the valid traditions within the Islamic heritage of his own past. There then followed an enthralling set of encounters with leading masters of the Islamic Sufi tradition, both in the East and the West, as Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri begins his spiritual seeking in earnest. The descriptions of his various meetings and experiences with these astonishing masters provide some of the most absorbing passages in the book. His first Islamic guide after his departure from Chinmaya's ashram, was Shaykh `Abdalqadir as-Sufi, an extraordinary person in his own right, a Scottish-born master who had established centers for his mainly European adepts in various parts of the world. As Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri matured into a recognized authority, he began to collect around him a growing number of followers, seeking from him the guidance that would assist them in their own life journeys. Several centers for his adepts were established, nearly all focused on both enhancing the inner life of its members as well as emphasizing a strong service ethic to the community and society at large. Village style communities, clinics, schools, and places of worship were organized around the world, from the US, to Britain, Sweden, Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka and South Africa.

“Son of Karbala” is not an ordinary memoir. It is a highly instructive and thoroughly enjoyable book that can benefit the reader at any number of levels. Above all, it is a story of the passion for truth that consumes and then alters a person in ways that are truly inspiring. The delights in knowing, with unalterable certainty, that the subtle breath of an All Merciful God holds the universe together, can bring an immense transformative force into one's life. Each and every thing falls into a pre-ordained place even when one is confronted by a seemingly endless procession of chaotic and meaningless events. Many peoples' lives have been profoundly altered by their encounter with Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri. In reality, the force of his presence is nothing

more than the reflection of a contented self that has made its peace with itself as well as its Creator; and with which its Creator is manifestly contented. The catastrophes that befell his native Iraq did not detract Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri from his magnificent quest. If anything, the tribulations of his country should be seen also as a salutary warning to all who chose inappropriate paths that strayed far from the divine measure.

It is this property that marks out the “Son of Karbala”. It tells a number of stories and carries multiple messages within it. But it is ultimately the sense that serenity and success is assured if one pursues the inner life with sincere determination and purpose. That is the real message of the “Son of Karbala” and we have to thank Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri for sharing his journey with us.

Ali Allawi

Baghdad,

Iraq

October 24, 2005

Ali Allawi is the Minister of Finance of the Republic of Iraq.¹ He had been prior to his current appointment, the Interim Minister of Trade, and later the Interim Minister of Defense, in the new Government of Iraq.

¹ In 2005.

Introduction

Listen to the reed how it tells a tale, complaining of separations.

- Jalaluddin Rumi

This book is the journal of a quest. It chronicles my life-long search for knowledge; a search that was driven by love and uncompromising passion, in the realization that conflict within and with others comes from man's natural drive to resolution. My goal was to understand the meaning of life and know its Source.

By God's grace and through appropriate applications and blessings, openings were granted to me. Words, events or books cannot define my gratitude for this. Yet, when close friends, students and family requested me to write my biography, I felt compelled to share the gifts of understanding and knowledge that have been bestowed upon me.

My experiences may be of particular value to those who have been displaced from the land of their heritage, especially if they are from Eastern or Muslim backgrounds. *Insha'Allah* (if God wills), they will also enable interested people from other cultures and religions to achieve a better understanding of the Islamic culture and its way of life, which has undergone such radical changes over the past decades.

Current world events and conflicts between peoples and nations add impetus to the usefulness of a book which might show some order within the chaos and clarify misconceptions and fears Westerners have concerning such issues as Muslim fundamentalism, jihad and terrorism. The reader will share my personal discoveries of how we Muslims lapsed in our socio-economic and cultural development and how our great religion became over structured and ritualistic. I came to a greater understanding and reconciliation with the world situation without compromising my spiritual heritage. I hope the reader, too, may come to terms with difficult events and disturbing global relationships at many levels.

I was born and brought up in the ancient city of Karbala, where Shi`a Muslims, theologians and mystics had lived and died for over thirteen centuries. Apart from its famed date palms and orange groves, Karbala holds great significance for millions of Muslims around the world. It was on the plains of Karbala on the 10th Muharram 61 AH (10th October 680 CE) that Imam Hussein, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, along with 71 of his companions, was brutally martyred. Ever since, there is a deep sadness and concern in every Muslim's heart as to why Muslims have often had to endure cruel and hypocritical leaders.

As a European-educated young man, I looked for a home or culture that would reconcile my past with an appropriate future. I had lost Karbala with the continuity of its ancient way of life and Prophetic values, only to find its original blueprint ever residing in my soul, rather than physically in any land – for I looked everywhere without success. The cultural dislocation, eventual statelessness and lack of country or people to belong to, led me to accept wherever in the world I was, as my temporary home. This brought the discovery that the more you identify with your nationality, religion, language and culture, the more difficult it becomes to discover the higher spirit within you. In my case, outer destitution became the door for inner restitution.

My quest and longing for truth has led me to conclude that the end of the search for meaning and purpose in life – the whys, whats and hows of existence – is only the beginning of the enlightened phase of joyful continuity. What I was truly yearning for was closer than I had ever imagined. What I feared and hated lay in my own imagination and mind, veiling deeper meanings and the eternal truth. My desire is now to invite others to the celebration of life through unconditional service and awakened consciousness to the universal Truth, the ever present and perfect ways of the One God.

This book is dedicated to all sincere human beings, who accept the limitations of humanity and seek the boundless delights emanating from the soul. May the wandering seeker be awakened to fulfilled living, surrender in utter gratitude and be content by witnessing the Glorious Creator and His boundless perfections which shine through apparent worldly imperfections.

Oh my son! This world is like an ocean in which many a creation had drowned. Make, therefore, the fear of God your boat in this

Introduction

ocean; your faith the main hull of the boat; reliance on God as its sails; reason as its rower; knowledge as its captain; and patience as its anchor.

- Imam `Ali

CHAPTER 1: The House of Shaykh Ahmad

Allah makes ample provision for whom He wills of His bondsman,
and restricts it for whom (He wills). Lo! Allah is Aware of all
things.

- Qur'an (29: 62)

I remember a peaceful winter afternoon in Karbala. The sun brilliant and the breeze cool, the palm fronds swinging with rhythmic ease. I must have been about eleven years old and was sitting on one of the flat-topped roofs of our house. The ancient city spread out before me and as I looked towards the great golden dome of the mosque of Imam Hussein, that had seen so much of the past, I wondered about the future; 'What will become of Karbala, and what will become of me, in years to come? Where and what is my destiny?'

I was in my final year at primary school and preparing to go to Karbala's only and newly built secondary school. That morning the teacher had asked my class to write a composition on what we wanted to be in the future. My friends each expressed their desire to join the professional ranks emerging in Iraq; engineers, doctors and administrators, I could not come up with a desired career. After much thought, I presented one sentence in large letters: 'I could be a doctor, an engineer or a teacher. I do not really mind what or where as long as I am content.'

The breeze whispered to me that I would not stay in Karbala for long, although Karbala felt like forever. The town and its people seemingly timeless, an endless repeat of time already unfolded. Somehow, even then, I knew I would eventually leave my home for good. I would leave my people and my country, not to avoid anything, nor to reach anything, but simply to live my destiny.

That which is not meant, the hand cannot reach
And that which is allotted you will find wherever you may be.

- Saadi

Looking down upon the narrow road, I spotted my uncle's car, one of the first few in Karbala, making its way through the crowd of horse drawn carriages, donkey carts and passers-by. As the sun began to set, orange and red peered through the dusky haze. Over the newly installed loudspeaker, the muezzin sounded the call for the faithful to come to prayer; '*haya `alas salat`*' (make haste to prayer), the oldest of exhortations sounded out from the newest of mediums.

The evening before, my nanny, Mashti, had enthralled me with one of her stories. In Persian she would begin, '*Yeki bood yeki nabood ghayr az khuda kesi nabood`*' (There was One, there was no one, other than God there is no one). And in Arabic she would end, '*Wa` llahu a`lam`*' (and Allah knows best).

`There was One, there was no one, other than God there is no one.`

'There was a sand storm in which a king, out on a hunting trip, had been separated from his guards. As the lost king wandered, a shepherd boy without knowing the king's identity helped him with food and shelter. The following day, when the storm had passed, the king revealed his identity to the shepherd and invited him to stay at the royal court. The innocence, simplicity and loyalty of the shepherd boy endeared him to the king. Soon, he grew to be an influential vizier, making the courtiers and feudal aristocrats extremely jealous of the king's new protégé.

Now, it was the habit of the young vizier, twice a day, to slip away to the seclusion of his private chambers, where no one knew what he was doing. The courtiers speculated and gossiped about this strange conduct. 'He was stashing away gold and jewels which he has stolen from the royal treasury', one would whisper. 'Perhaps he is performing witchcraft', another would add. When the king heard these speculations, he was determined to find out what his vizier was up to and ordered a small hole to be made in the vizier's wall.

The following day, when the vizier had quietly made his way to his chambers, the king and his retinue gathered by the hole. Looking in, they saw the vizier take off his richly embroidered gowns and put on the patched robe of a shepherd boy. In his shepherd's clothing, he would sit on

his prayer mat in deep prayer. The king turned to his courtiers and proudly proclaimed, ‘this is the real wealth and magic this shepherd boy seeks. He is a true servant of God.’

And Allah knows best.’

Oh my Son, establish regular prayer, enjoin what is just, forbid what is wrong and bear with patience whatever befalls you; truly, this act requires courage.

- Qur’an (31: 17)

With the call to prayer ringing in my ears, lifting above the golden dome of the mosque, my thoughts turned between school and the memory of the shepherd boy. I knew within my heart that it would not matter what professions or roles I would acquire in my future life. It would not matter what clothes I would wear, nor where I would wear them, as long as I was content and secure within myself. As providence would have it, I wore many clothes, accepted various and diverse roles and would come to call different countries and houses home.

The first of these houses was the one where, in October 1937, I was born. It was an old house at the heart of the city of Karbala. The house lay adjacent to the Mosque and Shrine of Imam Hussein and belonged to my father, Shaykh Ahmad Al Haeri Al Mazanderani. The date of my birth was considered most auspicious as it coincided with the 3rd of Shaban (the eighth month) in the Islamic lunar calendar, which was also the birthday of Imam Hussein. My father decided to name me ‘Fadhlalla’, which means ‘the grace of God’.

* * *

Three generations before me, a man named Zainul `Abideen (meaning the best of worshippers) had been born in the Iranian province of Mazanderan, on the southern coast of the Caspian Sea. In the early 1800s, his father had fled Shirvan, in present day Azerbaijan, as thousands were slaughtered in the wake of a brutal Russian invasion. Zainul `Abideen was sent to the seminary city of Najaf in Iraq where Imam `Ali, the fourth Caliph of Islam and the father of Imam Hussein, is buried. Here, he became Shaykh Zainul `Abideen gaining an unparalleled reputation

amongst his contemporaries for piety and abstinence. For fifty years, he lived the life of an ascetic, without a wife and home comforts.

A man will not find sweetness of faith until he is heedless of the fruits of this world.

- Prophet Muhammad

It is said (legend and truth have mingled) that one night, while in supplication at the shrine of Imam `Ali, Shaykh Zainul `Abideen let out an exasperated exclamation. 'I have lived my whole life in devotion to God and for years I have lived off nothing but dry bread and vegetables, I am getting old now, I want a home and I want to eat chicken instead of dried bread!' There, at the shrine, he fell into a brief sleep, dreaming the most vivid of dreams. Imam `Ali came to him and said that if he had any wish for an easier and more comfortable life, he should pull aside the curtains that manifested in front of him. As the Shaykh opened the curtains, he saw a large tablecloth spread across the floor with several people sitting around it enjoying a sumptuous banquet. The Imam then told him to go to Karbala, for this was the table of his son, Imam Hussein.

Asceticism does not mean that you should own nothing., It means that nothing should own you.

- Imam `Ali

Shaykh Zainul `Abideen packed his few possessions and headed for Karbala. At the gates of the city, a wealthy merchant, finely dressed and mounted on a horse, asked the head of the approaching caravan if a man named 'Zainul `Abideen' was amongst them. As the Shaykh stepped forward, the man got off his horse, bent down and kissed his hand, introducing himself as Hajji² `Ali, also originally from Mazanderan, but for many years resident in Karbala, He

² A common title in the Muslim world used to designate someone who has been on 'hajj' – the pilgrimage to Mecca, which is a once in a lifetime requirement for all Muslims, who are able to undertake it.

requested the Shaykh to stay at his home, while in Karbala. He was thanked, but told that accommodation arrangements had already been made at the seminary.

Everyday, a huge tray of food was brought to the Shaykh from Hajji `Ali's house. A few days later, Hajji `Ali offered the Shaykh his daughter's hand in marriage and money to buy a house and household goods. When Shaykh Zainul `Abideen asked the reason for the extreme generosity, Hajji `Ali revealed that he too had had a dream. Imam Hussein had come to him and told him that a caravan would be arriving from Najaf on a particular day and amongst the travelers would be a man, who bore the same name as his son. This man was to be served and helped in every possible way. 'Zainul `Abideen' was the name of the only one of Imam Hussein's sons who survived the battle of Karbala. Shaykh Zainul `Abideen thanked God for this great blessing, married Khursheed, Hajji `Ali's daughter, and lived the rest of his life in Karbala. There he established a thriving, internationally renowned seminary.

As Shaykh Zainul `Abideen's reputation grew, a group of merchants from India arrived in Karbala looking for a religious leader to whom they could give their *zakat*, the donation to the poor, which is the obligation of every Muslim³. They were first recommended to the house of a well-known cleric, who showed much piety and asceticism. There, they were given the simplest of meals, dry bread and lentil soup, but just before their departure, a cat ran from behind a curtain dragging a chicken in its mouth, which it had stolen from the kitchen. The visitors glanced at each other in puzzlement questioning the cleric's asceticism, and left without handing over their *zakat*.

Surely, the hypocrites strive to deceive Allah, but it is He who
deceives them.

- Qur'an (4: 142)

³ The word '*zakat*' literally means 'to purify'. The implication being that if you give a portion of your wealth or earnings, you have taken a step towards purifying yourself of your love of wealth. The obligatory *zakat* is the equivalent of 2.5% of particular possessions or earnings, but the word is also used for general charitable donations.

The following day, the party arrived at Shaykh Zainul `Abideen's house, where they were served a lavish lunch with a chicken on every plate; for it was now reputed that there was always chicken at Shaykh Zainul `Abideen's house. Impressed with his inner purity and outer generosity, they handed over their *zakat* and submitted to him as their spiritual leader. In time, the Indian relationship grew, with the princes and sultans of many states being amongst the Shaykh's followers.

In Shi'a Islam, the principle of guidance is invested in an individual or several individuals who stand at the peak of the religious and scholarly hierarchy and whose authority on matters of Islamic law are accepted by the lesser clergy and citizens in general. Shaykh Zainul `Abideen was acknowledged as such a man – a *Marja-e Taqlid* (Source of Emulation). More recently, the term Ayatollah⁴ and Grand Ayatollah have been used to designate the same station.

Shaykh Zainul `Abideen and Khursheed (meaning sun) had four sons, each of whom were prominent men of their time, all reaching the highest rank of religious or political leadership. His eldest son and my grandfather, Shaykh Muhammad Hussein, took over his father's mantle as leader of the Friday prayers and master of the religious institutions of Karbala. He stayed there until his death whereupon, his eldest son, my father, Shaykh Ahmad, took his place; like his father and grandfather before him, he too led the main congregation at the Shrine of Imam Hussein. Shaykh Muhammad Hussein's second son, Shaykh Baqir, went to Iran and became a senior and respected Ayatollah in the Justice Ministry (his descendents are scattered around the world, but a number still live in Iran).

It was on Shaykh Zainul `Abideen's prayer mats and with Khursheed's *tasbeeh* (rosary or worry beads) that I grew up. Today, the worn prayer mat and *tasbeeh* sit in my room. The *tasbeeh* was made of clay pellets fashioned from the earth taken from near Imam Hussein's burial ground. On each of these beads of sacred earth, a name denoting an attribute of God would be recited.

⁴ The word *Ayatollah* was initially used to denote the prominent clerics who supported the Constitutional Revolution in Iran in 1906. Subsequently, it has become more generalized. As the title Ayatollah began to be applied less discriminatingly, the term Grand Ayatollah gained acceptance to give greater status.

The use of the rosary in Islam was a foreign custom, probably taken from Byzantium. During the Prophet's time, when something was to be recited repeatedly, they used date pips, as are still used in some places, especially Sufi centers in North Africa. There is a pile of pips on one side and with each recitation one pip is thrown onto the other side. The Qur'an relates, 'To God belongs all the desirable perfections and attributes', and when the Prophet was asked, 'What are these attributes?' he replied, 'He who knows ninety-nine names or attributes of God will be in the Garden.' And so the Muslim rosary traditionally has comprised of ninety-nine beads.

Allah's are the most beautiful names, so invoke Him by them and leave those who desecrate His names. They will be repaid for what they do.

- Qur'an (7: 180)

Off a cobble stone alleyway, across from the *Bab al-Zainabiyyah* (the gate of Zainab⁵), one of the main entrances to the Shrine stood our house. When I was a child, there had been no separation between the Shrine and our house, but in time, a narrow road was built encircling the shrine. There were three entrances to the compound, which actually consisted of a collection of houses, the first lead to my father's home and those of the immediate family and the other two were the guesthouse and my aunts' home.

As you walked into our home, beneath the shade of a tall eucalyptus tree, you would come to what was the first of three courtyards. There, a visitor would sit and wait on one of the benches beside the circle of orange trees in the center of the courtyard. Onto the same courtyard opened the three wood and glass doors (the equivalent of French windows) of my father's library. Carpets and cushions lay on the library floor, several thousand books lined the walls, some printed, some handwritten and leather bound, a number in the hand of Shaykh Zainul Abideen and Shaykh Muhammad Hussein. All the books were in Arabic or Persian⁶.

⁵ Zainab was the younger sister of Imam Hussein, whose denunciations of the murderers of the Imam and the ruling king Yazid are famous in Muslim history.

⁶ Persian is more correctly called 'Farsi', after the name of an area/province in what is now Iran.

Until the early twentieth century, printing presses were still rare in the country and professional scribes often copied books by hand. It was some 400 years after Gutenberg's invention that the printing press became widespread in the Middle East. The first printing press was established in Istanbul in 1729, but was closed down, only to resume printing in 1784 in a most restricted manner, due to the strong objections of clerics on the spurious grounds that it may defile the Arabic script. It took the direct intervention of a European power, in the form of Napoleon's conquest of Egypt at the dawn of the 19th Century, for the Arab countries to have their printing baptism. The first printing press in Iran only started operations in 1817.

Interestingly, apart from the Muslim countries' general tendency to blindly reject any Western invention that was not directly related to the military, another reason for the prohibition of printing in Arabic was the vested interests of the guild of calligraphers and scribes – the predecessors of those whose inscriptions were written on my father's books. Perversely, their strength was a legacy of the Islamic countries' far greater level of scholarship than that of Europe prior to the Middle Ages.

Ignorance is enough for you if you are content with your present knowledge.

- Imam `Ali

While I was in Karbala, the modern printing presses of Cairo and Beirut were producing increasing quantities of material, but their focus was of a more worldly inclination than my father's interests and so he largely avoided them. From 'Abbas Kutibi', my favorite Karbala bookstore, I would eagerly purchase the latest edition *Ithnaine* (Monday), the popular Egyptian weekly current affairs magazine, whose owners and editors, like their Lebanese competitors, were zealous Christian freemasons.

It was through these modern publishing houses that the Arabic language subtly began to deviate, reflecting the erosion of the culture of religion in the Arab lands, and its replacement by a more Western and worldly outlook. The Qur'an gradually became less and less understandable to the layman, as a number of key Qur'anic terms took on meanings that were often ironically the opposite of their original. Hence, *da`wa*, originally meaning to invite someone to the religion,

came to mean a dinner party; *inzi'aj*, which meant moving the heart towards God, now means to be bothered; *khumul*, which used to mean not to show off or be pretentious, now means laziness and sloth; *mumtaz*, which the Qur'an uses as 'to stand out' in the way that criminals do, has come to mean excellent; *ratib*, which meant a repeated litany or regulated supplication, now means a fixed salary; *riyadha*, which meant a virtuous and self-disciplined way of life has come to mean sport; and *shahada*, a word used to describe the Muslim profession of faith and which until a generation ago had only religious connotations, is now commonly used for a certified qualification (usually a university degree) that would ensure a well-paid job (*ratib*).

There is no good in worship without pondering upon its meaning,
and no good in reading the Qur'an without reflection.

- Imam `Ali

Behind the first courtyard in our compound was a second family courtyard, which lead to a third smaller courtyard, and which included my father's small and modest sleeping quarters; barely big enough for his bed. At the other side of his courtyard was the tall wall of my father's alchemy laboratory, whose entrance was from the roof. Next to this entrance were large vats of garlic pickle – my sleeves occasionally bearing evidence of having been dipped in the thick dark liquid as I reached in to sample the product. Every morning after *fajr*, the dawn prayer, and then again for an hour before *maghrib*, the evening prayer, my father would retreat to his laboratory. From the upper floor, I would hold on to the banister and tentatively make my way down the precarious wooden stairs, choking and coughing as the sickly smells of sulphur and ammonia would invariably engulf me.

There, on tables or niches in the walls, would be all kinds and sizes of pots, some with burners beneath, crude distillation units, a strip of felt slowly dripping filtered liquids from one container to another and liquids of all colors in unmarked jars. Metal strips would be lying around, copper, lead and silver. There would be animal horns, human hair and chemical compounds. At the end of the ground floor, in an enclosed room, raged a coal furnace. Like his father, and grandfather before him, Shaykh Ahmad was a practicing alchemist.

With a mixture of curiosity and concern, I would quietly sit and watch my father as he worked, totally absorbed in his experiments. Occasionally, he would tell me stories of one of his cousins having an accident, things exploding and pots catching on fire. To my surprise, nothing so exciting happened in his workshop, at least not in my memory. As I grew older, one day he explained to me that the aim of the alchemical process is to enable a base metal to transform into a higher noble metal, from lead to gold, from an unstable to a stable state. 'It is an exercise of being admitted to God's secret of how time and the timeless relate; how thousands of years can be shrunk by speeding up the natural process. Whoever wants to turn other metals into gold for material gain will never succeed', my father assured me. The alchemist will himself be transformed and will transcend the usual human limitations. This in itself is worth far more than the worldly power and wealth the elixir is meant to provide.

Once I remember, a guest had arrived at our home, from outside Iraq to discuss alchemy with my father. He was a wild looking man with long matted hair, who spoke Arabic with a North African accent. He arrived enthusiastically and left disappointed a few days later, accusing my father of not letting him in on the 'inner secrets' of the craft. When he had gone, my father told us over lunch, 'Whoever is anxious about the end product will miss both the transformation and the product.' Shaykh Ahmad's alchemical pursuits were his struggle to transcend the limitations of reasoning and the mind. Success implies being admitted to a zone of consciousness where you become a conduit for the inspirational Source. 'You must', my father had said, 'unite your will with God's will.' Then there is no 'you' as such, only a soul that is God's agent and a reflection of His knowledge.

How can norms be broken for you whilst you have not broken the norms of the self (ego).

- Ibn Ata' Allah Iskandari

A few months after I left Iraq, I was informed that my father had stopped going to his laboratory. On my first visit back to Karbala, the laboratory was under a cover of dust, concealing ancient secrets. My mother told me that just before he ceased working in the laboratory, a number of my

father's silver rings had gradually become golden in color. Muslim men are not supposed to wear gold and he stopped wearing these rings.

In my library I have a few of my father's books on alchemy. One in particular, a four-century-old treatise, was his constant companion, always by his bedside. Every now and then, with little comprehension, I read a page or two. It is filled with allegorical references and written in classical Arabic. Typically, the book describes strange mixing procedures, instructing the alchemist to 'heat the mixture until it has become mature and accepted stability'; followed by even more abstract parts to do with the quality of the practitioner's state, telling him to be 'an instrument rather than a manipulator of the event.'

* * *

The second courtyard in our home was spacious and spanned two levels. It was named the *Dakhlani* or inner house. Towering over this courtyard was a tall date palm. It was to this palm tree, one memorable day, that Kareem and two other men came brandishing swords and daggers. Kareem was the caretaker of our family orchard, the *Bagh Jamal* (Orchard of Beauty), situated a few kilometers north of the town. He also occasionally looked into the development of the trees (mainly orange) in our compound. This particular palm was ten years old now and had not yet given fruit.

Failing horticultural persuasion, Kareem turned to more traditional measures. His two associates sharpened, flourished and clinked their swords together as they danced around the tree calling out, 'What use is this palm tree if it doesn't bear any fruit?' Once it was determined that the palm tree was suitably warned and frightened, Kareem interceded, begging the men to give the palm tree another chance. 'Next year', he promised, 'it will bear fruit'. After further prodding, poking and pleading, the mystical troop departed, exhausted, but satisfied.

The following year the palm tree produced several branches of Karbala's finest caramel colored dates. My mother would climb up the palm's trunk with agility to harvest the dates. She continued to do this for years until her climbing career was cut short by the tree growing tall enough to be exposed to the street outside, which had been recently opened.

Tragically, Kareem's story does not have as happy an ending as the fruiting palm tree's. The old ladies of the house were sure that Kareem would eventually bring sorrow and the evil eye upon himself by bragging about his good fortune. He would boast about the fruits of the orchard, about his devoted wife, his hard working donkey, and most especially about his military prowess. One night, he heard noises outside his little farmhouse and shouted to the intruder to reveal himself. There was no response, but a shadowy figure continued to move outside. Kareem grabbed his gun, shouted again, and then offloaded several rounds in the direction of the stooping figure a few yards away. His pregnant wife was fatally wounded and died soon afterwards in his trembling arms.

She had slipped out because she was sick and did not want to disturb her husband. She was a shy, modest and soft-spoken lady. Kareem never recovered from this tragic event. A short while later, his pregnant donkey expired whilst giving birth. Kareem was left standing alone and bereft in the 'Orchard of Beauty'.

No calamity befalls on the earth or in yourselves, but it is inscribed in the Book of Decrees before we bring it into existence. Verily, that is easy for Allah.

In order that you may not grieve at the things you fail to get, nor rejoice over that which has been given to you. And Allah likes not prideful. boasters.

- Qur'an (57: 22-23)

Our home, compound and way of life were part of the evolved Muslim culture. The collection of houses, courtyards and their different functions such as the *Burrani* – the outer house, and *Bayt al Amma* – the house of the aunts were typical of large family homes in the Middle East. As was the habit of the Muslims, each house looked in onto a shady courtyard showing little to the road and passers-by. This was not only to preserve the modesty of the women of the household, but also to contain and shield household contents from prying eyes. Islam frowns on ostentation, but for many of those concerned, more pressing than the chastisement of the hereafter was the

possibility of expropriation should a nasty governor or greedy prince thinks his subject's excess wealth could be a threat to his leadership.

Modesty is not present in anything but that it adorns it, and evil is not present in anything but that it makes it ugly. Every religion has its character, and the character of Islam is modesty.

- Prophet Muhammad

The number of inhabitants in the compound would vary from time to time, but usually there would be seven or eight elderly ladies scattered between the houses attending to the chores; the sweeping, washing and cooking as well as storytelling and child minding. None was paid a fixed wage and all were considered part of the household. Their needs would be taken care of as and when they occurred. Occasionally, visitors and guests would give them gifts of clothes, sandals or special food. The servants in the household acted freely and they could come and go as they pleased. They attended to their duties with the least supervision and were most respected by the younger family members.

First amongst these women was the small, but powerful Nana Sekeena. She had come from Isfahan, capital of the old Safavid⁷ Empire, and was very proud of it. Not a day passed without her reminding us, *Isfahan nisfe jahan* (Isfahan is half the universe). Love of Imam Hussein was her first and lasting passion. Her second was to be exclusively in charge of the shopping, storing and safeguarding of the household goods, which were packed away in a room exclusively used for storage and tea making. Boiling water and tea were always available from morning till night, kept simmering over small kerosene stoves. This room was on the second floor in the main house and was known as the *sandug khana*, 'the box room' because it had several black Zanzibari wooden chests with brass trimmings and hinges large enough for us children to hide in.

⁷ The ruling dynasty of Iran and for a time parts of Iraq (1502-1736). They were the Ottomans' greatest rivals in the Islamic World.

Incorporated in Nana Sekeena's authority was the maintenance of several ornamental cages for canaries and nightingales, which were hung from the roofs and the feeding of the many cats which looked longingly up at the cages. She was also in charge of insect extermination. During summer, you would hear her pumping away at *Imshi* (go away), the local hand operated insect spray puffing out diluted DDT. She was meticulously clean and fussy, an ancient skinny spinster, inflexible in her ways, but unfailingly loyal to the family and unswerving in her antagonism to my nanny, Mashti.

Cleanliness is half the faith and is the key to accepted prayer.

- Prophet Muhammad

My devoted nanny, Mashti, was a Georgian widow who had come to live in northern Mazanderan where she had married a wealthy landowner and borne him a son. After an epidemic claimed both her husband and their son, the husband's brother, a greedy and ambitious man, managed to acquire his brother's land, leaving Mashti with no inheritance. She was advised to take refuge in Karbala and our family was recommended to her.

When she arrived I was a few months old, about the same age as her deceased child would have been and so she dedicated her life to my upbringing. She would always tell me adoringly, 'You are my reason for living.' She had translucent pearly skin, beautiful blue eyes and long blond hair carefully made up into plaits, which I would often undo and pull. She was always available for my childish demands, some of which in the manner of children who are certain of getting their own way were no doubt unreasonable.

She was so attentive to me that she often pre-empted my wishes, whether it was the olive oil soap I had forgotten before going to our Turkish bath, deep in the cellar of the house, or my favorite fried onions with chicken livers. She was always on hand to do what I wanted making sure no other members of the household competed with her, not even my mother. The poor woman was often reprimanded for such excessive favoritism and was especially picked on by Nana Sekeena.

Mashti's other great quality was storytelling. During the blistering hot summer days, we would spend most of midday in the cellars, being cooled by four *badgirs*, wind-catcher chimneys that funneled cool air from outside. Then, at night, we would come up to the flat roof exposed to the cool desert breeze and gaze upon the sparkling stars of a desert sky, drifting off into a world of dreams whilst listening to the lady storytellers. Mashti was the acknowledged favorite. Umm al Saadah, and Nana Hussein made up the complement.

Surely the heart of a child is like fallow ground: whatever is planted in it is accepted by it.

- Imam `Ali

Umm al Saadah was an old widow belonging to the prominent Arab tribe of *Bani Asad* (Sons of the Lion), the same tribe that my mother belonged to. Saadah is the plural of *Seyyid*, meaning a descendent of the Prophet; thus, her name literally meant mother of the descendents of the Prophet, on account of her husband having been a *Seyyid*⁸.

Umm al Saadah had a proud wrinkled face with strong Arab features. She was hard of hearing and sight. We would often exploit these weaknesses for our amusement. We children had a portable electric lamp with a small bulb and no lampshade. Umm al Saadah had never seen an electric light close up and she had only seen them on ceilings or walls. One night, after she had told us the evening's story, we presented her with the 'candle' to blow out. Blow as she might, it would not go out. We told her that this was *jinni*⁹ lamp and that we had to whisper a secret name before it could be extinguished. We performed the magic of commanding the light to die out, which it did instantly. She was alarmed and concerned about the danger that may result from our relationship with the *jinn*. After several futile attempts to blow the lamp out and our hearty laughter, she came to realize the wonders of electricity,

⁸ A conservative estimate would be that there are over 20 million Seyyids stretching across the Muslim World, though there are many more who are unknown or undeclared as there have been periods of persecution against the Seyyids. The wearing of a black turban commonly indicates a Seyyid.

⁹ In Islamic tradition, the 'jinn' exist in the world of the unseen. Whereas the base elements of humans are earth and water, the jinn are made of fire and air.

Nana Hussein was the most devout and eldest member of the household, wise and frail. She ate little and prayed a lot, her black rosary always handy. Whenever one of us complained or expressed discontent, she would answer, *khair, khair* (it is only goodness), then she would produce some biscuits, raisins or nuts to give to us. It was only years later that I realized that the wise see goodness and Divine mercy in every situation and event.

My mercy encompasses everything.

Qur'an (7: 156)

During summer nights, I would regularly be woken up at dawn by the sound of Nana Hussein unlocking the doors of my aunt's house to go to the Shrine. The doors to the houses had large steel tong-like keys which would jangle loudly as they turned the three or four times necessary before the door opened. My father once overheard me complaining about the annoyance of the early morning noise. He told me, 'it will take you the best part of forty years to realize that the sound you dislike represents for Nana Hussein the opening of the gates to heaven.' I was perhaps then seven years old. The sound of my father's teaching still resonates with me, and the peaceful, happy face of Nana Hussein appears vividly before me in my mind's eye.

It was some years later, whilst I was studying in England, that Nana Hussein passed away. My mother wrote to me about how one day Nana Hussein had come to her and cheerfully announced that she will die tomorrow. She was therefore requesting that my mother come and spend the night in her room. 'How do you know you will die tomorrow?' my mother enquired. Nana Hussein explained that the night before she had a dream in which she was taken into a vast garden. In this garden were many beautiful homes and palaces, tendrils of scented flowers cascading over ornate pavilions. She was then directed towards a house and was told that this was her new home. She told her angelic guide that she could not stay there because it had no roof. He answered that 'the roof will be made tomorrow.' From this, she concluded with certainty, she would depart from this world the following day.

Nana Hussein showed my mother all that she had in her possession. Everything was prepared – a few bags of rice, barley and other grains were to be cooked and distributed to the poor for three

days following her death and she gave my mother her small pouch containing the sacred dust from Imam Hussein's burial ground. A few drops of the dust would be prescribed for any ailment, mixed in water or placed on the tongue. Throughout her life Nana Hussein kept this small healing pouch next to her pillow. Throughout her life my mother too kept and sparingly used the dust from this pouch.

My mother spent that night in Nana Hussein's room reading the Qur'an until just before dawn. At that time, Nana Hussein turned over towards my mother thankfully and closed her eyes forever. She was buried mid-morning in our family mausoleum, next to the tomb of Imam Hussein, a great and unexpected honor.

Detach your heart from this world before your body leaves it, for you are tested in it, and you were created for other than it. Surely when someone dies, the people say: 'What has he left behind?' And the angels say: 'What has he sent ahead?'

- Imam `Ali

In Karbala, whenever anyone died, the corpse would be taken immediately to one of the few preparation places to be washed and shrouded. Then, the coffin would be carried by relatives, friends or porters along the bazaars, alleyways and streets on its way to burial. As the procession moved along, people would come out from their shops or houses and walk behind the dead body or help to lift the coffin whilst chanting, *La ilaha illa 'llah* (There is no god but Allah). In this way, every death in the town was felt by a large part of the population – a perpetual reminder as to the fate of us all and the leap we will make from the stepping-stone of this life to the eternity of the next.

Every Thursday, this reminder was reaffirmed communally, for Thursday picnics at the cemetery were a major social event. The public cemetery of Karbala was vast. Not only did it accommodate the local inhabitants of the city, but also the many thousands of coffins that were brought from far and wide, reflecting the dying wish of many Shi`as to be buried in Karbala's sacred earth.

The picnics would be prepared from before the afternoon, with the women making *Khubz al Abbas*¹⁰ (the Bread of Abbas). The bread was kneaded from the flour of wheat and barley, rolled flat and flavored with chives, onions, and garlic and then baked with mincemeat. At the cemetery, the children would run and play, as the older people read Qur'an, wept and prayed for the dead.

Visit graves and by this remind yourself of the next world.

- Imam `Ali

Death was very much alive in Karbala. After all, the city was founded on the most tragic of deaths. A death that shook the very foundation of the Islamic world, the shockwaves of which resonate to this day. In 680, on the 10th day of the Islamic month of Muharram, the plain of Karbala became the Plain of Martyrs.

¹⁰ Abbas was the younger half-brother of Imam Hussein, who was also killed at Karbala.

CHAPTER 2: The Plain of Martyrs

Muhammad is no more than a Messenger and Messengers before him have passed away. If then he dies or is killed, will you turn back upon your heels?

- Qur'an (3: 144)

At Ghadeer-e-Khum, on the return to Medina from his last *hajj* (pilgrimage) to Mecca, the Prophet Muhammad addressed the people, 'I leave behind amidst you two great things: The Book of Allah and my progeny. Should you be attached to these two, never will you go astray from me, for truly, these two will never part company until they both meet me at the Spring of Paradise.' Then he continued, 'The Lord Allah Almighty is my Master and I am the master of every true believer', and taking the hand of Imam `Ali, his cousin and son-in-law, he raised it above the crowd. 'He is the master of all those whose master I have been. O Allah, love those who love `Ali and hate those who hate him.'

Shortly after this, the Prophet Muhammad died. Yet, on the Prophet's death, his elderly father-in-law and close friend, Abu Bakr was proclaimed as the new Caliph of Islam. The Muslim ranks had swelled dramatically in the last few years of the Prophet's life. `Ali was young and there were those who felt he would be unable to hold together the nascent Islamic state. Three times the mantle of leadership passed him by. The borders of Byzantium were rolled back, the Sassanian¹¹ Empire melted and the banner of Islam swept all before it. Throughout, Imam `Ali was loyal, electing not to contest publicly the leadership of Muslims and helping the Caliphs whenever it was in the interests of the people.

One day in June 656, a mob descended on the house of `Uthman (the third Caliph) in the capital Medina. They were demanding justice from the misrule of `Uthman's governors, and although Imam `Ali sympathized with the mob's complaints, he sent his two sons, the Prophet's grandsons – Imam Hassan and Imam Hussein – to protect `Uthman. The mob overpowered them and after

¹¹ Name given to the Persian dynasty and empire, which lasted from 224-651 CE.

gaining access to the house murdered `Uthman. Upon the news of the Caliph's death, the *Shi`atu `Ali*, the followers of `Ali – from which the word Shi`a comes – proclaimed Imam `Ali as the fourth Caliph of Islam.

`Uthman, although a close companion of the Prophet, had come from the Meccan ruling classes, who had bitterly opposed and fought the Prophet in the early days of Islam. As the proceeds of conquests poured in, `Uthman was unable to restrain his relatives' greed for wealth and power. Scarcely a generation after the Prophet's death, the rule of money was undermining the rule of God. The bonds of religion, which had held the early Muslims together, began to give way to the bonds of the tribe.

`Uthman had appointed many of his relatives from the *Bani Umayya*¹² to key offices. It was against their corruption and nepotism that the mob was protesting. One of these relatives, Mu`awiyah, the son of the Prophet's old opponent Abu Sufyan, and the governor of Syria, refused to acknowledge `Ali as the new Caliph.

`Ali is from me and I am from `Ali. No one can discharge my duty instead of me except `Ali.

- Prophet Muhammad

Banners were raised and the two armies met at the Battle of Siffin on the banks of the River Euphrates. However, just as the Shi`a of `Ali had victory in sight, Mu`awiyah showed his guile. Qur'ans were pinned to his soldiers' spears, indicating a wish for arbitration under God's book, and the battle finished indecisively. Shortly after, during the month of Ramadan, as `Ali prostrated in prayer in the mosque of Kufa, an assassin struck him from behind¹³. On his death, the people of Kufa proclaimed his eldest son, Imam Hassan as Caliph.

¹² The word '*bani*' means 'sons of'. The Bani Ummaya was one of the more powerful clans amongst the larger tribal grouping of Mecca – the Quraish. The Prophet also belonged to this tribe, although he was of the Bani Hashim clan.

¹³ The assassin was a member of the Kharijites (Seceders), a group that had originally supported `Ali, but became disillusioned when he agreed to negotiate with Mu`awiyah.

In order to prevent bloodshed, Imam Hassan reluctantly agreed to sign a truce with Mu`awiyah. He retired to Medina to live a life of prayer and devotion until, at Mu`awiyah's instigation, he was poisoned by one of his wives. In the truce with Mu`awiyah, along with other agreements that were flaunted, Imam Hassan expressly prohibited the election of Mu`awiyah's son, Yazid, as Caliph; the latter being a notorious reprobate well known for his public wine drinking and licentious behavior.

Despite this, on Mu`awiyah's death, Yazid was proclaimed as Caliph, Thus was ushered in the Umayyads, the first usurping dynasty of the Islamic world. It was precisely against this institutionalization of hereditary leaders that Imam Hassan had fought. Yazid, recognizing that his position was precarious, immediately sent word to Medina that Imam Hussein be required to take an oath of allegiance to him. If he refused, he was to be killed.

When asked to take the oath, the Imam suggested that the people should be summoned to the mosque the next day and a consensus be taken as to whether he should or should not pay homage to Yazid. This was refused, but the Governor of Medina feared recrimination if he killed the Prophet's grandson and thus spared him. Two days later, with a small group of family and friends, Imam Hussein escaped, by night, to Mecca. From there, he set off on the journey northwards, through the Arabian Desert towards his father's old capital, Kufa. The citizens there had pledged their allegiance to him and had begged for his presence.

On his way to Kufa, he came to a plain on the edge of the desert where some Babylonian villages had once stood. He was told the place was known as Karbala; a name derived from '*Kur Babul*' – meaning villages of Babylon. 'Truly', said the Imam, 'this is the land of *karb* (anguish) and *balaa*' (misfortune). There he ordered the tents to be pitched.

Hassan and Hussein are the leaders of the youth of Paradise.

- Prophet Muhammad

Every year, as Muharram approached, hundreds of thousands would flock to Karbala as the city stirred in anticipation. Twenty days before Muharram began, large tents would go up in the open courtyard surrounding the Shrine. The poles of these tents would be some twenty meters high

and broad enough for two or three of us boys clasping our hands together to only just encircle one. Inside the tents were calligraphies, rugs and tapestries. Woven on the tapestries were pictures of battle scenes and warriors. There was *Dhu'l Fiqar*, the legendary two-bladed sword of Imam `Ali and *Dhu'l Jinah*, the 'winged horse' of Imam Hussein.

In all, six or seven tents would be pitched inside the marble courtyard of the Shrine, each one joined to the next so that sunlight was screened and it was cool inside. My favorite was the Sufi or Dervish¹⁴ tent at the back of the shrine. Although small compared to the others, it was exquisitely colorful and certainly the most enticing and mysterious of the tents. Inside, incense drifted through the air, rose water splashed onto faces, Turkish delight vanished into mouths and men with the most impressive of beards sang and chanted praises of God and the Prophet. They had come from Turkey, Iran, India, Afghanistan and further afield, each one with a staff and each one with his own brand of headgear; turbans of all colors, sizes and styles, skull caps and tall red fezzes.

A dervish is someone who is preoccupied in contemplating the next world and is least concerned about this one. He is intoxicated with the spiritual realm, with its meanings and insights rather than worldly acquisition. The word dervish comes from the Persian word '*darweesh*.' *Dar* in Persian means door and the true dervish wants to find a door out of the physical imprisonment of the body to the Source of eternal life.

Secrets fall from the Sufi's hand, whole kingdoms for the taking.
Unlike someone who begs on the street for bread, a dervish begs
to give his life away.

- Jalaluddin Rumi

'There was One, there was no one, other than God there is no one', so Mashti began her story.

'There was a man who was quietly living out his life, until one day he caught a glance of the princess of his city as she rode through the streets in her carriage. For a moment, her radiant face

¹⁴ The words Sufi and Dervish are interchangeable.

was accidentally exposed. The man was possessed and infatuated at first sight. From then on, wherever he turned in his mind's eye, he was haunted by the princess' face. He resolved that he could no longer live like this, whatever the cost, he must find a way of obtaining her hand in marriage. There was, of course, a problem. He was an ordinary citizen, while she was the king's only beloved daughter. Her beauty was touted far and wide, kings and princes had come seeking her hand, and all had been spurned, for the old king could not bear to lose her. What could this wretched fellow possibly offer that the princely suitors had not?

Now in this city, there lived a renowned dervish. In desperation, the young man explained his problem, begging the sage for whatever help he could provide. 'I can help you marry the princess' the dervish promised, 'but I need six months of total submission from you. During this time, you must do exactly as I say.' 'Anything', the desperate lover enthusiastically agreed.

The dervish took the suitor high up into the hills overlooking the city. There he was given a patched robe, a rosary and ordered to sit cross legged in contemplation. He was told not to speak to anyone at anytime nor accept any food or gifts. In addition, he was not to be seen eating or doing anything other than meditating or praying.

As time wore on, the young lover's beard began to grow, his hair fell unkempt around his ears and he lost weight. Gradually, he began to look the picture of a wise and Godly recluse. The pure mountain air and sparse food, which the dervish delivered intermittently, were having their expected detoxifying effect. Helped along by the dervish's rumors, our novice also began to gain something of a reputation in the surrounding settlements.

The people climbed up to his retreat with their problems and desires. He would sit solemnly, fiddling with his rosary beads and saying nothing. The profundity of his silence had a remarkable effect on his visitors. Presuming they were in the presence of a greater being, his visitors turned to introspection where they all seemed to find the answers they had come looking for. Soon, the young sage of the mountain was heralded as a great, new saint. From far and wide, presents were brought to him for his services though it was known by now that this man was so holy that all gifts and offerings remained unopened on the ground around him.

After six months of this, and upon the dervish's suggestion, the king decided to see the wise man of the mountain for himself. Accompanied by the dervish and his entourage, he climbed the hills towards the new saint's perch with pomp and ceremony. The king, having heard many stories of the saint's miracles, was in a receptive state to experience miracles as a reward for his strenuous efforts to reach the top of the mountain. The more difficult we consider an achievement, the more we want to believe in its importance.

Sitting humbly beside the young sage, the king asked him numerous questions, all of which were met with wise silence. After a while, the king began to feel that this man was answering his questions without saying anything. He was so impressed by the composure and worldly abstinence of the new saint that he asked him if there was anything that he, the devoted king, could now do for him. The novice silently shook his head. 'I must give you something', pleaded the king, 'you are a blessing to my kingdom and my people, of whom you have helped countless numbers.' Once more, the novice shook his head, signaling his total contentment and disinterest in kingly favors. Then, at length and slowly, the king continued, 'I have one thing which is more valuable to me than anything else. Many great men have begged me to give my princess to them, but you are truly the only one who has proven himself worthy. Will you not take my daughter's hand in marriage?' The novice looked up, smiled at the king and, in refusal, again shook his head.

At this juncture, the dervish was gesticulating ferociously from behind the king's back for his novice to accept, but the novice was unmoved. The king got up and proclaimed, 'Truly, this man is a saint', and set off back down the mountain. As soon as he was out of sight, the dervish pounced upon his student, kicking, punching and cursing. 'You idiot, what have you done! Six months of work! Why didn't you accept the king's offer? You fool! Imbecile!' The erstwhile suitor got up and calmly brushed himself off. In measured words, he addressed the dervish. 'For six months, I pretended to be a pious man and I had the king at my feet. What if I actually was pious?'

And Allah knows best.'

Hussein is from me and I am from Hussein. May Allah love whoever loves Hussein.

- Prophet Muhammad

On the 1st of Muharram (which is also the first day of the Islamic year), the flag flying above the Shrine of Imam Hussein changes color. The huge blood red flag would come down and hoisted in its place, for forty days, would flutter a jet-black cloth.

The visitors, whether individuals or groups, would percolate throughout the city, the streets would become residences and alleyways toilets. Many houses become overcrowded temporary hostels and the outskirts of the city was a huge campsite. Every night, the people would cook and distribute food to the poor and the passers-by. The kerosene lamps and campfires would be lit, and the lament of Karbala told and retold, fact and fantasy mixing indiscriminately and irrelevantly as each group tried to outdo the next in grief and superlatives. With each passing day, the intensity and fervor of the proceedings would increase. In the first few days, the scene would be set.

Though Kufa was a Shi`a stronghold, Imam Hussein's father and brother had both found to their cost that when the people there were tested by force or bribery, the promises of the majority would come to nothing. Thus, to ensure the sincerity of their requests for leadership, before he left Mecca Imam Hussein had sent his cousin Muslim Ibn `Aqil to appraise the steadfastness of the Kufans. Encouraged by the enthusiastic welcome he received, Muslim sent words of encouragement to the Imam.

It was the time of the *Hajj* pilgrimage and Imam Hussein had intended to stay in Mecca until after performing the pilgrimage. When he heard of Yazid's plan to have him killed while he performed *hajj*, he decided to set off immediately so as not to desecrate the Holy Ka`ba¹⁵. Stunned by his decision to leave on the eve of the pilgrimage, the Muslims were perplexed and

¹⁵ The square building at the center of Mecca, which is draped in black during the month of Hajj. It is said that the Ka`ba was built by the Prophet Abraham, as a symbolic house of God and it is towards it that Muslims pray.

asked why. 'This year's pilgrimage I have to perform at Karbala', the Imam replied. When asked what animals he would sacrifice, Imam Hussein pointed to his family, his half-brother Hazrat Abbas, his eighteen-year-old son `Ali al-Akhbar and his nephews. 'These are my sacrifices', he had said.

As he was making his way to Kufa, the Imam heard word that Muslim had been executed in Kufa. Yazid had sent the murderous Ibn Ziyad to assume the governorship of Kufa and crush the people's insurrection. Many of the Kufans, who were threatened with death and confiscation of property, deserted the cause. The Imam warned those travelling with him of the dangers ahead and told those who wished to leave that they should do so.

When they see affliction, there are few who adhere to their religion.

- Imam Hussein

On the 2nd of Muharram, shadowed by a small contingent of Yazid's army, they reached the plain of Karbala, where the tents were pitched. On the 3rd, the main stay of Ibn Ziyad's army arrived from Kufa, commanded by Ibn Sa`d. The Imam's water supply was cut off and by the 7th, his family and close followers were without water and fully surrounded by a large army. On the 9th, Ibn Sa`d's army marched onto the camp. Imam Hussein asked for one more day to be with his family and supporters for their last prayers and supplications, which was granted.

* * *

Every year in Karbala, on the night of the 9th, the electricity generators would be switched off, plunging the entire city into darkness. On this night of strangers, *sham-e ghariban*, candles are lit as sorrow descends on the city in remembrance of the plight the Prophet's family faced. As Imam Hussein and his companions had done, the night would be spent in prayer and devotion.

Then, on the following morning, *Ashura* (literally meaning the 10th), the story and Battle of Karbala is re-enacted. The tradition of the pageantry or 'passion-play' was probably an import

from India and Iran, a few centuries before, but now it had been taken up with gusto by the Arabs.

If you could push your way through the massive crowd to the *mukhayyam*, the tented replica of the Imam's encampment near the shrine, you would see people dressed up as the family of Imam Hussein and his enemies. Whoever played the part of the Imam would conceal his face with a white cloth, for the Shi'a are not supposed to draw or depict the faces of the Prophets or Imams (though this is not always adhered to). The white stallion, which played *Dhu'l Jinah* (the winged one), would be well fed and groomed, ready by now for the great appearance. The unfortunate actors playing Yazid or Shimr (the Imam's killer) could well end up being assaulted as the people's enthusiasm got a little out of hand. The poor pseudo-Yazid could find himself running for his life and often had to be given bodyguard protection. These acts and plays are called *shabeeh* (the like of truth) and had become an important aspect of Shi'a tradition over the years.

Alongside the actors playing out their roles, the declaimers would re-live the legend of the battle through the *marthiyas* or elegies of renowned poets. The poet's¹⁶ words would come to life as with choking emotion through the charged air, the intricate detail of every aspect of the battle flowed out in hyperbole. Starting from the dawn of that fateful day, the poet would begin:

'The sun had run its journey over the night;
Unveiled, the Dawn revealed her glorious face.
The king who rides the heaven saw her light
And called his brave companions to their place.
'The time has come at last; to God give praise;
Arise! In fitting prayer your voices give raise.'

The 72 martyrs, ranging from 14 to 70 years old, came out to face the enemy. Dressed in the cloak and armor of the Prophet, wielding *Dhu'l Fiqar*, his father's sword and perfumed in musk, Imam Hussein stood at their head. The time had come.

¹⁶ These verses are extracted and adapted from the *marthiya* of the Indian poet Mir Anis as translated by David Matthews.

From the stamping of the horses, sand flew up;
The firmament filled like an hour-glass.
The dark blue sky became a dusty cap,
And blackness spread over valley, hill and pass.
The glow that lights the world was lost from sight;
The afternoon at once had turned to night.

Fighting the huge army of the enemy for most of the day, the desperately thirsty warriors fell, one by one, with grace and nobility. Behind them, in the Imam's camp, the women, children and sick waited helplessly. Sakina, the Imam's youngest daughter, piteously begged for water. Abbas, the bravest of the men, hearing his niece's cry, made for the enemy lines, his sword cutting a path to the river through Ibn Sard's army.

The sword of brave Abbas flashed with such power
That Gabriel sought protection from his Lord.
The son of Sa`ad there faced his final hour.
As lions spring to gain the river banks,
Abbas swam through the waves of serried ranks.
The guards of the Euphrates lost their heads
And like the river's current flowed away
Abbas, dry-lipped, took water back to their tents,
And the Prince of Arabs fought again.

As Abbas emerged from the river to make his way back to the camp, an arrow hit the water skins. Soon his blood was flowing alongside the water, as he lay dead by the side of the riverbank. Meanwhile, Imam Hussein's infant son, `Ali Asghar, was also dying of thirst. Holding his son in his arms, the Imam asked the enemy for some water for the baby.

He cradled Asghar in his warm embrace.
Outside in ambush lurked black Kahil's son¹⁷
Who fired a three-pronged arrow from his place;
Its target was the neck of the little one.
The baby cried in pain; the Leader thundered;

¹⁷ Hurmaila ibn Kabil, an expert bowman of Yazid's army.

The tiny child was slaughtered by his side.

The Imam put down his murdered son on the desert sand and turned towards the killers.

Hussein swooped like an eagle from on high,
As lions in the jungle pounce on deer.
The heavens flashed; the clouds began to cry;
His horse rushed down like water swift and sheer.
The sharp sword cut the foe with thunderous crash;
They fell like mountains beneath the lightning crash.

Eventually, as the afternoon drew on, all seventy-one of his army of kith and kin lay dead. The Imam was left standing alone to face Yazid's army.

Ten thousand arrows dashed upon his chest;
A hundred at one time sought out their prey.
The spears transfixed his side and pierced his breast;
Ten struck for every four he pulled away.

Eventually, the blessed Imam succumbed to his fate.

Hussein falls from his mount - calamity!
His holy foot falls from the horse's girth.
His side is gaping open - misery!
He swoons; his turban drops upon the earth.
The Qur'an has fallen headlong from its stand.
The Ka'aba's walls have crumbled into sand.

A soldier named Shimr stood over the Imam's body, sword raised. 'I grant you one last wish', he said, 'Give me water', the Imam replied. 'I can give you anything but that', smirked Shimr. 'The water is not for me', exclaimed Hussein, and as he spoke, a spring gathered by his feet. 'It was for you, so that God might find some good reason to forgive you on the Day of Judgment.'

* * *

Through the streets, the human river surged. *Ya Hussein, Ya Hussein*, reverberated between the walls and hearts of Karbala. Stripped to the waist in barefoot procession, the men beat their chests in what is known as the *latum* (beating). Sharpened daggers, attached to chains, were hoisted over shoulders to lacerate the mourners' backs, rising and falling to the accompaniment of drums and cymbals. Dulled swords clashed with bloodied foreheads. Blood and tears mixed in the dust, as the *azza*, the expression of mourning, descended with an avalanche of emotion. My father did not approve of the self-flagellation and discouraged our family from taking part in the upheaval of the proceedings. Nevertheless, whenever any of these spectacles passed, you could not help but let your own streaming tears join the prevailing current. The grief was contagious and the love of remembrance of Imam Hussein's stand against man's vices and injustices always swell in breasts and purify hearts.

The common people act by imitation, the distinguished act by love and evidence, and the elite of the elite act by contemplation and witnessing.

- Shaykh `Ali al Jamal

Three days after the massacre, the bodies of the martyrs were discovered and buried by the *Bani Asad* tribesmen who lived in the nearby town of Towaireej, about 10 miles from Karbala. In commemoration, the *Azza Towaireej* would make their way towards Karbala. It was said that as the Imam's body lay exposed, a lion sat guard, protecting it from the circling vultures, and so inevitably, a man in a lion skin costume would be produced, during the *shabeeh*. Once the growling and swaying lion was removed from the display platform, the town's people would be fed from enormous trays, some two meters across, bearing mountains of rice topped with *qeemah* (a stew of minced meat with chick peas).

Then, the town quietens until 40 days later when, according to local tradition, the Imam's severed head, which was taken to Damascus to be paraded at Yazid's court, was reunited in burial with his body. In a separate tradition, it is reported that the head was taken to Cairo and is buried in the famed Mosque of the Head of Imam Hussein, opposite the Al Azhar University. Under the dome of that famous mosque is an inscription relating to a Prophetic tradition that any supplication made under the dome of Imam Hussein will be accepted. The mosque remains one

of Egypt's foremost places of worship, for the love of Hussein is by no means limited to the Shi'a world. Many of those who descend on Karbala in Muharram are Sunni Muslims.

It is generally estimated that the Sunnis constitute around 80 percent of the 1.3 billion Muslims in the world, although they are a minority in Iraq. The word Sunni comes from *sunna*, meaning the way or tradition of the Prophet, but the line between Sunnis and Shi'a is often blurred. Many Sunnis, although not officially accepting Imam `Ali as the rightful successor to Muhammad, nevertheless hold great love and respect for the Prophet's family and progeny, especially Imams `Ali, Hassan and Hussein and their mother of light, Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet. This can clearly be seen in the vigorous `Ashura celebrations of the Sub-Continent's Sunni as well as Shi'a Muslims. Equally, every Shi'a will strive to adhere to the *sunna* of the Prophet Muhammad. The lesson of Karbala is for every Muslim.

Every day is `Ashura, every place is Karbala.

- Ayatollah Khomeini

In a world where despotic and dictatorial leadership is the norm for most Muslim countries, *Ashura* holds significance far beyond the ritualistic rites that have come to symbolize it. The battle fought between Imam Hussein and the forces sent by Yazid to destroy him has forever linked the name of Karbala to those oppressed by any tyrannical rule. It is so much more than the 'brief military engagement' the Encyclopaedia Britannica dryly refers to. It is to do with the eternal question of what are the qualities of a man that make him worthy of leadership; is it worldly power and political cunning or spiritual insight, justice, wisdom and enlightenment? Saddam Hussein, for this reason, banned the `Ashura celebrations, fearing that they could become a rallying call against his own despotic regime.

On a profound level, the Battle of Karbala also symbolizes the ongoing battle between the higher self or soul and the lower self, the ego. While the lower self asserts its ever-changing indulgences and whims, the soul reflects the Divine light that animates it and calls it to joy, wisdom and harmony.

Today, Imam Hussein is as alive in people's hearts as when he lived. From all corners of the world, millions visit Karbala to pay their respects. Conversely, no one sets off on a journey to pay his or her respects to Yazid or his father Mu`awiyah. No one even knows where Yazid is buried. On one of my latter day visits to Damascus with a friend, Hosam Raouf, and with the help of a local historian, we tried to find out where Mu`awiyah was buried. We were eventually taken to a narrow alleyway and a rather embarrassed guide pointed to a ladies public bath and toilet. As far as he and the antiquities department in Damascus had been able to ascertain, Mu`awiyah's final resting place lay therein.

Some time ago, I was asked to give my first public talk on Muharram to a crowd of British Muslims. I prayed for inspiration, and that night had a wonderful dream. There was a fine black tent, stretching towards the horizon. I was taken inside and saw the Prophet and his family scattered in different parts of the tent. Imam `Ali beckoned to me and said, 'You wanted to talk to my sons, and here they are.' Both Imam Hassan and Imam Hussein appeared, as young men, cheerfully exchanging pleasantries. I cautiously approached Imam Hussein and asked, 'Do I have your permission to talk about your martyrdom?' 'Of course you can', he replied, 'but only if you depict me as you see me now; in perfect joy, in timeless bliss – not in any other way.'

It rained on the plain of Karbala and passed,
It turned the desert into a blooming orchard and passed.
He put an end to oppression for all time to come;
He created an orchard by watering the sands with his blood.

-Muhammad Iqbal

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