

The abc's of Islam
Michael Wolfe
Sunday, August 7, 2016

A lot of the misconceptions about Muslims in my country stem from people never having met one. Many of you have already met some local Nantucketers who happen to be Muslim—the Qureishi's. My being here is a chance for you to meet one more. To start that off...

I'm going to tell you a story. Since it is partly a story about myself, I want to warn you. Thoreau once said: "I wouldn't talk so much about myself, if I knew anyone else half so well."

I should start by saying that as an American, I'm amazed to be standing here today in a church in a town where my mother's family got started centuries ago. 6 of Nantucket's founding couples were my grandparents.

So: Nantucket holds a special place in my own story. *Church*, maybe not so much.

When I left Ohio and came east to college at 18, I didn't have much use for organized religion. I was interested in literature, in writing. And I managed to get through a perfectly good four-year university without ever learning a thing about Muslims or Islam. But after college I lived in Muslim parts of Africa for several years. There I met actual Muslims, something that can still be hard to do in the USA.

And I found out then that Muslims are human beings like everyone else, and not so exotic as people may think. I learned that Islam is an old Abrahamic religion. That Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Job and Moses, Mary, John the Baptist and Jesus are major figures in it and models for good behavior. I also learned that Islam calls itself a religion of the Book. I'm a writer, so...

This was pretty important to me 20 years later, in the 1980s, when I became a Muslim. I don't mind confessing that I found myself in a bad situation then: I was forty, impatient, cynical, and cut off from feeling alive. I was lifting the soup to my lips and never tasting it.

I needed spiritual refreshment, but my own familiar avenue to it, the Judeo-Christian tradition, seemed closed to me. I found in Islam a new and yet a familiar path back to what I had learned in the ABC's of my upbringing. I didn't feel I was departing from what I knew in becoming a Muslim, so much as I was adding to it, or refreshing it: Abraham, Jesus, the familiar was important.

Not throwing away the tradition I was raised in, but instead somehow making it new. Because, for me, that tradition went a long way back. For example: My mother descended from early American Christians...I'm not a genealogist, but I find names like Mayhew, Folger, Coffin, Macey, Gardner, and Bunker in my mother's family. Her maiden name was Fosdick. There's a house still standing here on Liberty Street built by Benjamin Fosdick. There are

portraits of Fosdicks in the Whaling Museum in town. So now you see why I'm amazed to be standing here today.

And perhaps you also see why I didn't want to throw that past away. I wanted to add to it. And like my forbearers, most of whom were or became Quaker, I value the right to exercise freedom of religion guaranteed in the first words of the First Article of the Constitution.

It has never been very easy to be a Muslim in the US, but of course it's much harder to be one in, say, Syria or Iraq. Here one endures a bit of slander and loose stereotyping. It spikes every election year, of course, but we're not being killed for our beliefs.

Around the world, however, 90% of the actual victims of the terrorism perpetrated in Islam's name are average Muslims, who just happen to disagree with the extreme interpretations of their faith. Honestly, the harder part of being an AMERICAN Muslim is not the societal side. It's keeping the faith, any faith, in a secular world. At least that's how it is for me.

Let me tell you three words that have helped me refresh and keep the faith. The first word is SALAT: but in Islam prayer is called Salat. It doesn't derive from the Latin word to ask. It derives from the Arabic and Hebrew words for Peace. And it means, as an action, stepping out of the stream of present time to express gratitude for existence and creation.

It's a time out. It's a stop in time. It's a breath of fresh air. It's like having a stream running by your door that you can step into when you want. A lot of Muslims do this 5 times a day.

Salat is stepping into a peaceful place. It means there IS such a place and its available.

The second word is a phrase: BISMILLAH. I begin. In God's name. It means: I start out remembering this is sacred. However small, however passing: this is sacred.

It's the first word of the Quran. A person in a traditional Muslim society would say this, when beginning anything. A trip, a meal, a letter, almost any transition. 20 times a day. I learned this from my friend Mostopha in North Africa. Mostopha owns a tourist shop in the medina. When Mostopha gets into a taxi cab to start a ride into town, he says, *Bismillah*.

Not for all to hear. He says it under his breath. If he signs his name to a contract, he writes Bismillah first.

It is a reminder, a marker, a minor consecration, something sort of automatic to set the event apart.

The third word is another phrase, God Willing: Inshallah. Whereas Bismillah marks the present moment, and Salat is a free zone outside time, Inshallah is like a protection from the vagaries of the future. It's part of every sentence concerning the future.

If the sentence is in the future tense, Muslims will find a way to shoehorn it into a sentence.

It is invariable. "I'll see you, inshallah." "We'll you that tomorrow, Inshallah." It's a way of acknowledging life's provisionality.

There are many paths to get to these realizations about the present, the past, and the future. They came to me in this form. I'm happy to have something simple to refer to when the past wears me down, when the present overwhelms me, when the future fills me with uncertainty.

Religion is a very simple thing, really, and very delicate as well. And Islam and being a Muslim no more or less so.

I have a good friend, not a Muslim at all, nor of any religion. His name is Harry. Harry says, "I'm not sure I believe in God, but I believe in Church."

It's a honor to stand in this church and say a few words to you today. I hope it will be of some use to you, *Inshallah*.

POEM: A Ritual to Read to Each Other

By William Stafford

If you don't know the kind of person I am
and I don't know the kind of person you are
a pattern that others made may prevail in the world
and following the wrong god home we miss our star.

For there is many a small betrayal in the mind,
a shrug that lets the fragile sequence break
sending with shouts the horrible errors of childhood
storming out to play through the broken dike.

And so I appeal to a voice, to something shadowy,
a remote important region in all who talk:
though we could fool each other, we should consider
lest the parade of our mutual life get lost in the dark...

...I call it cruel and maybe the root of all cruelty
to know what occurs but not recognize the fact.

For it is important that awake people be awake,

or a break line may discourage them back to sleep;
the signals we give—yes, no, or maybe—
should be clear: the darkness around us is deep.

“Say: We believe in God and in what has been revealed to us, and in what was reveal to Abraham, Ismail, Isaac, and Jacob and the Tribes, and in the Books given to Moses, Jesus, and the Prophets from their Lord; we make no distinction between one and another among them, and to God we bow.”

From *The Quran*, Chapter 3, verse 84.