

BACK TO THE FUTURE

HERE'S WHERE I stand: I have a 24-year-old son wanting to marry a family that doesn't want him (too young, too poor, too "sheikhy," too Azhari); a 22-year-old, hijab-wearing, Qur'an-memorizing, night-praying, social-justice striving daughter who refused someone whom her mother thought wonderful (no chemistry); and a 19-year-old son, of great shyness, who late last night struggled mightily to open up with me, his imposing father, the topic of his secret longing for marriage.

Oh, did I mention that my 12-year-old cornered me in the car last week and told me he's deduced that something physical must be going on to bring about babies, and asked me to break it down for him? "I've seen lions mating, and it looks like fighting." Those were his words.

Is it just me, or have you too noticed that our Muslim community seems suddenly to have exploded with complaint and concern about marriage. Overnight, we've been deluged by the most desperate difficulties of marriage and divorce, and everybody's dealing with it: Young, midlifers, the old. Men and women. The married, never married, want-to-be-married, remarried, and formerly married. East and west.

A friend of mine, who happens to be editor of this magazine and who has written its current cover story, tells me it's not that our communal marriage angst is new. It's just that we've simply pent up addressing a clear trend toward hair-raising problems with marriage for so long (at least two decades) that it's now burst forth in an avalanche, the accumulation of years of mistakes, misapplications, and indifference.

I believe him.

In the past half-year, these pages have tried to speak to family crisis in the Muslim community, and without fail the one boulder-of-a-theme that keeps tumbling down is the crumbling of our once mountain-stable marriage hallmark. For a long time, it seemed to be the one remaining thing that we just did better than anybody else.

No more. Now it's as if we can't do anything about marriage right. The traditional communal avenues to marriage have broken down. The criteria by which we contract marriages have shifted from *eman* to money. We've driven age-old, human motivations for marriage underground. And we seem to have entirely forgotten the stirring nobility of our *rujoolah* (manhood) and the fair graciousness of our *unoathah* (femininity). And, of course, with these virtues has vanished our passionate reservoirs of mercy and affection. Tranquility is lost.

You can tell much about the dimming light and failing courage of the male Muslim heart by the solutions for the marriage problems we have proposed. On one hand, *urfi* (secretly contracted) marriages have proliferated in the east. It offers a solution to those who are eligible to marry, who want to marry, but whom the unspoken codes of society and culture tacitly restrain. This misshapen contract-creature seeks to preserve the letter of the Shari'ah by enabling marriage among willing parties with mere acquaintances as the two witnesses, but without either family knowing.

How revealing that it is popular in places like Egypt, where impoverishment and slavishness to protocol coa-

lesce to obstruct otherwise profitable emotions to marry, as well as in the opulent Gulf, where affluent men desirous of that "alternative" spouse, but fearful of their first wives and powerful family ties, can dispense with the condition of publicizing one's marriage. How insightful it proves Imam Malik to have been in his opinion that broadcasting marriage may even supercode witnesses as a criteria validating Shari'ah compliance in marriage. Many Muslim women have denounced this hybrid as loophole prostitution.

In the west, for those Muslims who still care, we have the concoction of "zawaj-friends," *'ala wazan*, 'girlfriend' and 'boyfriend.' What is a zawaj-friend? It's your husband or wife, silly, at age 16 or so. When all the world around you is dating and doing it, now you, or rather your children, don't have to be left out. Marriage is contracted with the current crush of one's high school dreams, parents complicit, and then the two can "be together," though both return to their respective homes for the night (by 10:30?).

Shari'ah-compliant dating! Ah, how enlightened we've become!

Islam has the simplest, purest, dignity preserving, community strengthening, most lenient criteria of marriage in the history of humankind on earth. They are literally a Godsend. Can't we just revert back to them?

For if these are our "Islamic" solutions to our Muslim marriage crises just wait to see what avalanches the next decade shall bring.

Amer Haleem

CONTEMPLATING THE PURPOSE AND SOURCE OF KNOWLEDGE

BY KHERTA ABUBAKAR

QUR'AN

"And (consider how) your Sustainer has inspired the bee: 'Prepare for yourself dwellings in mountains and in trees, and in what (men) may build (for you by way of hives); and then eat of all manner of fruit, and follow humbly the paths ordained for you by your Sustainer.' (And lo!) there issues from within these (bees) a fluid of many hues, wherein there is healing for mankind. In all this, behold, there is a message indeed for people who think!" [16:68-69]

HADEETH

The Prophet Muhammad, sallallahu alayhe wa sallam, said: "Feed the hungry, visit the sick and set free the captives." (Bukhari)

NOTABLE QUOTES

"Three deeds are hard to sustain: Remembering Allah often, helping others with your money, and treating others fairly."

—Ali ibn abi Talib

"A sure sign of inability is to blame fate often."

—Arab Saying

"Beware of pride sought in anger; it leads to embarrassment (disgrace) of apology."

—Abdullah ibn Amr

"As for the man, inquire not of him. But ask of his close companion. For every close companion by association is an epitome."

—Arab Proverb

That the Qur'an and the Sunnah encourage the believers—and humankind in general—to seek knowledge is rarely questioned. Who can argue against Islam setting learning as the primary human mission when the Qur'an's very first verse of revelation is "Read in the name of your Lord who created" [96: 1].

The question that is rarely asked in this regard, however, is one that requires honest reflection: *What is the nature of the knowledge that constitutes the main focus of this verse?*

Many have taken it, and the subsequent four verses that with it make up the Qur'an's opening divine pronouncement, as an encouragement to seek out and excel in the so-called "natural" sciences. Contemplating the constituents and mechanisms of our physical and living environment are important aspects, not only of learning, but of confirming our belief and engaging in worship, and we are right to esteem them. Yet, in the age of science become religion we must not lose sight of the fact that our learning must first and foremost revolve around internalizing the prime message the Qur'an descended from Heaven to equip us with on earth: There is no god but the God, Allah, our Lord-Creator.

To possess knowledge of *tawheed*, that is, the Oneness of Allah as being the only God—and thus the only one to be worshipped—is to understand that He is above everyone and everything else, that He alone is the source of knowledge, and that we benefit from it solely by His grace. This is exactly what the angels confess in acknowledging the limitations of their knowledge in the Qur'an's account of our father Adam's creation: "Highly exalted be You [O God]! We have no knowledge other than what You, Yourself have taught us. Indeed, it is You alone who is the All-Knowing, the All-Wise" [2:32].

The challenge for us, then, is to seek out knowledge (spiritual or worldly) in a fashion that benefits us in our relationship with our Lord, first and foremost. Thereafter, consideration is given to other benefits—what accrues to our fellows in humanity, our co-beings in creation, and our host environment, for that too is part of Allah's message. More precisely, our need and love of God, our desire to please and be near Him and to evince with every thought and breath our unrivaled appreciation for Him—all this impels us to discover ourselves and the laws

that Allah built into us and our world, at every level of obviousness and subtlety, in order to benefit ourselves and all other being, in accordance with the will of Allah, for that is, in fact, His will for us, and the breadth of divine benevolence.

Thus the Prophet, sallallahu alayhe wa sallam, said: "When Allah wants good for someone, He gives him understanding of the [knowledge of the] *deen*—the religion [of Islam]" (Bukhari and Muslim). Scholars have explained that this "understanding" is that of the Qur'an and the Sunnah, the prophetic model, in a way that enables one to lead a life as God has intended human life to be lived, in accordance with knowledge that ever increases us in virtue and uprightness.

The purpose of seeking, obtaining, and applying knowledge is, therefore, to make of us good men and good women, as individuals and peoples, with that same goodness radiating from us into the natural world. The single most significant challenge in achieving this becomes knowing and finding the source of this knowledge and learning how to seek it. These first-order axioms become the bases for all that follows from them.

As for learning Islam, becoming knowledgeable about religion, there is good news. In just the last five years, Islamic education in the West has sky-rocketed, with everything from Qur'an memorization schools, Arabic language classes, to Islamic Studies degree programs that can be done on a part-time, or course-by-course basis. Such knowledge is becoming accessible to us. What remains is to take advantage of this, to free ourselves from the obstacles, internal and external, that obstruct us from learning.

Al-Khateeb al-Baghdadi (d. 463 AH / 1070 CE) left this piece of advice to those in search of real learning: "O Student of Knowledge! I exhort you to purify your intention in pursuing knowledge and to strive to make your soul act according to knowledge's dictates. For the science [of this religion] is a tree the deeds of which are its fruit. Thus he is not counted learned who does not put his learning into practice."

The path is clear, and the choice, of course, is yours. . .for a time.

"And say: My Lord, increase me in knowledge" [20: 114]. ▲

IN A SELFLESS WORLD

BY NOUR HABIB

HOLD ONTO your sandwich, honey. Make sure no one takes it from you. Don't share your stuff with other people. They're just tricking you into giving them something better than they will give you."

Difficult as it is to believe, we actually give advice like this to our 5- and 6-year-old children as we send them off to school. It obviously speaks to the concern parents harbor that their children get the best out of life and don't get taken advantage of.

But something rings wrong in this advice in a very shrill way.

If you look over the previous words of wisdom once more, you'll realize that not a single syllable even acknowledges the ethic of sharing.

It is a scenario played out over and over in households across the Middle East, at odds as it is with their historic and religious emphasis on hospitality. Unfortunately, today's societies have brainwashed individuals into looking out only for themselves and their families.

Now, if we follow these children to school, and enter any given classroom, we will see a continuation of the non-sharing principle. Teachers do not encourage students to share crayons with their neighbors. Nor do they chastise the kids for keeping others away from the building blocks. The classroom seems to be governed by an unspoken first-come, first-serve concept.

One child psychologist on an Egyptian show discussing social problems highlighted selfishness as a main

cause of the problems that society now faces. There is no community effort to make life better. No one sacrifices for the other. No one cares about the comfort of a neighbor.

But the very idea of sharing underpins all human society, the psychologist noted. We cannot live without the people around us. We cannot live in the world alone. Interdependency is a defining human characteristic. When we think harder about the needs of the people around us, ultimately, we are making life easier for ourselves.

Selflessness is no foreign concept to Muslims. Everywhere we look in our religion, we see examples of people

caring for others, sharing their wealth, and having the interest of their fellow Muslims at heart.

The Prophet, sallallahu alayhe wa sallam, famously said: "None of you truly believes until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself" (Muslim).

Allah states in Surah Ali-Imran: "You shall never attain to [the highest] virtue [of faith] until you spend [in charity] from that which you love" [3:92].

These texts are proof that selfishness has no place in Islam. Not only do they exhort Muslims to share what they have, they call upon them to give from the very best of what they love. Allah does not simply command His servants to be charitable with what is extra in their lives. By His wisdom and mercy, He orders His servants to impart what is most dear to them. Numerous reports from the life of the Prophet, sallallahu alayhe wa sallam, exemplify how seriously he and his Companions took Allah's exhortation. They were completely selfless.

One striking example took place after the *hijrah*, when the Prophet, sallallahu alayhe wa sallam, asked each of the *Ansar* (the Muslims from Madinah) to take one of the *Muhajireen* (the Muslim emigrating to Madinah from Makkah) as a brother. So many beautiful stories unfolded in this instance. Among them is the *Ansari* who divided

"None of you truly believes until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself"

(Muslim).



“Each of you is a shepherd...a man is the shepherd of his family; a woman is the shepherd of her husband’s house and children...”

for the first decade of your marriage, or she took it for granted that you wanted her to complete her education through to an XYZ degree, which you would be only too happy to pay for. And did he tell you about his personal mission to single-handedly save polygamy in Islam?



If you believe this scenario doesn't apply to you—your relationship with your spouse-to-be is good and strong, your reliance on Allah is *sahabah*-like, marriage problems of today don't apply to a classic couple like yourselves—then don't worry. They now have pills for people like you. But for the rest of us earthlings, taking care of the seemingly unattractive prenuptial measures to found a good and lasting marriage is a necessity alluded to in the famous hadeeth of the Prophet Muhammad, sallallahu alayhe wa sallam: “Tie it down. Then trust in Allah” (Tirmithi).

A HANDFUL OF “WHAT IFS”

The increasing rate of divorce among Muslim Americans is staggering, some studies indicating an alarming 31 percent rate and rising. That means nearly one out of every three

Muslim marriages this summer will end up a sad *talaq* statistic. And the news gets even more exciting. Those marriages are ending sooner and sooner—in time for slow learning couples to get ready for their second divorce. We now have the novel phenomenon among Muslims of a growing number of marriages barely able to withstand a year of misery-by-matrimony, that first anniversary cake slice turning into pie on their face in both the shaykh's office and divorce court.

Much of the cause of this disheartening disorder of matrimonial bliss is directly attributable to a lack of appropriate premarital counseling and conversation. I speak both of its scarce availability due to incompetence and inadequacy in our masajid and Islamic organizations and a home-grown culture of unwillingness and unawareness about marriageable Muslims seeking it out and making a plan to go through it before consummation.

Many of the women I've interviewed freely admit that the main reason they remain with their own spouses years on is largely because they made three things clear to their spouses from the beginning: (1) The least they expected of marriage, (2) the minimum they wanted from their husbands, and (3) the limits as to what they were willing to put into it. They theorize that nowadays Muslims marry blindly, anticipating mutual marital understanding, only to discover months or even days later that the misunderstanding and chaos that characterized their prenuptial matrimonial experience would actually accompany them for marriage's duration—at least without serious intervention.

So for you mere Muslim mortals:

Do your due diligence on your “what ifs” prior to. Of course, we can't ask everything to prevent everything and anything from happening. But though every couple is unique, there are things of a general nature that are part of every marriage.

DEFINE YOUR ROLES

Let us dispense up front with the philosophical: Yes, yes. We are all equal worshippers before Allah. Special rights are due every individual. Justice hangs over and about each one of us alike.

But it is rather sad that so many Muslims and Muslimahs no longer have the depth of knowledge and thoughtful experience (and these are not scholarly fathoms by any measure) to appreciate that our human equalities do not define our roles for us in life, family, or marriage, in specific. Real live adults must negotiate these, for the most part, and they can and need to differ in significant ways.

The lack of this realization accounts for much of the confusion when it comes to the function and obligations of wives and husbands in marriage. With that in mind, still there remain many questions that need to be answered by both spouses. Who is going to do what, specifically (because things don't do themselves and the servants are out)? What expressly is expected of each spouse? That is, who will assume which responsibilities?

This comes under the much-cited little acknowledged—“Each of you is a shepherd...a man is the shepherd of his family; a woman is the shepherd of her husband's house and children...”—hadeeth of the Prophet, sallallahu alayhe wa sallam. This defines for us the gist of our responsibilities,

ALL THINGS GREAT AND SMALL

Man's Duty in the Greater Scheme of Life

BY AHMAD HALEEM

THE GREAT BOVINE creature heaved with exertion as she endeavored to give birth to the calf that now wriggled weakly within her womb. In the climax of her motherhood, the heifer tried and tried, all the energy in the air seemingly drawn in by her immense struggle that now took place in the barn.



And yet, despite all her laborious efforts, despite all the furious workings of her maternal instinct and strength, the little calf within her body couldn't make its way out of the strong, basin-shaped ring of bone near the spine, couldn't make it out into the world on its own.

Drenched in his own sweat and the hot blood of his laboring patient, praying to Allah that he could save the calf now being squeezed dangerously by the powerful workings of the muscles of the cow, the man

worked nearly as furiously as the laboring creature in front of him. For many long, dragging, painful hours, he fought the temptation to inform the farmer and his son that the calf would not make it, that it could not possibly squeeze its way past the mother's undersized pelvis. With some quick knife work and a doctor's official prescription to surrender, the young man could have easily aborted his laborious, grimy, and odorous job at hand, delivering the calf that is, and ended the life of

a calf who just couldn't make it, a creature who did not meet the survival-of-the-fittest logic first applied by the English philosopher, Herbert Spencer.

And yet, despite all the luring shortcuts to the end of a painstaking job, the man battled on throughout the darkest hours of his performance, intent on saving the little creature now struggling in the womb seeking to disgorge it, to push into a world of grass and sunshine. Deeper and deeper, higher and higher, darker and darker, the veterinarian braved the climax, endeavoring to save the life of this small beast.

And in the end, he did.

In the compilation of his short autobiographical stories as a country veterinarian, *All Creatures Great and Small*, English born animal doctor, James Herriot, describes just such sequences. They display for his readers the unique quality of man, the feature that makes his essence capable of surpassing the flawless composition of that of angelic creation.

But what makes us different? Is it that we possess highly developed brains and can, therefore, conduct processes like abstract reasoning and advanced categorization? For even so are we told. Is it that we stand apart from the rest of creation because we have opposable thumbs by which we manipulate our environments like no other creature? In this, too, have we