



#### PRESIDENT'S & ELEVEN'S NOTE

Assalamu'alaikum wr wb,

**(** 

Alhamdulillah, all praises be to Allah, from whom we receive blessings and guidance. May peace and salutations be upon our beloved Prophet Muhammad peace be upon him (PBUH), his family, his companions, and all who followed thereafter.

Eleven years have passed since the first ELEVEN Magazine was published. Alhamdulillah, we are grateful to be given this opportunity to publish another issue this year. ELEVEN began as a ground-up initiative by like-minded individuals who were passionate about writing and were keen to benefit the Muslim community through this medium. Over the years, ELEVEN has officially become an annual publication under NTU Muslim Society. It serves as a platform for the Muslim community to share thought-provoking ideas, perspectives, and personal experiences, with the common hope of sharing the beautiful message of Islam.

In this year's publication, the ELEVEN team has chosen the theme 'Conversations'. Conversations allow people to share perspectives, reflect upon circumstances, and express emotions through the powerful medium of the spoken word. I am reminded of a hadith from Prophet Muhammad PBUH, which says, "He who believes in Allah and the Last Day must either speak good or remain silent." [related by Al-Bukhari and Muslim] The hadith highlights the importance of being mindful of the words we utter in conversations. Indeed, meaningful conversations, whether with God, with our loved ones, or even with ourselves, can leave a long-lasting impact on an individual. Likewise, I hope the writings in this issue will impact its readers positively and spark beneficial conversations beyond these pages.

I would like to express my heartiest thanks and gratitude to the ELEVEN team and all its Contributors for their efforts and dedication in publishing the eleventh issue of the magazine. May Allah reward their efforts duly and grant them His blessings. May Allah continue to guide us all and help us remain steadfast on the path of righteousness. Ameen.

Wassalamu'alaikum wr wb, Muhammad Asyraf Bin Mustaffa 32nd NTU Muslim Society President Assalamu'alaikum, our dear Readers!

'Conversations' – it could be defined as a twoway communication, characterized by a string of words put together to convey a thought or a message. It possesses the capability to perform various speech acts according to the intention of the speaker. Other than pushing & challenging this definition in creating creative content to spark change in our society, the process of producing this publication served as a safe space for our team & Contributors to understand the importance of addressing societal issues & enlighten ourselves on the etiquette of having conversations that matter.

As you flip these pages, you'll first delve into the depths of our Contributors' minds & hearts as they engage in introspection & eventually action, in 'Self'. Then, perhaps you'd be able to appreciate the blessings of a much-needed support system from loved ones in 'Friends & Family', which makes up the building blocks of a community. Lastly, to progress as a society, there is a pressing need for us to mobilize against detrimental ideologies & unify towards spreading goodness as we discuss possible solutions to tackle societal issues in 'Community'.

Putting this magazine together has been a truly humbling & emotional experience for our team. As we bid a bittersweet farewell to our ad-hoc term, we hope that this edition would occupy a place close to your heart as it did for us. With that, we present to you, our dear Readers, the 11th edition of our ELEVEN Magazine; a guiding light for the lost & the confused, a voice for the silent & misunderstood, & a source of comfort for the lonely & broken-hearted.

With love & Wassalamu'alaikum, 11th ELEVEN Team

Photo by Aisyah Samsul



If someone strikes up a conversation, however silly, join in: you cannot judge the beauty of a particular path just by looking at the gate. Think good of yourself, think better of others, and think the best of Allah. As Allah says in a hadith qudsi, "I am as My servant thinks of me... If he draws near to Me a hand's length, I draw near to him an arm's length. And if he comes to Me walking, I go to him at speed." "Compromise where you can, but where you can't, don't. Even if everyone is telling you that something wrong is something right. Even if the whole world is telling you to move. It is your duty to plant yourself like a tree, to look them in the eye and say, no, you move."

"Ya Allah, You took everything away from me & Yo emptied my heart, & there is nothing to stand between me & You." Curiouser and curiouser! Cultivate th

> habit of being grateful; not just for the good things but also the 'bad'. His plans are greater than ours and every setback or loss

s a silver lining. "Be patier ver what they say" Th xcellence of Allah's Hearing uch that He hears what is sa and He even hears what is no aid. So, be patient. Surely, ther nothing He cannot fix. ould be that you dislike mething, when it is good fo ou; and it could be that you like mething when it is bad for you. Allah knows, and you d not know." [Qur'an, 2:216 eave footprints of kindnes nd love wherever you go. Be ind to yourself, be kind t thers. It's not as bad as yo nink and you will pull throug his one as well. "And you ord is going to give you, an ou will be satisfied" [Qur'ar 3:5]. So I've been sitting her or the past 2 hours thinkin "So where are yo ing?" [Qur'an, 81:26]. minder to myself first an nd work hard towards o Allah, He will ease yo rough the process. It reall

the 111th ELEVIEN team

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emotions, actions, values and motivations. Question yourself. Then question others, and listen Can't change the world, but you can start by changing yourself. [wonderberryfin] "O Lord You have honored me by permitting me to invoke Your Name, so grant me the ability to show gratitude. O Lord, I ask for Your Love, the love of those You love and the love that will bring me closer to You, please increase the love of everyone in our hearts, place a barrier between us and our egos, and grant us intellectual humility". "So verily, with every hardships comes ease. Verily with every hardships comes ease" [Qur'an, 94:5-6]. To be more God-conscious, to be more grateful, to be more forgiving, to be more sincere, to be more honest, to be more kind, to be more generous, to be more adventurous, to be more present, to be more hopeful, and to be more... me

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# CONVERS-

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## self

introspection & action



## IS THERE ANY MORE ROOM? Fairuz Jaafar

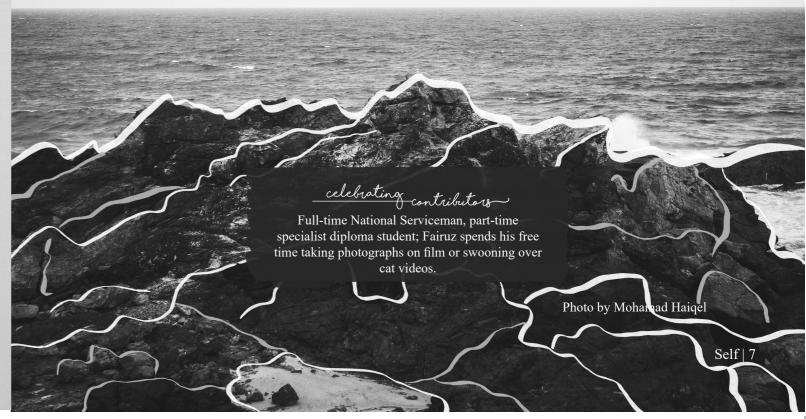
it's easier to shadowbox alone than to seek solace from kin and be told to bear witness bluntly, your words an inconvenient din

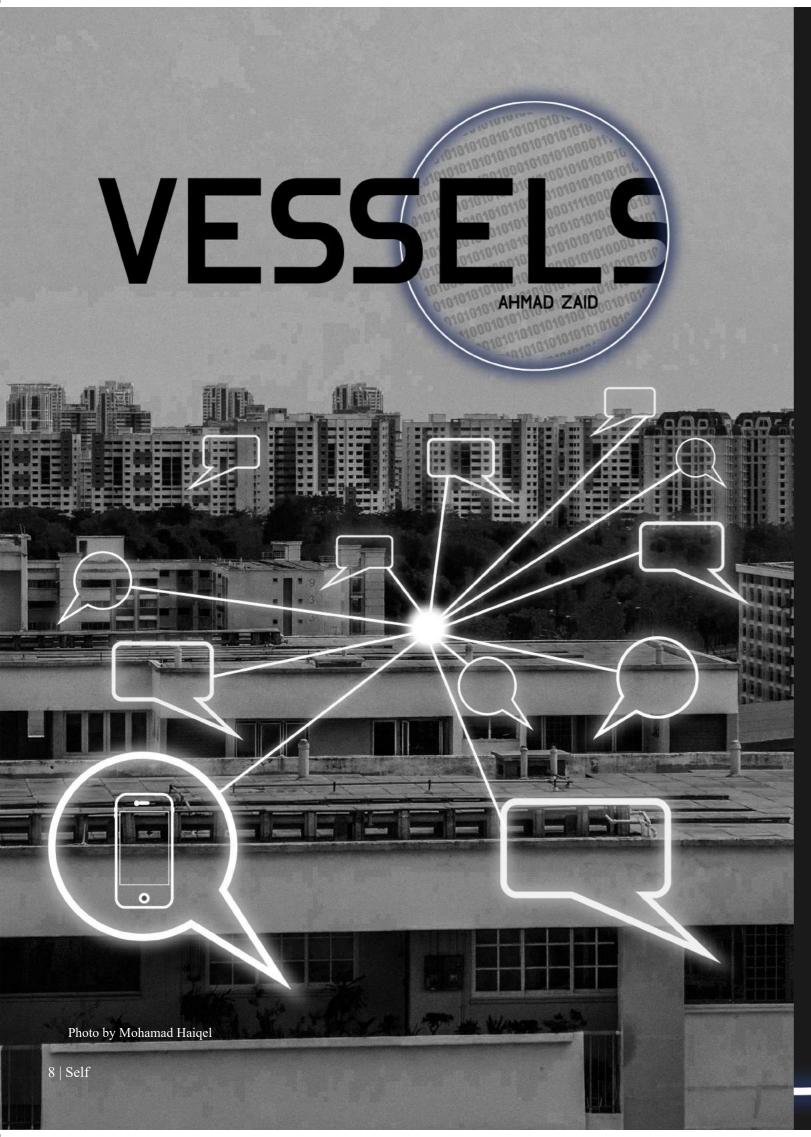
it's easier to swallow uncomfortable truths than to be frank about your pain, and be blamed for a lack of faith; your tears in vain

it's easier to keep mum than to be open about your trepidation and resume a dormant argument; your sentiments the bone of contention

you end up offering the olive branch you end up apologising for feeling you end up doubting your condition you end up blaming yourself

my brokenness is my own doing; my pain is not for others to fix.





On a bright LCD screen our fingers danced
Our thoughts translated into pixels
Swiped, double tap, screenshots shared
Emojis a way to depict our emotions
A small rectangular box voicing our opinions
Like a vessel to what we have to say
A novel definition to conversations
A novel way where ideas are conveyed

Sadly, the box misused and abused
As if verbal insult not enough used
Keyboard warriors starting a ruse
To top it off, we created fake news
Shedding a bad light on a certain race
Telling them to know their place
Each comment left has no face
Behind a screen that acts like a barricade

Debates on religion merely based on opinions
Facts and evidence not raised during the motion
Too busy defending our own religion
Learning more about it? Too ignorant
Comfortable with what we already know
Beyond our jurisdiction let MUIS handle the show

Our lips, thoughts and hearts are our own
Yet we still speak out of control
The hearts envious, the thoughts devious, the lips pretentious
We label ourselves pious, so naive and oblivious
Curse and swear, call them disbelievers
So full of hate, what if it was the reverse

This is what's become of us If we lack the courage to lead To have deeper conversations To own the words that we speak

Every spoken word has a weight to it
The message to deliver heavier than it seems
It affects their hearts, their thoughts and their lips
The good comes from Him, the bad is from within

We are just vessels
A means to an end
Through the messages we send
We are just vessels
In control but controlled
Only know what's made known
We are just vessels
Every word like jigsaw
Pieced together to see more
We are just vessels
A servant of the Creator
For the speaker and the listener

celebrating contributors

Currently serving the nation. On odd

Currently serving the nation. On odd days, I enjoy learning new things, especially about personal effectiveness. Hobbies: Reading and Gaming

...

Wie geht's?

how are you?

Siti Amirah

잘 지냈어요

T nspired by the buzzing world around us, where everything seems too quick for us to handle, **L** and managing different chats at one go on our smartphone – I ponder over the meaning of the conversations that we have in our day. In the conversations that we have, how much of them are we truly engaged and interested in? Are they actually things that matter to us and benefit the people around us? Are we actually keeping up with the this overload of information that we attain? Thinking about this makes me wonder if it might be beneficial if we simplify our lives with one conversation at a time, attending to one matter at a go. This makes me think of the simplest form of conversation.



ma shlom-kha?

how are you!
apa khabar?
おですか!

All of the above mean "How are you?". This arguably might be one of the simplest forms of conversation because this is the phrase that we all first learn when we learn a new language. This goes to show that such an utterance of asking someone about their well-being does matter a lot to us. It is a simple phrase, and some say that it's a frivolous one. It can be used in passing, just to お元気でか? spark a conversation out of plain courtesy. The value of the question in that utterance has become void. It seems unfortunate that something that is a necessity in languages that we learn has become a thing that is close to nothing due to our sometimes mindless inconsideration.

cómo estás?



Even so, we can actually make that phrase a meaningful one, when we ask with the intention of care, concern and love for our fellow brothers and sisters of this world. With this intention, we can change so many of our utterances into meaningful ones and string a beautiful and meaningful conversation. This emphasises on the importance of the intention behind all the actions that we carry out in this lifetime. Hence, utter it with the intention of really wanting to know how a person is truly feeling. Give them the attention that they deserve. Follow up with sincere questions to know more about the events that are happening in their lives and be ready to engage. Insha Allah (God willing), this might add meaning to the conversations that we have, and we might even be catching someone before they spiral into their

At the same time, in this busy world of chases and races, we should take the time to also engage in meaningful conversation with ourselves and with Allah S.W.T. While the people around us are important, taking care and keeping ourselves in check is just as important. Caught in the hustle of things, we sometimes forget to ask and check on ourselves because we might give the excuse that we have no time to lose and have to keep going forward. Personally being guilty of this, letting myself bottle my struggles and negative emotions only leads me to a dark place. Hence, let us engage ourselves in a meaningful conversation to acknowledge the blessings and struggles that we face, with the attention that we also deserve. At

own dark holes of negativity and doubts.

the same time, engage our Lord with the attention that He deserves as we ponder and be grateful for the blessings and the ease that He is providing and will provide for our struggles.



hasisih



#### Hvordan har du det?

Let this be a reminder that Allah loves His servants that care for the people around them and cherish them with love. At the same time, our soul and body are all on loan from Him, which means that taking care of ourselves mentally is a task that is entrusted to us by Him. But most importantly, let's strive together for the best relationship with Allah S.W.T as He is Ar-Rahman and Ar-Rahim, where He loves us the most in the most unconditional of manners.

как твои дела

## 你好吗 Piye kabare?

\_celebrating contributors

Siti is a fresh Linguistics and Psychology graduate, trying to figure out the art of adulting. She is also a cat mum to 2 chunky cats and thoroughly enjoys taking way too many photos of them.

Photos by Natasha Kasim

Self | 11

10 | Self

Chapter1 Self.indd 10-11





Shiham M. H.

onologue. Mono. A speech given by a singular person to express their thoughts. Or a long speech by one person in a conversation. One. Often, people would think that a conversation requires two or more people. A response from the other. An exchange of words. But words aren't always the sounds coming from your mouth that make up a sentence. It could be a simple meow from your cat as you rant about your day. Or the small hints throughout the day from Him after your earnest prayers. It could also be your own answer in your head.

Adventure [5.46 AM]

I open my eyes.

Blink once.

Blink twice.

Sigh. Another day. I dragged my feet to the toilet and somehow managed to do my morning prayer. As much as I wanted to go back to sleep, my body wouldn't move. Maybe I was too tired, or maybe my

soul knew what it needed. I raised my hands and said a silent prayer.

"Dear God. I don't know what I'm praying for. I mean You know how it is. Just the same mundane routine. No trouble, no hardships. Yet. But that is also a problem. My life is peaceful, but I don't feel at peace. Am I not grateful? Do I not see Your signs? I don't know." With that thought, my body somehow felt less lethargic and my day goes on.

I wish my life was a big adventure where nothing is ever different but never the same all at once. I'm winding down the same old road which would lead me to different destinations. A familiar scent from the bakery, which I'd usually rush past, tugged on my heartstrings as I focused on my biggest worry - choosing between the ham and cheese sandwich or tuna and cheese sandwich for breakfast. Decisions, decisions... I was hoping for some adrenaline rush to assist with my decision-making but apparently that only came much later from the panic of not being able to find my ez-link.

I've been telling myself to try something new, but the only adventure I've embarked on is purchasing a club sandwich. But hey, that's a good start, no? Sigh...

#### Appreciate [9.05 AM]

Thank you for the seat, God! It's amazing how this small thing could either ruin or make my day. I plugged in my earpiece and closed my eyes, hoping to get a short nap before reaching my destination. Of course, at that instance, a baby decides to cry. I looked up and saw a mother struggling to pacify her baby while making sure her older child standing on the seat next to her didn't fall. I guess I wouldn't be getting that power nap then. With much reluctance, I took out my book and tried to read, hoping the ride would come to a quick end.

#### **Advice** [11.35 PM]

On any other day, I would say 11pm would still be too early to hit the sack. Today, however, gosh it's too late. It's been a long day – multiple consultations with lecturers and getting rejected, followed by hours of rehearsals which required me to brave through the mental battle of having to constantly juggle expectations; others and mine. It was a harsh reminder that always chasing after perfection won't get you anywhere. Sometimes, it seems like a distant fantasy. Upon realization and years of persuasion, it's hard to catch myself.

I was drained.

Physically.

Mentally.

But I'm not done just yet. If it wasn't graded, I wouldn't have invested so much effort in journaling, a concept which I simply can't understand. Well, what choice do I have? I opened up my notebook and stared at the reflection questions. Eyebrows furrowed. Fingers mindlessly hitting the keys.

10 February 2019,

What did I find beautiful today?

Waking up.

Knowing it's another day, another chance of living. I find the unknown in everyday beautiful.

How similar yet how different everything is. I find beauty in challenging myself, trying something new despite the fear of the unknown. Knowing that somehow, I can make each repetitive day just a little bit more different.

A child's innocence.

A child's amazement of the world, how his eyes twinkle as he stared out the window, mouth agape. As he touched a stranger's arms, he asked him why he painted his arms - a question out of sheer curiosity and no tinge of judgment. And the laughter, masha Allah, the laughter that followed sounded like magic. I remember the stranger's soft voice as he explained patiently to the child and that knowing smile which were exchanged among the passengers, even if it was ever so briefly.

Growth.

The ability to learn from your past mistakes and change. The beauty of seeing how far you've come, and how much I've grown. Realising how perfection is not an end goal but compromising with your endless expectations. It is accepting that doing your best is enough. It is coming to terms that perfect doesn't exist.

Each day is my greatest adventure, expecting everything and nothing from the world.

To see the world in a different lens is a blessing and noticing these small moments in life makes it all worthwhile. Learn from your past, work on your weakness, and grow away from it. '

Enter.

Today was an adventure. An adventure waiting for me to unravel myself. I guess retrospection in its own way, is like reviewing your research paper after hours of writing and perfecting it. It could be a chance for you to have a conversation with yourself. A monologue. Sometimes, it must be forced. It can be taking the longer route to be alone in your thoughts. It can be a longer *sujud* (prostration), praying for good to happen. It can be writing, to let out your inner thoughts and feelings. There's a beauty in finding time to spend time with yourself. Talk to yourself, make time to reflect and grow. In the end, you are responsible of your own growth. Growth is everyone's superpower hidden within, find it and use it well.



I'm sorry I wear the hijab But my chest remains bare Some days are easier to cover up But easy is always *rare* 

I'm sorry I wear the hijab Yet I talk too loud and laugh without a care Sometimes it's hard to control How I act or if I stare

I'm sorry I wear the hijab
But I'm clad in outfits that hug a little too tight
I'm aware of the things I need to change
If you could just give me more time to make it right

I'm sorry I wear the hijab Yet I don't convey its true meaning But the more you pick on me The lesser I feel like donning I'm sorry dear self-For you should always know As long as you're still trying He'll guide you through and you will grow

> So today I'll don the hijab In hopes that I'll stop Being sorry for the things I was sorry for throughout

For someday I'll don the hijab Abiding by His rules (full of trust) Because as the saying goes; "Allah loves those who are steadfast." (Qur'an 3:146)

I'm Sorry
I Wear The Hijab

Nurul Hidayah Fadilah

celebrating contributors

A 22 year old undergraduate who enjoys the quiet company of the night sky and beams at the sight of a moon... and cats, although I am still trying to get over my fear of petting them.

Photo by Mohamad Haiqel

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Amidst all the cacophony please listen, there is nothing wrong with your brain. Fabi-ayyi ālā-i rabbikumā tukadhdhibān<sup>1</sup>

Voices crawl into your mind beyond your volition.
The jury's out, you're insane.
But amidst all the cacophony please listen

Children's hearts do not see the legislation, their eyes do not pierce with disdain. Fabi-ayyi ālā-i rabbikumā tukadhdhibān

People indiscriminately shoot with the "impiety" gun making their courtesy a sight to be feigned. But amidst all the cacophony please listen

Your beauty surpasses the touch of the sun, darkness is when mercy is best attained. Fabi-ayyi ālā-i rabbikumā tukadhdhibān

Every man's hands are calloused with discrimination, it needs sand paper to erase the grain.

Amidst all the cacophony please listen,

Fabi-ayyi ālā-i rabbikumā tukadhdhibān

Qur'an 55:13

Nur Laili

ff then which of the

avours of your

Lovo

will ye demy?

celebrating contributors

I'm an English undergraduate who simply wants to produce writing that she wants to read! I pride myself in joining multiple fandoms like the MCU, Brooklyn Nine-Nine, Harry Potter and more as a way to de-stress. Fangirling is an art in itself too!

Self | 15





The tear runs
To put you to sleep
Your thoughts eat you up inside
It talks to you as you sleep

You think about that couple you saw
As you scroll through that social media page
That skinny beautiful model
You compare
In despair
Who am I?
Why can't that be me?

This cycle continues
But the tears dry,
The emptiness begins aching
Forlorn, the world just seems against you

As you sit yourself up,
The photo frame lands on the floor
Shatters in pieces
The photo of the mum and her miracle forcing smiles
It dawns upon you;
You are here,
On this Earth, for a cause
Which you've yet to find

You forget that roof over your head,
The loved ones around you
Your health,
You're alive, you're still living

While you are busy looking at things you don't or can't have,

There is a lot to be grateful for, just look around

Count these blessings

There are people out there who might not be as privileged as you

Fathom this.

As part of human nature;

We tend to want what we don't have

And often times, forget to appreciate what we have

That's alright it takes time to acknowledge and work on it.

Know that there will be good days

Even if things do not work out

Everything happens for a reason

These thoughts can be controlled,

For you are the puppeteer and your thoughts are the marionette

Nevertheless, you will face the toughest of days,

When hoping feels futile,

Remember this:

Know you're never alone

God's with you

Even on your loneliest days,

He watches over you, He protects you

Never forget that

celebrating contributors

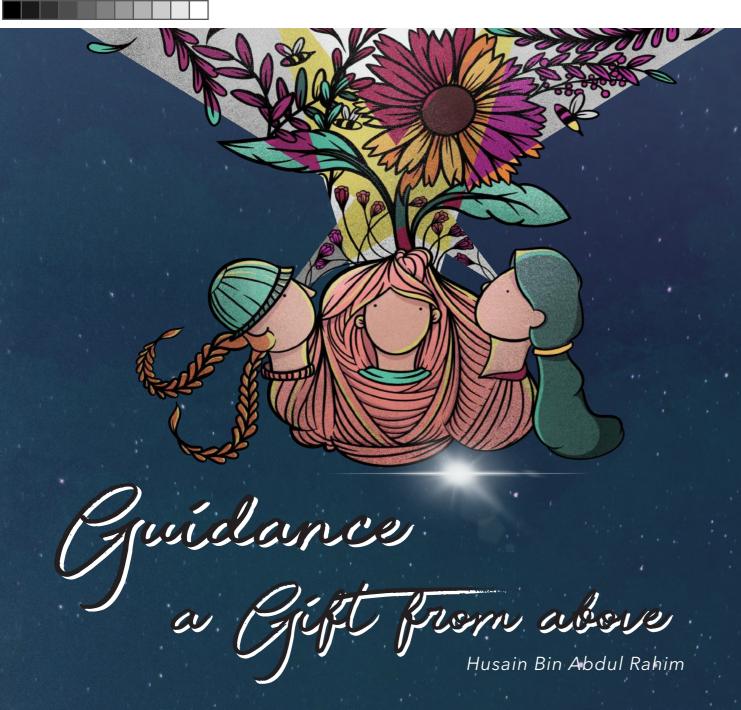
I find happiness in children and travelling. Always in search of ways to be a better version of myself. I believe to never stop hoping and trying because in life there's always more to it.

Photos by Mohamad Haiqel

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Self | 17





The boy was suffering inside...

It starts out with a spark For you to see the light in the dark Deep inside your heart A pulling of your thoughts apart

Coming from a place of higher learning, he was bombarded by many foreign ideas that challenged his core beliefs. Feminism, pluralism, secularism, liberal humanism, atheism, skepticism, existentialism, deconstructionism, relativism, Marxism, utilitarianism, hedonism. All his life, he thought that as he went higher in the system, it would tell him the truth, the way the world worked and the way he should live, the true meaning of life. It's been years of barely

surviving inside, the battles of his beliefs, coupled with the battles of his ego and desires. It didn't help that the world was hypersexualised, and over-commercialised with the objectification of humans for capitalistic entertainment, filled with an image driven self-identification, destructive cultural Marxism legitimizing homosexuality, and everything metaphysical and spiritual was explained away by the analytical schools devoid of God, positivistic world views that claim empirical inductive studies of the particulars is

Treading that gentle line Between life and death

the only way of attaining universal truths. Pushing your soul to the Divine To mention God in every breath

Just having to think about the various terminologies and jargons in his head made him feel like vomiting. Thinking of their implications in the world at large is another black hole altogether. He couldn't function anymore with his friends. All he could see was the libertine, political social justice causes which many engaged in while ignoring the real issues. Many of his other friends drowned while trying to swim the vast and deep ocean every night on their own, by their own efforts and own intellect.

It seemed like a lost cause...

A mad rush to buy all the books To avoid the judging looks Why am I unsettled you say? What is the true meaning of each day?

He closed his eyes, to black out the thoughts that were flashing in his head as he sat down in the crowded MRT heading home. But as much as he could, there was no way of removing that feeling of dread, that his life had no meaning, that God is dead like what Nietzsche said. Recently, the boy has been dabbling in existential philosophy like Heidegger, Kierkegaard and even Sartre but their answers to give meaning always excluded God, something he felt that he could not accept. Looking at the state of Muslims was even more depressing. Factionalism, fanatical reformists, fear-mongers, Islamophobic responses, killings and violations of basic human dignity. Taliban, Al Qaeda and ISIS, terrorism and genocides? Was this the Islam that he was born in? Was it always like this? Is human life and dignity that cheap?

Whispering a prayer, full of desperation, he murmured "O God, show me the truth as truth and show me falsehood as falsehood, and give me answers to clear my doubts, O God the All-Knowing." Shortly after, his prayer alarm on his phone vibrated, Maghrib time was nearing. The boy decided to go to the nearest mosque at the next MRT station. The mosque was quaint but had a strange familiarity with a kampung feel.

As you approach the Sacred A teacher will appear, fated Ready as you are in sincerity To bring you closer with purity

After his Maghrib prayers, he sat down musing about his life wanting to do nothing for a while when suddenly, he could smell a beautiful fragrance around him. He saw a man sitting by the side of a pillar wearing an imamah and donning clothes like they were out from the 11th century. He had a glow on his face that no one else saw. Just when he realised something was out of the ordinary, that man faced him and smiled kindly at him. With that, everything else disappeared.

It was only both of them now.

It was at this very moment, the boy felt a sense of tranquility, a peace that cannot be expressed. Cool tears dripped as he gazed upon what he could only describe as angelic. The man stood up, walked calmly and sat close in front of him. He said, "You prayed for an answer to your doubts, ask now for it will be answered!" The man then smiled again and placed his right hand upon the boy's head.

Imam Al-Haddad, Imam Al-Ghazali Assistance and Guidance, you see Books that revive you from the dead Knowledge and light as they are read

The boy immediately felt as if his burdens has been lifted from the cool touch of the man's



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hand. He suddenly felt compelled to ask the man, "Tell me how do I get close to God? I feel very far from Him."

The man was silent for a while before he spoke. When he opened his mouth, it seemed like pearls were falling out of his lips. "O my son, you must first get to know your Lord, who you are worshipping. You must embark on this journey of seeking knowledge. I see you have a desire of acquiring this knowledge, a sincere longing and passionate thirst for it. But up till now, you have never possessed it."

The boy was amazed, how was it possible that he never had any knowledge before? He replied the man softly, "I think I have knowledge... I've been learning all my life, I got top scores at PSLE, O Levels, A levels in both secular and religious subjects. I even have a scholarship in university. Am I not knowledgeable enough?"

"O my son, this knowledge is not on pieces of paper, this knowledge is what gives you benefit for your soul, illuminates your heart and is a cause for your salvation in the Hereafter. If you aim to seek knowledge to compete, to show off and to chase after the debris of this world, you will destroy yourself, your religion and your eternal life."

**(** 

Upon hearing this, a sense of guilt overcame the boy, "What should I do then? I'm lost. What about all the theories I've learnt from the philosophers? Don't they tell something about the truth?"

"Be a man who seeks knowledge "O to make it his provision on the way to the next life and intends by it nothing other than the countenance of Allah Most High and the home of the Hereafter. If you do this, then you will be of those who succeed"

my son, do not worry about the theories and the philosophers. Relying on them will only lead you astray. What is most important for you to do now is to make a sincere intention between you and God that in seeking knowledge, you want to gain guidance, not simply the transmission of information. If you do this, then glad tidings be to you. The angels will spread their wings for you as you walk and the fishes in the sea will ask forgiveness for you as you strive."1

"Please tell me then, how can I start? What is this guidance?" exclaimed the boy eagerly.

"O my son, you should know before all else that guidance, which is the fruit of knowledge, has a beginning and an end, an outward aspect and an inward essence.<sup>2</sup> There is no way to reach the end without mastering the beginning, just as there is no way to discover the inner essence of it until you have arrived at an understanding of its outward."3

"Be a man who seeks knowledge to make it his provision on the way to the next life and intends

by it nothing other than the countenance of Allah Most High and the home of the Hereafter. If you do this, then you will be of those who succeed."4

"Here I am going to point you to the 'beginning of guidance' for you to see where you stand and determine what your heart intends. Immerse yourself in the oceans of this knowledge if you find your heart receptive. But beware of the deceptions of Satan who will trick you into searching for knowledge to satisfy your lower self that commands to evil. You will be pulled into the abyss of destruction if you do that."5

Then comes the challenge to test To see if you will persevere to best Your nafs, the devil and the world And they'll never leave even till you're old

I love learning and reading lovely books with people of love in the path of the Beloved

"May God give you a truthful teacher to teach all these to you...These answers are enough for you my son. Goodbye." The man stood up and walked away through an open door in the wall of the mosque.

"Wait! Don't go!" The boy shouted. He wanted to ask more, to clear more of his doubts.

Patience is the path that will release One in adversity and in ease Remembrance of God is a cure And praises upon the Prophet, add more

Suddenly the azan for isha' prayers was heard. The man was nowhere to be seen again. But the cool touch of his hand could still be felt on the boy's head. Was the boy dreaming all this while? Was it real? Who was that? Who knows for sure? It was over before he knew it.

What was more astonishing is that on the boy's lap, there laid a copy of a book with a black cover. The title of the book was "The Beginning of Guidance" by The Imam, Abu Hamid Al Ghazali.

Tranquility and serenity in your heart Seeking knowledge constantly in part Before you turn away again Before you say this is all in vain

The boy immediately picked up the book and kissed it. The beautiful fragrance was still there.

He smiled.

Give yourself a chance to be good Before your body is mixed with wood Come and walk this path together We'll abide in eternal happiness forever

- Abu Hamid Al Ghazali, The Beginning of Guidance (Bidayatul Hidayah), White Thread Press, Translated by Dr. Mashh. Al-Allaf, 2010, Pg 16.
- Ibid. Pg 16
- Ibid. Pg 17

Calligraphy by Amira Yasmine

Self | 21



Girl, 20.
Siti Munirah

the shawl sits
heavy on her head
draped over
her sunken shoulders
pinned down
cloth covering
just enough of herself
hiding behind
a portrait
her palms opened in prayer
forehead kissing the floor
crouched

her shawl falls
a small sight of skin
on the back of her neck
as she greets the other girls
feeling exposed
by her wrists
she pulls her socks higher
afraid her ankles
might show
too much
of how little
she actually knew

#### Self Talk

By the end of the month, you've exhausted yourself and can't even count the number of times you've tried and failed to give up this job you hate so much

#### because

by the end of the month,
the pay check they've promised
is handed to you
making you forget
the feeling of helplessness
constantly worrying
about somebody else's life
even when your own
is on the edge
of falling apart

#### because

you've been taught
the highest form of humanity
puts others
before their own
even if
you get crushed
under all that weight

#### because

getting stepped on
is just a step up
so,
you keep telling yourself
soon,
you won't have to do this anymore

#### because

it's just
a part-time job
only for earning enough
not to feel guilty
pretending
to be living a life
you didn't have

#### because

you grew up
believing
you could somehow
substitute
their privilege
with
your perseverance
as if
a cow
could outrun
a coyote

#### because

at least you have a job
even if
it is the kind
that leaves you
empty
wondering why
temporary
feels like forever.

Visual by Nashrah Alwi

Self | 23

**(** 



22 | Self

**(** 

## Her Garden

Sakinah Mohamed Mohsen

With Love written all over She looked down to her feet And saw every petal left to wither

She looked up to the sky

Her aura, so warm Casting her fragrance upon others Her moves, so soft Delicately swaying in the wind

And in her heart she said her prayer In a state of despair She asked for His care For the pain she can no longer bear

Her words, such tenderness such carefulness Careful not to hurt Careful not to poison

She reflected upon her actions For she came to a realisation Seeking happiness and recognition Solely from His creation Wasn't really the best of aspirations

They told her to give For to give is better than to receive So she gifted others With that she gained much relief

So she realised she is not here to please All the humans just to get their attention Because there is bigger gratification In pleasing the Creator and not His creation One that is beyond imagination

And that's what she did She poured and poured And now they ask 'Why is she so empty?'

She aspired to grow a garden And nurture each flower unconditionally She hoped to bloom happiness and patience And care out of love and sincerity

So she asked herself If only she knew the right way to love The right way to give For the only thing she craved Was to please the human souls

She hoped to reap the rewards later The blooming of not just one flower But her Garden of Faith Her guide till the Hereafter

she can see the true meaning of Love?

So how is it that with blindfolds,

celebrating contributors I get inspiration to write from the books I read. I love nature and going on adventures as much as I love staying in to cook or bake during my free time.

### the struggle Nurul Nabilah

"Why did I wear it too early?"

started donning the hijab when I was 13, without any conscious thought. Back then, I didn't think much of it other than wearing it to fulfil my obligations. However, as time passed by, I began to think a lot on how a piece of cloth could affect the way I understood my own values, attitude and various personalities. At that point of time, only a handful from my group of friends donned the hijab, hence, there were a lot of times whereby I felt insecure about how I looked. Slowly, I began to question this decision and constantly wondered about the invisible benefits that I could gain with this scarf on my head.

As I grew closer to the time whereby I would graduate from secondary school, I began to shower myself with doubtful questions to myself such as "Why did I wear it too early?" or "What if various opportunities in the future become limited for me just because I don the hijab?". These conversations I held with myself consistently made me feel that donning the hijab was the least of my priorities and that meant that I should only complete what was necessary such as praying five times a day.

Even though I was consumed by these negative thoughts, I began to understand that it is just another passing phase in my journey of donning the hijab and that I shouldn't dwell on it too much as I could make impulse decisions that might not turn out well for me in the long run. As much as I wanted to take it off, I asked for His guidance and for Him to grant me patience for as long as possible because my naïve 13-year-old self made a decision that I was clearly not ready for.

It was not easy for me to adapt myself to the society's standards on how a 'hijabi' should be, for I know that there are flaws and habits of me that should be discarded or hidden away most of the time. Be it remarks from friends or family, it was tough for me to convince myself to stay this way. I have been wearing the hijab for 4 years now. Certainly, I am glad that I didn't take it off even when there were times I constantly wished that I could turn back time so that I would be ready with my whole heart and sincerity to make a decision that in which I would be able to carry the weight.

I admit that I was struggling to accept the way I presented myself in front of friends and family. Things that helped me the most were patience and feeding myself with comforting words everytime I felt low and terrible about wearing the hijab in order for me to hold on. I spent a lot of time asking Him to ease my heart and push away the negative thoughts I had, in order for me to be strong in my principles and to also be firm in the decisions I make, not because of others, but for the benefit of myself. Why? Because I've learnt that it's always your journey and that people are here to help, but at the end of the day, you decide what is best for you.

celebrating contributors

In this world, there are two things that I love the most, children and food, they make me the happiest!

Photo by Nur Awadah

Self | 25

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Chapter1 Self.indd 24-25







Andrea Leong

searching for them. Signs that would show me the answers to my unspoken questions.

Little did I know, I only needed to learn how to read them.

Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA) 2.00

'Dang it.' I bit out and sighed.

This was already my second year in university. If I kept up this standard of GPA, I would definitely receive a warning letter from the school sooner or later. And how am I supposed to face my parents? Tell them that their daughter has been studying hard but nothing seemed to be getting through her head either way? That she made the wrong decision in continuing her engineering studies because she didn't know where else to go?

Walking home with a heavy heart, I trudged down the stretch of grass along the river and stared at the familiar reflection of the houses across. Lying down on my usual dented spot, I cast my thoughts towards the sky.

Looks like my prayers didn't reach You this time as well.

'Whatever.' I sighed again.

The warm gentle breeze blew around me and carried with it a familiar scent that tickled the inside of my nose. I sneezed and rubbed my nose.

Is that pollen?

Pushing the thought aside, I reached for my phone and opened up WhatsApp. My fingers hovered uncertainly above Merda's name. Didn't she take a leave from work today? I shouldn't disturb her...

Hey, I'm sad.

Merda is typing...

What happened?

I don't feel like telling you through text :(

Okay, where are you right now?

At our sunset spot.

I put my phone down and a flicker of white crossed my peripheral vision. Turning my head, I was surprised to find a couple of white flowers beside me. Didn't I pluck these out the last time I was here? Pulling out one of the flowers, I held it above my face and frowned.

How persistent.

'Well you look terrible.'

I looked up to see Merda's towering figure. She sat down beside me and hugged her legs together.

'Whenever you're ready.'

I laid there for a good few minutes, enjoying her presence before collecting my thoughts and telling her about my day.

'- then I was at the crossroad outside of school. The traffic man was red at that time but at that moment, I just wanted to step into the line of moving cars. Then everything would end, and I wouldn't have to worry about a thing anymore. But I didn't and here I am.'

I shivered from the thought of it.

'...I'm glad you didn't. I should've known from how down you were these days but-' Merda laced her fingers through mine in a tight grip.

'You're here now. Sometimes, that's good enough. Gosh. '

'Wait, get it later.'

She texted someone on her phone and started talking about the latest novel we were both reading.

30 minutes later.

'Holaaaa~ The life of the party is here!'

I turned around in surprise to see Trina standing at the top of the lawn with a bag of drinks. 'What are you doing here?' I asked.

'The question is why was I not here?'

'I texted her.' Merda said.

'I-i didn't want to bum anybody else out with my troubles.' I stuttered.

'Toooo late, I'm already here ye fool.'

Trina sat down beside me and handed out 3 large size slushies.

I gaped at her and took my cup of slushy in defeat. The three of us talked till dusk and the darker part of my thoughts was gradually replaced with solace instead. Feeling the need to go to the nearby toilet, I stood up and excused myself.

'Come back before the sun sets, we've got to watch the sunset together.' Merda said.

I nodded and walked up when Trina called out.

'Andrea! How about writing?'

'What?'

'Writing! You like that, don't you? I bet you knew that from day 1 but you're just scared of letting go of what you already have. Just so you know, we'll be holding on to you even if you do fall. Okay ewwww cringe, now hurry and pee ye fool!'

Both of them laughed and turned back to the sunset. I stood frozen at the top of the lawn with the white flower fluttering between my fingers. While looking down at the figures of my two best friends, I came to a startling realisation.

How could I have missed this?

The signs.

All these while I have been praying and waiting for some grand answers to appear when the signs have always been there for me to see. I just didn't know how to read them. Like the lone white flower, I decided on my own that it had no chance of growing again after being removed from its roots. Yet there it was, blooming against all odds.

I held the white flower up between Merda and Trina, and smiled to myself.

If I was the flower, they'll be the gentle wind that carries me through.

At the back of my mind, I was already writing out a story of my own, a story about our friendship and the precious signs behind it.

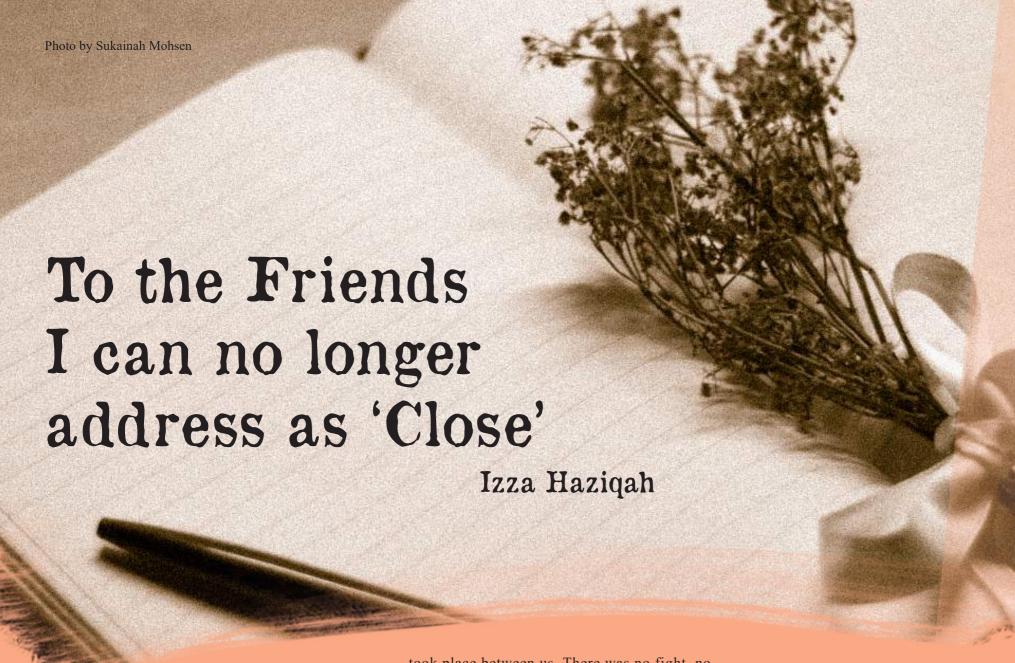
celebrating contributors

An undergraduate of history who enjoys reading, sleeping, kbbq, travelling and anything that resonates with being happy:)

Visual by Mohamad Haiqel

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here are moments when it baffles me that we no longer talk. When I ran for the bus to school, I remembered the day we ran for our bus, panting while laughing as we finally sat down. When I cleared my drawer, I found the notebook that you gave me, still with the birthday letter you taped to the first page. When I caught Yiruma's River Flows in You playing in public, it took a while to realise that those fingers were not yours, and the smiles were not ours. When my Spotify playlist shuffled to All Time Low, I recall us in the MRT sharing your red earpiece. We promised to catch their concert in the future. The band came, but we didn't go together.

How did we get here? I sift through my memories but hardly anything surfaces as a satisfactory answer. If I'm asked, "What happened?", I wouldn't know how to start. Nothing bad ever

took place between us. There was no fight, no tension, no huge incident that blew up. Can two people who were really close simply grow apart? Are we really one of those cases where "life just happened"? I just can't explain the timeline of our relationship. There is only a 'then' and a 'now', with an inexplicably empty in-between that my limited mind fails to fill.

Now, I only view you from a strange window. I can see what you're up to. You go on with life, you interact with others, you go to work or school, and you share moments on social media. But I can't open that window, nor can I even touch it. It's a panel that separates us, invisible and incomprehensible. And because of this window, even though I see you, alive and well, sometimes it feels like you're dead. Dead, because it's as though we exist in different worlds and move in different timelines. It's as though we stopped knowing each other. It's odd and painful.

But you know what? Broken friendships, I have come to realise, were necessary. Friendship was huge to me. A top priority. Sometimes even higher, regrettably, than what was really supposed to matter. So when our friendship didn't last as ideally, though it was difficult to accept, it made me realise that hardly anything will last ideally. In this world where everything is temporary, truly lasting human relationships are incredibly rare. I guess our friendship was not meant to be an incredible rarity.

Though, despite whatever happened, I'd never want to belittle our time as close friends. I came across a term; 'friends by circumstance'. It defines friends that stay together only due to the circumstances they share, and when those circumstances change or end, so will the friendship.

As familiar as it seems, I don't wish to dismiss you as merely a 'friend by circumstance'. You weren't only that, though circumstances may have brought us together. Everything, after all, is planned by Him. I believe that our friendship was blessed to me, by the grace of God, for good reason. Even if it turned out like this, your presence, however temporary, carried its significance. When I was alone, you helped to fill that loneliness. When I was struggling with studies, you were there to struggle beside me. When I was confused about life, you generously shared your advice. We gave each other our precious time and for a moment, no matter how brief that moment may be, you were truly a close friend to me. I will forever be grateful for that.

Some days, when I'm reminded of how different things are, I tell myself, I'm okay, and I'm convinced. But there are other days when I'm not, and my longing for the past consumes me; the past where you and I are still close, forming more memories for the future us to smile over. I'm still learning to live with these two types of days, but I'm more at ease now. I'm content as I realise how little control I have, as everything is truly up to Him.

All that being said, no matter what happens in the future, I wish you all the best. I doubt I can promise that I'll always be there for you, but you can count on me to pray for you, your family, and your friends. For all the wrong that I've done (and I'm sure there's plenty), I hope you find within your heart forgiveness. Maybe one day, our souls will reunite the way they first united – in better circumstances.

Take care, dear friend.

Love,

celebrating contributors

Izza is a typical Literature student who uses writing as a means to handle her crazy emotions, while hoping (desperately) that it'll become a source of her livelihood one day. She enjoys warm company and has a deep appreciation for good humour, (as all decent people should).

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## Affliction

On the 28th page of the second chapter

The world welcomed another flower

She had eyes filled with an admirable fire

A fire some of you had that has now expired

When she was a child, shadows were her enemy
She feared the dark and believed it was scary
How naive and gullible she truly was
To think a dark room was the worst of her fears

With monsters in her head

Not under her bed

She turned to her father

Who swore would always protect her

**(** 

But then she remembered him condemning the broken
Calling them weak as they gave in to their demons
But what father dearest wasn't aware of
Was that the same monsters plagued the daughter he loved

Afraid of being shunned

The flower turned to run

Into the arms of her mother

Who promised would always love her

But what mother dearest forgot to mention
Was that love is not free of condition
For mother dearest was not the kindest
Her tongue was sharp and ever so ruthless

"Smile, breathe and smile again,"

She told herself despite the pain

The untainted cloth was now no more

What's left is just a shell of before

Her screams for help fell on deaf ears

"She'll be fine," they said despite her tears

But 'fine' was not what she wanted

An escape was what she truly needed

Worn out and tired she allowed the demons in

Into her mind, her soul and into her very being

They consumed her, promising a sweet escape

And ever so slowly, the flower withered away

If only someone had tried to make it right

The world wouldn't have lost such a bright light

With so much fire and so much potential

What a shame no one bothered to make her feel special

"Ignorance is bliss," they said

"It's all in your head," they said

Of course, it's in her head

It's called mental illness and it makes her see red

They say, "Be grateful, someone's got it worse."

But how can she see that when she's blinded by her curse?

This illness is not like a fever

Our community is painfully unaware

Of the disease that is ironically fair

It plagues the rich, even the poor

The young, the old and many more

Where you can ride out and slowly feel better

A simple "Are you okay?"

Is enough to make the demons run away

But people fear what they cannot see

They said it's taboo, don't talk about it

But do not fret, if no one hears

For Allah is listening, He sees your tears

"Do not grieve," He reminds us

For He is always present, so do not fuss

Remember that He chose you for a reason

He believes in your strength, don't think you are beaten

So get up again if you've fallen

Brush yourself off and face the problem

Photos by Siti Sarah

He promised with this hardship

There will come ease and relief

So seek help and trust in His plans

For His plans, are the best of plans

It takes a single conversation

To spread awareness of the situation

To make sure another light

Won't be diminished by the night

Just a 19 (+1) year old trying to get through poly without drowning in my own tears.

#### •

### THE HALAL STATUS

Nur Diana Nordin

eing a minority, it is rare to not have a Chinese friend in your social circle.

After all, they do form the majority in our little island. There are both pros and cons to such a friendship. On one hand, this connection opens us up to new experiences and a better understanding of the other's culture, but on the other hand, it is a chore to find common ground for the most basic need - food.

It is rather unfortunate that some non-Muslims understand halal food as no pork, no lard. In other words, as long as the meal has no pork or by-products of the pig, the food is considered *halal*. They fail to understand that even chicken, beef and mutton can be considered *haram* (not *halal*).

Halal foods are those that are:

- 1. Free from any components that Muslims are prohibited from consuming according to Islamic law
- 2. Processed, made, produced, manufactured and/or stored using equipment and utensils that have been cleansed according to the Islamic law



There are some points in time, where we somewhat feel bad for having to limit our friends' meal options because they have to accommodate to our *halal* needs. Those instances where they go "Oh, let's eat at \_\_\_\_." "Oh, we can't", as they glance at us, with that sudden realisation. I honestly feel bad to make them go an extra mile for food options.

I feel the best way to confront this issue is to raise awareness, help them understand why we do what we do, and not just "because my God says so, and therefore, I will follow." It may sound difficult and troublesome but every small step counts.

I was fortunate enough to be invited to a friend's house for a Chinese New Year steamboat. I was the only Muslim, so I could not expect them to serve some *halal* food. The thought of politely declining the invitation crossed my mind. It is tedious, having to think of what to eat, the cutlery and having to explain the food choices and such. Also, what if my friend's mother went out of her way to cook some halal food for me, but I have to politely decline because all the utensils used have been in direct contact with pork? Would that seem rude and impolite if she had gone through all that effort and I said no? Those thoughts kept me up and I was sure I wanted to just skip the gathering. On the other hand, I wanted to go for the gathering and experience my first Chinese New Year event with my peers. I was at a crossroads. I voiced my thoughts to another friend, who gave me a suggestion: "Why not just bring your own pot, cutleries and utensils and ask John (our friend) to prepare seafood options?"

I shared the idea with my mom, and she agreed that that would be a nice middle ground. So, I went with it and discussed with John about the seafood. Despite having settled the food issues and the pot and cutlery, I still felt nervous and worried.

Before long, the day rolled up. I woke up with a sense of excitement and belly filled with dread. With my pot and utensils, I made my way to John's house. I read beforehand that it was customary to bring oranges and exchange oranges when one enters the house. During the exchange, they would wish one another a prosperous year ahead, filled with love, wealth and good fortune. For those who are not married, they will get the red packet during the exchange of oranges. It was interesting as it was different compared to our practices, where the green packet is usually given when one leaves the house, and instead of well-wishes, we ask for forgiveness from one another. In the spirit of immersing myself in the

culture, I brought oranges and even prepared and practised my well-wishes in Chinese. Of course, the lines were those basic Chinese lines that everyone knows.

It was dinnertime. The table was all laid out, with one big pot in the middle. Up till then, I still felt nervous and worried, even though I did enjoy my time. I took out my pot, ladle and my cutlery, and my other friends stared in amazement because I came prepared. John took out a portable induction cooker for my pot and we all helped to bring out the ingredients. I felt touched because most of the seafood were in their pre-cut packages from the supermarket and the cutlery prepared was plastic. I realised I did not have to worry so much and that my friends understand and were willing to make small changes so as to allow me to enjoy the gathering comfortably.

Time passed by fast. The meal itself was like any other steamboat, but the time spent was irreplaceable. We ate, we laughed, and we learnt about one another, our culture, our personalities and our history. When I got on the Grab home, I laughed at myself for even thinking of skipping the gathering, all because of how troublesome it may get with the food. Because of such a miniscule issue, I would have missed out on such an amazing time.

A little sharing goes a long way. What I shared to my friends could be passed on to their parents, which would then be passed on to their friends. Along the way, we will learn and experience more. I guess this gathering was a prelude to the longer school trip that we will be embarking together. Having gone through this, I feel more settled, knowing that my friends understand my culture more and would not mind accommodating to the halal requirements. And for that, alhamdulillah, and thank God for letting me go through this and meeting such wonderful friends.

\_celebrating contributors

A 21-year-old physiotherapy undergraduate, hoping to see more of the world and gain new insights as I stumble through life.

dear mother

Ikhmah Roslie

Mother, I'm sorry for all the times

For all my countless attempts, for saying that "I'm fine."

For hiding the whole truth, for telling all the lies,

For always being busy, for never having the time,

For only letting you see & celebrate my highs,

For refusing to share the load on these shoulders of mine,

For making you think you missed all the signs,

When you've been nothing to me but kind.

Mother, I'm still the same person
The 5-year-old who never wanted to be left behind,
The 13-year-old whose resolve could never be broken,
The 18-year-old working hard on herself to be redefined,
The 19-year-old who found her way back to religion.
I know it's hard, it hurts when you see me losing my mind,
But I'm more than a 22-year-old with depression,
The girl who has lost her faith in all of mankind.

Mother, I'm not sure if I can make it.

Some nights are so hard, it's impossible to breathe,

Some days are so long, I can't remember what I did.

This suffering is real, it's so much more than just a myth,

"Pray more, recite more," as if that's all that I'll ever need.

Sometimes all I can think about is my pain, my grief,

A flickering flame at the end of this tunnel so dimly lit

I can't take this anymore, I think it's time for me to leave.

Mother, do you still love me?

My friends tell me they do as they're swearing & cursing

My name, pointing out my flaws, they're killing me softly.

They don't know the truth, but they stand blatantly assuming

I'm all sorts of things, when I'm weak, in need of empathy.

They demand an explanation, back & forth with the arguing

Though their disrespect was loud, their apologies were made quietly When I told them the truth that I'm sick, on the verge of breaking.

Mother, thank you for holding me at my lowest,
For being there, for patiently having this conversation,
A glimpse of His mercy & love, we see it in mothers
My anchor, my light, guiding me through this confusion.
Oh Allah, please forgive her sins & grant her the highest
Of heavens for she is an angel, trapped in this corruption.
She deserves more than I can give, so give her Your finest
& reunite me with her, as we prostrate together in submission.

celebrating contributors

Photo by Siti Sarah

**(** 

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An INFJ who enjoys reading & writing. I love flowers & handwritten letters too. Also, I'm a proud aunt of two nieces & a nephew (don't forget to say masha Allah).



#### YOU CAN CONFIDE IN ME "



A reminder to myself, first & foremost,

### ADAB WHEN TALKING

#### NO CHRSING

((لىيس منامن لطم المنوروشو للجيوب ومابدوة الجاجلية))

thadith: He is not amongst us who beats upon his face, tore his clothes and talkes ignorance.

Sahihal-Bukhari - Book 23, Hadith 53



#### LOWER YOUR MOICE

**(** 

(( دا مقد في مشيك واعفض من حوتك)

Quran: And be moderate in your pace and lower your voice al-Quran - Surah Luquan ayat 19



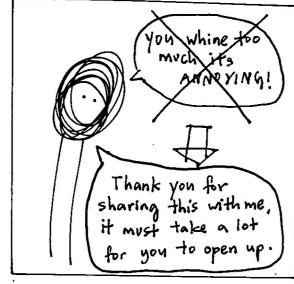
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#### SAY GOOD THINGS

لاص كان يؤمن بالله واليوم الآخر مليقل خيرا أوليعمت)

Hadith: He who believes in Allah & the Last Day must speak good or remain silent.

Sahih al-Bukhari - Book 78, Hadith 49



#### keep at so yourself

(( لايسترعبد عبدا في الرنيا إلا ستره الله يوم المقيامة )

Hadith: Allah will cover up during Piamat the faults of one who covers up faults of others in this world.

Sahih Muslim - Book 45, Hadith 93



By Dinie

#### HOW TO DEAL WITH STRESS













By Sorfina

#### "Bagai Ayam dan Itik"

This cartoon portrays miscommunication, or "Bagai Ayam dan Itik" figuratively. "Bagai itik dan ayam" means the portrayal of miscommunication through literal barriers such as language. The portrayal of a chicken and a duck communicating shows that neither is speaking in the same language, figuratively. Communication requires listening and both parties having to be on the same page if any productive or effective conversation is to be taken place.



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28/6/2019 2:12:24 AM

## celebrating

To all our Contributors: for arranging & capturing your experience into words & art, for sharing & trusting us in all that you do, for being a part of these conversations; thank you.

NTU Mechanical Engineering undergraduate

- Dinie

I am a fresh graduate Graphic Design student from NAFA. I love designing and I also believe that the key to happiness is to be content in life. We have two hands. One is to help ourselves and another hand is to help others.

- Liyana Farzana

I like words & photographs. I enjoy capturing beautiful moments.

- Sukainah Mohsen

Sorfina is a year 2 English major with an intense passion for cats, comics and every film James McAvoy has starred in.

- Nur Sorfina

I am an Information Engineering & Media student who loves taking photos and videos in my free time, especially of people and nature.

- Nur Tatiana

Works in an Oil & Gas industry in Pulau Bukom but also loves anything artsy fartsy. My goal is to make people happy through the art that I do.

- Amira Yasmine

I'm nothing if not an amateur, especially when it comes to art and design. But I'm always trying my best and finding new ways to experiment and improve myself!

- Nashrah Alwi

I am a design student in Art, Design and Media, in Nanyang Technological University. I experiment with different types of design from 2D to 3D and even interactive design. My aesthetic is often minimalist with a vibrant touch to it. I plan to continue giving back to the community, and I hope that one day, I would be able to make an impact to our society.

- Nur Azizah

Design is my passion. Fond of designing and editing ever since I'm exposed to design practices. Embarking the journey as a graphic designer for 1.5 years now. Aside from designing marketing collaterals, I do freelance design too, like illustrations and requests for wedding cards as well.

- Nur Nafisah Zakariah

I spent way too much time deciding what to write here. I'm overthinking and running out of words! So, crash course on me. Likes: Painting, photography, embroidery, fashion, Tony Stark (#LoveYou3000), helping people, self-growth, my baby nephew Yusof. Dislikes: environmental damage, toxicity (#SparkJoy), writing this too close to the deadline.

- Siti Sarah

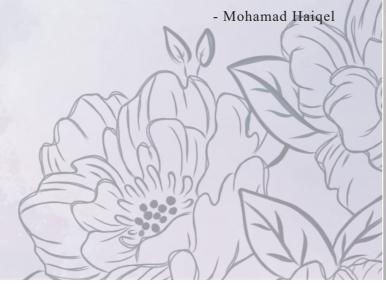
I snap and shoot...moments in life as it happens.

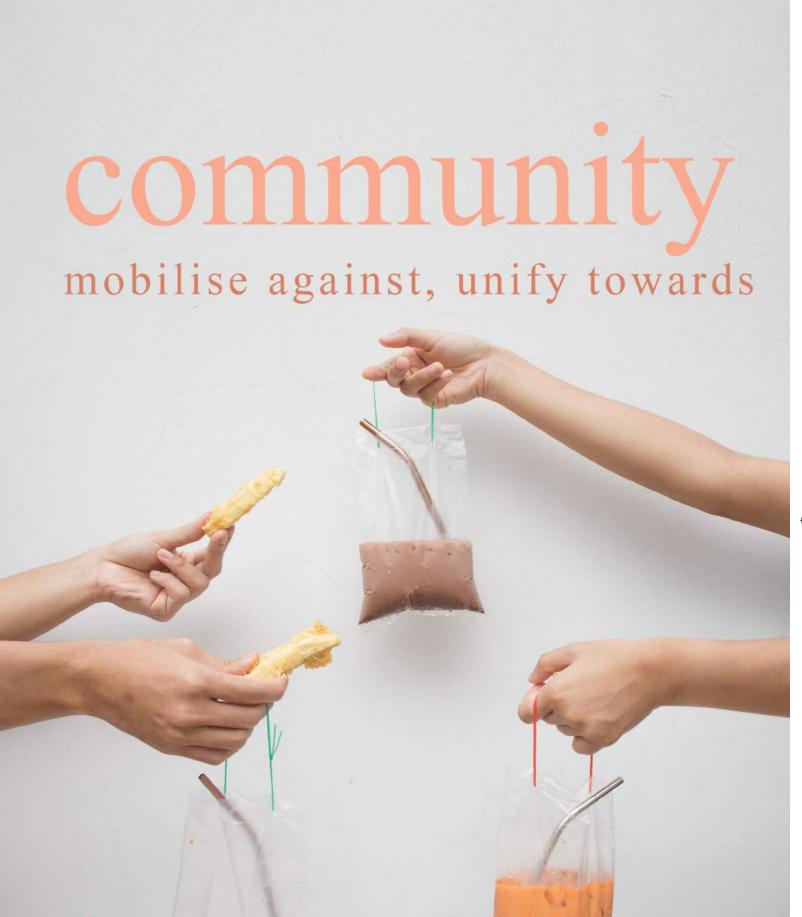
- Nur Aisyah Binte Mohamad Shamsul

A 22-year-old studying English Literature at NTU. She embraces the fields of design and photography to document and create beauty in her everyday life.

- Natasha Kasim

An engineer with a passion of snapping meaningful moments. Picture says a thousand words, reaching out to the thousand that sees it. Cherish those moments.





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### Christchurch

I wake up this Friday to news alerts.

Dozens Hurt -

I wake up to notifications - our brothers and sisters, in the midst of their supplications,

In the midst of talking to Allah find their conversations

cut short.

Firearms Incident -

Gunshots –

Our brothers and sisters in the midst of their supplications,

Tending to their obligations,

Find their souls set free.

I wake up to Trends on Twitter and Hashtags on Instagram,

New Zealand, Christchurch –

I wake up to see

headlines.

**(** 

Multiple Deaths in New Zealand Mosque Shootings

إِنَّا لِللَّهِ وَإِنَّا إِلَيْهِ رَاجِعُونَ

Cut down in the safest of spaces,

In the midst of their supplications,

Mid-conversation

With our Lord, in the safest of places.

I wake up to headlines,

New Zealand Police Warn People to Avoid Mosques

The safest of spaces.

I wake up to stories of a brother who sees a man enter his mosque, who greets him,

Assalaamu'alaikum –

Peace.

Gunshots -

I wake up to retweets, to a video circulating.

Gunshots -

Our brothers, prostrating,

Never to rise to their feet.

I wake up to an ummah shaken, collectively awakened

To a frightening reality, to our mortality, to questions of morality.

A profound sadness runs through our community.

We wake up to a renewed need for unity, we wake up amidst questions from all corners of society.

We wake up to a police statement –

"We ask all mosques to shut their doors"

Seemingly the safest of spaces no more –

But it is imperative they remain open, even more

Crucial than before. It is imperative that we remain open –

Bruised, scarred, but an ummah unbroken

Even as stories come out of blood along the floor.

Unbroken as we are we do not lock ourselves inside.

We do not close our doors, we have nothing to hide.

Our arms are open.

The depths of confusion and consternation can only resolve with conversation.

We wake up, an ummah unbroken.

We wake up to You knocking on our doors, our windows, our hearts and minds,

We wake up to You

Reminding us to be kind

To ourselves, to one another,

Woven, as we are, together.

We wake up to You knocking on our doors, reminding us to be glad

That every time we fall

Asleep, we wake up at all.

We wake up to You.

Are we truly ready for the arms of Your embrace?

Are we truly ready for a conversation with You, face to face?

We wake up.

We wake up to You.

We wake up to headlines, to retweets, to trends on Twitter, on Instagram.

May we remember you.

& may we remember You, Allah.

We wake up to talk to You,

we wake up to talk to 10a

To perform our supplications,

To tend to our obligations,

To join our Lord in conversation.

We wake up for You.

Al-Fatihah.

celebrating contributors

I spend my time studying Philosophy, playing football, writing, and most recently experimenting with taking photographs.

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Questions.

Is it wrong to question the 'unquestionable' in the religion?

As a student who studies religion theologically on top of just generic forms of religious issues pertaining to politics and society, I'm exposed to various other religions besides my own faith, Islam. Inevitably, I'd be asked questions on whether this would ever affect my faith and belief in Islam. Other than learning religion, questioning it is paramount in my pursuit of knowledge. Naturally, I've been exposed to the historical facts of Islam, the interpretation of the Qur'an, and the other

Islamic sciences such as the study of hadith and fiqh alongside the equivalent for Christianity, Sikhism, Judaism, and other religions that I have never even heard of prior to this. On top of reading through their holy scriptures, I explore and question the different contested interpretations in hopes of understanding concepts better. Undoubtedly, religion is a sensitive topic that many feel intimidated to delve into, making it one of the most neglected topics in secular schools. With my passion for knowledge and the questions that I have about the religion, it seems to me that taking on this responsibility is my calling.

After making this bold decision of specialising in religious and ethnic studies as part of my major, I've received multiple concerns from both parents and friends. They were worried that this decision would cause me to find other religions more appealing than my current belief, or that I would misinterpret Islam since I was not learning it from religious teachers or scholars but from Western-educated ones. Some even go as far as thinking that I would convert out of the religion simply because I was studying it without establishing a concrete foothold in Islam yet. Plus, I

was doing the unimaginable; I was questioning the 'unquestionable'.

"If Islam is the true religion, why did God create other ones?"

"If God is truly All-Knowing and the Most-Wise, why did He grant two separate groups of people with different faiths the same holy site?"

All of these harmless questions which were born out of curiosity, if asked anywhere else would be met with this infamous answer:

"Don't question the religion. Things are the way they are for a reason."

Perhaps our culture has unknowingly engineered us to accept things the way they are. Or perhaps it has been embedded in our sub-conscious that certain things in life aren't meant to be questioned. However, if questioning enlightens and empowers us to understand the religion better, why not? Questions create conversations between you and someone else, between you and God, and perhaps most importantly, with yourself.

I believe that questioning is a tool to fully grasp or understand something and this applies to understanding the religion as well. Religion is just like any other matter that you learn in school; reading something in a textbook, or watching a video online, or attending lectures might potentially spark a question in your mind. Most of us would

not dismiss this, pursuing it to seek the answers we deserve. In my years of studying religion and then facing backlash for it, I've encountered people who are able to accept things as they are. Good for them. I, however, do not fall under this category. Questioning things that transcend human comprehension is as frustrating for me as it is for those who are at the receiving end of my questions. However, simply through questioning my own religion, I've obtained valuable and insightful understanding regarding human nature.

Firstly, I've begun to understand that people are afraid of what they don't know. I've had two types of experiences with regards to this. The first group would brush you off with a stern warning that there are things in life that you should not question - religion being one of them. Surprisingly, it's a sentiment that I agree with, as we've learnt that we can't answer questions pertaining to the existence of God in theological classes. Questions like, "Where did God come from?" or "Why did He create the universe?" Of course, we all can never find answers to that.

"They ask you (Prophet Muhammad) about the hereafter [when will be its appointed time?] Say:" The knowledge of that is with my Lord [alone]: None but He can reveal as to when it will occur..."

Qur'an 7:187

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see how we, humans, are not equipped with the knowledge of the exact date of the Day of Judgement. Some information will remain as knowledge only to Allah S.W.T. As such, we should not occupy ourselves with questioning when it is and why we aren't bestowed with such knowledge as the focus should be for us to prepare adequately with the guidelines that have been made available for us to be ready whenever that day comes. That being said, it shows how even the Prophets, scholars, sheikhs, religious teachers have limits to what they know. This is also

In this Qur'anic verse, we

"If the sea were ink for [writing] the words of my Lord, the sea would be exhausted before the words of my Lord were exhausted, even if We brought the like of it as a supplement."

reflected in Surah Al-Kahf:

#### Qur'an 18:109

This verse talks about how if we were to use the oceans as ink to write down the vast knowledge owned by Allah S.W.T, all the oceans would dry out. As mere human beings, we would be delusional to think that we are capable of retaining and holding the whole ultimate truth in our minds. The important thing is to treat each question with respect and not to belittle someone's curiosity.

Contrastingly, the second group would go the extra mile of embarking on a journey to seek answers with you. I've

had questions that are difficult to answer even when directed to religious teachers but they don't tell me that it's wrong to question them, as long as I know the limits to my questions. At the same, I've had friends who go as far as finding videos of reputable Muslim lecturers who might be able to provide better insight. Even as a student specialising in the study of religion, there are things that I don't know and scholars that I've never heard of. This, to me, proves how questions could be a stepping stone to learning more.

The second thing I've begun to understand is that people are wired differently. Asking the right questions is the first step to building rapport and having conversations with different groups of people which helps illuminate perspectives, allowing better understanding. Sometimes, it is through questioning one idea that you'll find answers to a thousand other questions which are related off the far tangent. Personally, I've grown to learn a lot about the attitudes of Malay-Muslims in a conservative society; I've learnt the do's and the don'ts and what the perceived taboos and sensitive topics of conversations are. With that, there is a pressing need for the Malay-Muslim society to develop the interpersonal skills and knowledge to be able to engage in honest conversations, intellectual discussions and civilised debates to learn and understand the contemporary issues and problems which plague the realities of living in this day and age.

Lastly, I've begun to understand that Allah has given us 'aql and the ability to think for ourselves. Unlike the practice of our conservative society, Islam encourages its believers to think critically and question things. It has been reflected in multiple verses in the Qur'an, one of which is:

"Do they not contemplate within themselves? Allah created the heavens and the earth and whatever lies between them in Truth and for an appointed term. Yet many people deny that they will meet their Lord."

#### Qur'an 30:8

This verse explains that if people had reflected within themselves, they would have found an argument which proves the necessity of a second life after the present one – the existence of the Hereafter, the Heaven and Hell. It shows us how 'aql has been bestowed upon us by Allah S.W.T as a special characteristic of man which will set us apart from any other creations Allah has created, and that with everything he has created for us, there is an explanation behind it; we only have to reflect and ponder on it.

I personally believe that questioning the religion is a crucial step for Muslims to ascertain their faith as it enlightens them with the wisdom behind Islamic beliefs and not merely accepting it because of someone else, like parents, or because you

were simply born into the religion. There is a need for us to become conscious Muslims, instead of habitual Muslims who have no or little understanding of our faith. Question, learn, understand, reflect and continue to engage in this healthy cycle. Again, questions beget understanding. Perhaps slowly, but surely.

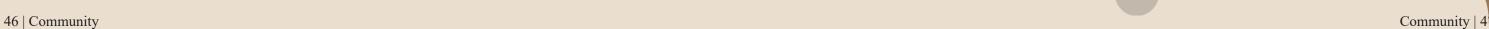
However, there are, of course,

undeniable caveats to all the things I have mentioned above. As much as questions are encouraged in Islam, the importance of being pro-active and seeking answers from proper, reliable sources should not be downplayed. Direct your questions to those who are fully equipped to answer your questions. Also, never venture into the religion and try to interpret religious texts on your own. With multiple misinterpretations of Qur'anic verses that have resulted in various undesirable social outcomes, it is important for us to be able to discern between what is correct and what isn't. Go for classes and find a suitable teacher as this isn't just an important avenue for you to learn, ask and clarify your doubts; it's also a safe space for you to seek advice as you embark on this journey towards understanding the religion.

As an ending note, I'd like to remind everyone, regardless of their standing in the religion that all of us have to start somewhere. As your fellow sister in Islam, my dear readers, let me encourage you to ask the right questions as part of your learning process. There is no need to feel daunted or scared. Your faith is a matter of the heart much more than it is of the brain. Your love for the religion can still grow even if things don't fully make sense at first. After all, Allah knows best and we can only try. May all of our efforts be blessed by Allah in our journey to understand His beautiful religion better.

Amin.







### SPEAKING THROUGH PRESENCE

Prophetic Approach

IN DEALING WITH PREJUDICES

Ustaz Mohammad Hafiz Kusairi

Visuals by Nur Nafisah

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ver supper with some of my younger friends who have just started full time work, a common thread that keeps appearing in our conversation is the issue of prejudices and discrimination. In fact, it has become almost a convenient scapegoat that complements negative workplace experiences: overworked yet underpaid, overdue promotion, perceived preferential treatment and the list goes on. While agreeably factors such as incompetency and indiscipline can also be contributing factors; if not the actual factors themselves, to totally deny the existence of prejudices and the eventual discrimination would equate to sweeping existing realities under the carpet. As the world starts to increasingly lean towards rightist and individualistic sentiments, an inevitable outcome is also the escalation of discriminatory acts towards particular segments of society that stem from prejudices which are often based on unfounded assumptions. In this globalised world, it is almost inevitable therefore that baseless prejudices that rear their ugly heads in another corner of the world can find their place even here in Singapore - a city which has almost incessantly introduced both measures and initiatives to preserve and at the same time strengthen ties between various ethnicities.

I am writing this article not just to highlight this reality, but also to encourage us to not stop at merely being resigned about prejudices and discrimination inflicted upon us. While our claims might be justified, not acting upon it will result in the creation of another fodder for further prejudices — that we ironically fall back rather conveniently to the very issue that we need to address.

In general, a person becomes prejudiced for three main reasons:

- 1. His or her consumption of misinformation relating to particular groups of people, their beliefs and thoughts
- 2. His or her negative experiences with particular groups of people
- 3. His or her misinformation which is further reinforced by his or her negative experiences



Visual by Norulhijriah Mohd Ikbal

We can actually observe therefore that one of the reasons for the pervasion of prejudiced sentiments within individuals stems from their lack of exposure to accurate information and/or positive experiences with the very groups of people they are prejudiced against. In fact, the occasional people who 'escape' their prejudiced lenses occupy another position which is no less demeaning: they are deemed to be exotic or, in short, a fortunate mistake of nature.

We might argue that there would be prejudiced segments of society no matter the volume of accurate information or positive experiences piled upon their conscience. In fact, the Qur'an has highlighted the presence of such people such as Fir'aun and Nimroz who remained adamant in their fallacies despite the overwhelming pieces of evidence presenting undeniable truths before them.

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Yet, Musa was still commanded by Allah to engage Fir'aun as seen with the following verses from Surah Taha, Qur'an 20:43-44:

"Go, both of you, to Pharaoh. Indeed, he has transgressed. And speak to him with gentle speech that perhaps he may be reminded or fear [ Allah ]."

It is the very principle underlining how our beloved Prophet Muhammad peace be upon him (PBUH) deals with the prejudiced treatments of the Makkan nobility towards him. We are not talking about people who simply refused to accept the truth presented to them, but who further escalate their prejudices into acts of violence. We are certainly most aware of the various accounts of abuse hurled upon him and the Muslims in the early days of Islam ranging from verbal abuses to variations of physical abuse, even culminating in murder. But why the steadfastness?

While it remained true that there would be individuals like Abu Jahal, Al Walid bin Mughirah and Utbah Bin Rabiah who would reject truth no matter how their arguments crumbled before it, there were also individuals like Amru Bin Al As and Khalid Bin Walid who, even in their bitterest animosity towards Islam, acknowledged

and recognized (albeit secretly), aspects of the message of Islam which was manifested by the Prophet PBUH and the Companions. Amru Bin Al As never stopped contemplating about Islam and its teachings after he was comprehensively defeated by Saidina Ja'far Bin Abu Thalib in a debate before Najasyi, the King of Ethiopia. Neither did Khalid, the gallant Makkan war general, after he was reduced to a bystander for most parts of the battle of Uhud and Ahzab due to the tactical brilliance of the Prophet PBUH and Saidina Salman Al Farisi. Certainly we have heard about the total change in perception the Prophet's PBUH hostile Jewish neighbour had of the Prophet PBUH when the latter visited his critically ill son upon discovering that he was prevented from placing the thorns which littered the Prophet's path daily because of the condition of his son?

As such, while there will forever be those who will continue to oppose truth and thus remain prejudiced, there will likewise be those who are not yet exposed to adequate information and experiences that will partially remove some of these prejudices, if not all. Here are some ways we can go about addressing prejudices the Prophetic way in this 21st century:

#### 1. Knowing the purpose of our creation

Imam Raghib Al Isfahani (died 1108) pointed out that our purpose of creation is two-fold: Firstly, it is to worship our Creator and secondly, it is to cultivate this world Allah entrusted us with, with beautiful character, with beneficial thoughts and discoveries, with initiatives that enhance the quality of living in general. These call for the creation of numerous positive experiences for those around us. In fact the creation of these positive experiences represents the fruit of one's relationship with his or her Creator. One who is conscious of his or her Creator is most conscious of his or her responsibilities. This will translate into how one conducts his or herself not only before God but also before His creations. One cannot be an ardent worshipper but at the same time be lackadaisical in the discharge of his or her responsibilities at work, untrustworthy in his or her relationship with others. Prejudices feed on negative experiences and we cannot let society consume them due to our failure to appreciate our purpose of creation.

Visuals by Nur Nafisah

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#### 2. Know our Prophet PBUH

Devote more time to read up more about how our Prophet PBUH especially appreciated the societal challenges he faced both in Makkah and Madinah. Study how sensitive and respectful he was towards the realities of each individual that came before him, even his enemies; he acknowledged the heterogeneous nature of Man and varied his treatment of others while remaining just. After which, try to translate these excellent mannerisms into our daily routines: to be more forbearing, to be a better listener, to be gentler in the face of harsher treatment henceforth. Excellent mannerisms (akhlak) will illuminate an unmistakable glow especially in times where regard and care for others today have shrunken beyond notice.

celebrating contributors

Blessed with a patient wife and a son who is his mini-prototype, Hafiz Kusairi enjoys reflecting on and sharing from historical events in addition to contemplating whether he should drop Arsenal for Liverpool.

#### 3. Specialize!

A fundamental purpose of creation is for us to actually contribute purposefully. This requires the identification of our strengths and the needs of the society around us. Harness these strengths and translate them into means to empower the weak, to enhance the strong and enlighten the ignorant. The Prophet's community had scholars in the form of Saidatina Aishah, Saidina Ali Bin Abi Thalib, Saidina Zaid Bin Tsabit, Saidina Abu Musa Al Asy'ari, philanthropists such as Saidina Uthman Bin Affan, Saidina Abdul Rahman Bin Auf, Saidina Abu Bakar As Siddiq and excellent tacticians like Saidina Khalid Bin Walid and Saidina Saad Bin Abi Waqqas. These experts put together created a cohesive community of excellence whose reputation spread far and wide, undeniable even to those who harboured ill-ambitions against them. This reiterates the pertinence of harnessing our strengths into purposeful action in order to address prejudices against ourselves.

#### 4. Articulate Your Thoughts

Do not just be eager to go through the mundane motions in life for fear of responsibility and challenges. Be invested; both as a student and worker. Do not be the one who just breezes through tutorials by contributing ideas only for the sake of 'participation points'; be someone who is prepared to contemplate your thoughts, present them, defend them and improvise them. Be someone who speaks up (purposefully) in meetings; be someone who is always working towards enhancing the experience of those around us. This also extends even to issues such as prejudices and discrimination: raise it with wisdom, articulate your solutions and be the walking example of your beliefs.

Concluding my thoughts, prejudices are here to stay. But understanding the roots of such thoughts and taking up even the simple act of creating positive examples for both ourselves and those around us will go a long way in addressing these prejudices. There can be no better way to do so than by taking a branch out of the Prophet's book, extending its leaves as soothing shade for this increasing restless society we live in.

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### Open-ended

Nasyiba Sahari

f you had walked down the aisle in my school hall on the Monday morning of the 2010 GCE 'O' Level results, I was that one student who dropped Biology. Dropping a science subject was a major travesty of my belonging in the triple science class. But I had realised very late in my secondary school years that sciences were not for me and that I was more inclined towards the humanities.

I used to beat myself up for having to drop a subject, but when I excelled as one of the top students in the cohort, I realised the wisdom behind the last-minute decision of dropping Biology. My humanities grades pulled me up, so that was best for me. I had used the remaining time after my preliminaries to improve and focus on my other subjects, so that was best for me.

I had great dreams and visions following that Monday morning. But now, eight years down the road, I am writing this in the wee hours as my toddler sleeps in the bedroom. I scroll through social media witnessing friends my age move mountains, feeling like it should have been me because I was the one who did well in school. I took a long time to accept what has been decreed upon me and to learn that my life should have always been my own open-ended question. I started to embrace every bit of my being – from being the humanities-inclined girl in that triple science class, to having married young and becoming a mother

In the humanities, there are many questions that challenge you to think hard of what

you believe in on top of the facts that you have to present. It challenges you to see the bigger picture of things – to consider other factors in the situation, to cross-reference with different sources, and to think critically of the sources' intentions instead of looking at things at face value. Hence, they are mostly open-ended. Quite contrastingly for the sciences, which consist of a lot of MCQs, there has to almost always be one correct answer, and even their open-ended questions require a set of compulsory keywords that would secure the full marks.

This had me recalling conversations with my friends' mothers during Eid visiting in the year we were all sitting for the secondary two examinations that would determine our subject combinations. I reminisce those conversations to be a lot like MCQs. They were not like, "What are you aiming for?" to which you are free to answer with your own reasoning, but more of, "Are you aiming for triple science too?" to which there are only two options (yes or no). It had been ingrained in everybody's minds that triple science was the correct answer because it was the best. In retrospect, the very fact that this topic (on subject combination) was the only thing that constantly came up in conversations made it seem like academics was all there is to us students. Other options in that MCQ, to me, would have been family, CCAs, hobbies, yet the correct answer of what seemingly defined us would have been studies.

The problem with these MCQs when it comes to life decisions was: who are we to know what is best for each person? Allah has created each of us unique in many ways, from our skin tones and the shape of our eyes to our strengths, family backgrounds and financial privileges. So, what makes people think there has to be one size that fits all when it comes to planning our journey in achieving success and happiness? Who are they to determine what (worldly) success means to us?

Secondly, our journey does not solely depend on our individual freedom to decide which way to go. We need to always remember that no matter how much we plan for our future, Allah is still the best of planners. At times when we inevitably get disappointed with the way life unfolds for us, we forget to humble ourselves enough to truly believe in what the Qur'an says, "Perhaps you hate a thing and it is good for you; and perhaps you love a thing and it is bad for you. And Allah knows, while you know not" (Qur'an 2:216).

As briefly as possible, this is how my life turned out completely different from what I had pictured it to be. My parents got divorced when I was seven and from then on, I had been living with my mom. My father passed away due to a heart attack when I was 16. My mother lost to breast cancer five years later. As a single mother, she could not leave a house behind as we had been living in a rented residence. Since I was already with someone, we decided to get married as it made more sense for me to move out instead of paying a hefty rent while on my first full-time job. At a time I was struggling to adjust to living with a whole new family while grieving for my mom, I longed for a child. Alhamdulillah, a month

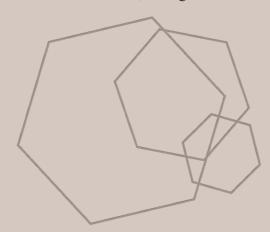
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Perhaps you hate a thing and it is good for you; and perhaps you love a thing and it is bad for you. And Allah knows, while you know not

Qur'an 2:216

before I turned 22, I gave birth to a healthy baby boy. I gave birth to a new meaning of life.

The whole predicament, by Allah's will, has led me here. It has definitely not been a walk in the park, but I have witnessed countless firsthand life lessons that have made me the person I am today. Having married young and currently braving through motherhood without the guidance of my own mother, I have to take a lot of things in my own hands and as daunting as that sounds, I believe in His wisdom, which I always ask to truly see more of everyday. I no longer try to conform to conventional life routes, and no longer beat myself up about it. I see life decisions as openended questions where there has to be reasoning in whatever decision we make, as long as we see life as a journey to one destination – Allah S.W.T. So, the next time you strike a conversation, try to make your questions open-ended, not MCQs.



Celebrating contributors

I'm a 25-year-old mother to a 3-year-old how and Lenjoy spending my free

I'm a 25-year-old mother to a 3-yearold boy and I enjoy spending my free time channeling my reflections and thoughts through writing.

Photo by Aisyah Shamsul

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'Zahir' and 'Batin'.

hese words are uttered during Hari Raya Aidilfitri where Muslims may greet one another with the phrase "Maaf zahir dan batin" which literally means "Forgive my physical and emotional wrongdoings." There is a deeper meaning to these words as these two concepts encompass the philosophical and religious aspects of Muslim culture. 'Zahir' refers to external things or the outward public appearance. It belongs to the physical world, just like our physical form. On the other hand, 'Batin' refers to the hidden meaning or the inner private self. And it belongs to the celestial world, just like our souls. Similar concepts also exist in other countries. In the Chinese culture, there is the 'Inside' and 'Outside' face, which is equivalent to the Japanese culture 'Honne' and 'Tatemae', describing the true sound and the built-in front or facade. This concept is known to be the very foundation of its culture. The distinction between public expressions and private thoughts is of paramount importance in Japan. People are taught to reward the act of maintaining positive relations with others whereas individualistic behaviours are punished. Keeping a good public appearance



THERE IS A DEEPER MEANING TO THESE WORDS AS THESE TWO CONCEPTS ENCOMPASS THE PHILOSOPHICAL AND RELIGIOUS ASPECTS OF MUSLIM CULTURE 32

at all times has also been influenced by social pressures to conform, which is summarized poignantly in the Japanese saying "The hammer that sticks out the most gets hammered in."

However, this strict adherence to the 'Honne' and 'Tatemae' has caused Japan many social problems despite moulding the society to become one of the most polite societies in the world, consequently creating an extremely stressful environment as it pushes this particularly hardworking society to extremities. The Japanese use this term 'Karoshi' which means death contributed to overworking. The Japanese society are imposed with high expectations of emulating the traits of a hardworking employee while adhering to the rigid rules of social interaction, forcing the Japanese to put up a public persona of the ideal Japanese citizen. Due to this pressure, the social phenomenon known as 'Hikikomori' which refers to behaving in a hermit-like manner become prevalent.

A person who has physically isolated himself and avoids all social contact for more than 6 months is diagnosed as a 'Hikikomori'. This diagnosis was coined and officially



recognised by the Japanese government. There is no definite reason to explain why people have become inflicted with this phenomenon. Most people withdraw from society because they can no longer cope with social interactions people around them, especially with the high expectations imposed by the society with regards to emulating the ideal Japanese citizen. The hikikomori phase could possibly be triggered by life-changing events such as failures in academics, relationships or career. An example which captures the stresses of maintaining a positive public face regardless of one's emotional state could be explained by the video in China, showing a female toll booth worker that went viral a few months ago. The toll booth worker was abused by angry drivers which drove her to tears, but she continued to smile as she faced the motorists, wiping away her tears discreetly. This explains the stresses faced by the Japanese in their daily lives as they strive to maintain a positive public face at the expense of their own well-being.

The activities of *hikikomori* include spending most of their days playing computer games and watching TV. To satisfy their need for connection without the burden and pressures of social conformity, they get onto social media. With the prevalence of social media, people can now connect with others without being governed by the rigid rules of physical social interaction. Online, the hikikomori are able to hide behind their anonymity. As such, it is a haven for them, particularly in societies like Japan where individuals are being scrutinised and judged by whatever they say or do. The pressures from their family and the society to embody the ideal Japanese citizen proves to be too much for them causing them to they withdraw entirely from society. Social media thus serves as a safe space from them to retreat into. One effective way to balance the titled scale due

to the unrealistic expectations and pressures of being an ideal citizen through putting up a positive public persona is with an outlet that allows individuals to share their inner thoughts and feelings. Thus, achieving a balance of an individual's *zahir* and *batin* aspects. Although social media is the most favoured tool which allows this balance to be achieved, it comes at the cost of an individual's desire to present himself in public as the safe space has been established while hiding behind anonymity, safe from judgment and scrutiny.

The need to balance these two aspects are important in navigating different social circles as an adult. Although Singapore's societal expectations are not as rigid as in Japan, there is still a standard to adhere to lest we lose our manners or civility, though these standards would less likely drive an individual to being inflicted with the hikikomori condition. Like Japan, however, Singapore is quick to shame someone who deviates from societal norms. Whatever that is being said or done would be subjected to scrutiny. Singapore's culture does not impose a strict rule for social interaction but constantly being in proximity with other people would lead inevitably lead to the desire to conform to social norms, which poses as a societal pressure. This leads to pent-up frustration and stress that they are unable to express in public for the fear of getting hammered down and shamed by the society, simply to maintain their zahir. Hence, individuals fall back on the constant use of social media in to voice out their true feelings and opinions, achieving the balance of zahir and batin.



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Singapore has its own way of shaming someone who deviates from the social norms. The more trivial cases are the ones shown on Stomp, the Singapore Citizen journalist website, where the type of news covered ranges from issues relating to inappropriate public display of affection to atrocious behaviour of high-profile figures, such as the Sim Lim mobile store owner Jover Chew and his dishonest business practises. Recently, the Grab passenger who complained she was being kidnapped when the driver went to her destination through a route that incurred ERP charges also made it onto the news. All these cases went viral through social media and the consequences suffered by the perpetrators included harassment and even receiving death threats constantly. In these cases, social media served as a platform to expose the immoral acts of people, allowing netizens to collectively shame and bring down an individual who has behaved immorally

in a public sphere. It has also become a

tool to bring justice to the perpetrators of

immoral acts in addition to balancing the

scale between zahir and batin. But due to

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the overwhelming amount of vitriol online,

denouncing an evil deed could be problematic as there is a lack of etiquette in doing so.

Coming back to the issues of hikikomori in Japan, Oguri Ayako works as a 'rental sister' for a Japanese non-profit organization called 'New Start'. Her job is to talk to the hikikomori and bring them out of their seclusion. She would begin interacting with them by writing letters and passing it to them under their door. She would also have to talk to them through the door because some of them refuse to let her in. It could take months for them to finally warm up to her and open their doors. Subsequently, it would take many more months before they agree to go out of their house. In some extreme cases, hikikomori who do not receive treatment due to the fear of being stigmatised may stay locked in their rooms for more than 10 years. Eventually, with the proper help and guidance, they would be able to assimilate back into society and find work.

"At first, I thought they were lazy and selfish," Ayako admits, but through consistent contact and conversation, she learned how thoughtful and perceptive they could be. She eventually fell in love with Ikuo Nakamura, a hikikomori she had helped and the two are planning to get married. Now, he wants to become a 'rental brother' like her to help other hikikomori. This love story would not have happened had it not been for the connection they felt which was established through face to face conversations instead of relying on social media. All of us can learn from Ayako and Ikuo's story - that true connection and love can only flourish when we strive to create a balance between our zahir and batin, which can only be achieved with patience and understanding.

celebrating contributors

I am someone who loves to read and aspires to live free and travel the world while having an online business. Still trying to find the best version of myself through prayers, meditation and books. I'd also like to open a Mee Rebus cafe.



re-establishing a spiritual connection with Allah

Ustazah Unaisah Adam

n today's hyperconnected world driven by technological platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube and LinkedIn, we often get caught up in trying to update one another on our social network with our lives. We share with the world a snapshot of the food that we eat, we record IG stories and vlogs about our daily lives and we even post quotes and memes to intrigue our family and friends.

Without realising, many of us seem to have drifted away from having a real conversation with our Creator, Allah S.W.T, to the extent that it is easier now to feel spiritually disconnected from Him especially with all the technological advancements and devices which keep us active online.

Our culture of instant communication and excessive online presence has adversely made us feel increasingly disconnected by making us neglect relationships that truly matter to us. Social media itself can be a virtual distraction that will affect our communication with Allah S.W.T if we are not careful.

Our hearts, however, do not distance themselves from Allah S.W.T overnight. It usually starts to drift away when we become less concerned with the quality of our 'ibādah (acts of worship).

This is probably noticeable when we delay our prayers or become overtly concerned with our materialistic lifestyle such as our postings on social media. We also tend to belittle the sins that we may have committed on a daily basis.

Living in an age of increasing connectivity, how does one re-establish a spiritual connection with Allah S.W.T? To re-establish our spiritual connectivity with the Creator, it is best to learn from the experiences of our Prophets, Ibrahim A.S, Musa A.S and Rasulullah PBUH, which are extracted from the Qur'an. Here are three guiding principles that we can follow to reconnect ourselves with Allah S.W.T.

"And your Lord said.
"Call on Me.
I will respond to you."

Qur'an 40:60

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#### Take Allah as Your Friend - Prophet Ibrahim A.S

In this digital age, we often struggle to find the true meaning of friendship and companionship. Have you ever felt lonely despite having so many friends on your social network? Whom would you consider a true friend in times of both happiness and hardship?

Amongst other prophets, Prophet Ibrahim A.S was distinctly described in the Holy Qur'an as a friend of Allah S.W.T (*khaleelullah*). In Qur'an 4:125,

"And who has a better religion than he who submits himself entirely to Allah? And he is the doer of good (to others) and follows the faith of Ibrahim, the upright one, and Allah took Ibrahim as a friend."

The verse above indicates how important Prophet Ibrahim's A.S position is in the sight of Allah. You might ask, "What makes Prophet Ibrahim A.S so special to be regarded as Allah's friend?" There are several verses in the Qur'an that suggest his significance and extraordinary ranking, as compared to the other prophets, which is largely due to the purity and sincerity of his relationship with his Creator. Prophet Ibrahim A.S was known to be in constant communication with Allah S.W.T through supplications or du'a. In Qur'an 4:125,

"My Lord: Grant me authority, and join me with the righteous. And grant me a reputation of honour among later generations."

Allah S.W.T answered Prophet Ibrahim's A.S prayers, as stated above, by rewarding him with the highest honour and reputation among all the generations of believers who came after him.

This includes the followers of from all three monotheistic faiths, Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

When speaking about Prophet Ibrahim A.S, the famous story in which he was once saved by Allah S.W.T from a blazing fire jumps to mind. It was reported that when Prophet Ibrahim A.S was thrown into the fire, he recited a du'a similarly found in Surah Ali Imran, Qur'an 3:173, "Allah is sufficient for me, He is the best disposer of my affairs.". Consequently, Allah S.W.T saved his beloved prophet with His divine order to the fire, "O fire! Be coolness and safety for Ibrahim" (Surah Al-Anbiya, Qur'an 21:69). A miracle occurred as the fire burned only his chains and Prophet Ibrahim emerged unscathed, peaceful and not even a trace of smoke was found on his clothes.

Such are the blessings given to those who remain in constant communication with Allah S.W.T. Therefore, we should emulate Prophet Ibrahim's A.S eagerness in establishing a sincere relationship with his Creator through regular supplications to Allah S.W.T.

### Deeper Conversations with Allah - Prophet Musa A.S.

Nabi Musa was one of the blessed Prophets to have spoken directly with Allah. This is evidenced in the exchange between Allah S.W.T and Prophet Musa A.S. in Surah Taha, Qur'an 20:10-12,

"Has the story of Musa reached you? When he saw the fire and said to his family, 'Stay indeed, I have perceived a fire; perhaps I can bring you a torch or find at the fire some guidance'. And when he came to it, he was called, "O Musa, Indeed I am your Lord, so remove your sandals. Indeed, you are in the sacred valley of Tuwa.."

To the ordinary human being, the idea of striking a direct conversation with God may seem impossible but we should never let that dampen our hopes to engage ourselves in deeper conversations with our Creator. How do we then achieve deeper conversations with Allah S.W.T? Prophet Musa A.S. speaks to Allah through supplications and his remembrance of the Creator, also known as zikr. Zikr can be considered as one of the most excellent forms of worship and whoever engages in zikr will attain a high rank before Allah amongst others. Zikr is not restricted to just prayers and worship, it is much more than that. What sets Islam apart from all the other faiths is zikr.

The greatest form of zikr is the fear of Allah. In a prophetic tradition (hadith), Abu Sa'eed al-Khudri reported that the Messenger of Allah said,

"Musa said: O Lord! Teach me something that I can remember You with and I can supplicate You with. Allah said: Say 'La ilaaha ill Allah', O Musa. He (Musa) said: All of your servants say this. He (Allah S.W.T) said: If the seven Heavens and those who dwell in them other than Me and the seven Earths are put into one pan (of the scale) and 'La ilaaha ill Allah' is put into the other; 'La ilaaha ill Allah' would be heavier."

This hadith has been reported by Ibn Hibban, and Al-Hakim declared it sahih (authetic). The hadith shows the significance of zikr. Any form of remembrance or performing a righteous deed is a form of zikr which brings us closer to Him, like how Prophet Musa A.S and other prophets became closer to their Creator through the act of remembrance.



Visual by Remy Mahzam

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### Disconnect to Reconnect - Prophet Muhammad PBUH

The discussion on re-establishing a spiritual connection with Allah S.W.T would not be complete without mentioning our beloved Prophet Muhammad PBUH has taught us one of the most powerful spiritual practices in Islam known as *khalwa*, or spiritual seclusion.

Khalwa requires us to disconnect from worldly interactions and withdraw ourselves from the dunya (world) so that we connect better spiritually to with Allah S.W.T.

Prophet Muhammad PBUH himself practised khalwa throughout his life before and after becoming the Messenger of Allah. The Prophet PBUH would spend time in seclusion, away from society in the cave of Hira' where he indulged himself in contemplation and self-reflection.

"One hour of introspection is more valuable than seventy years of worship."

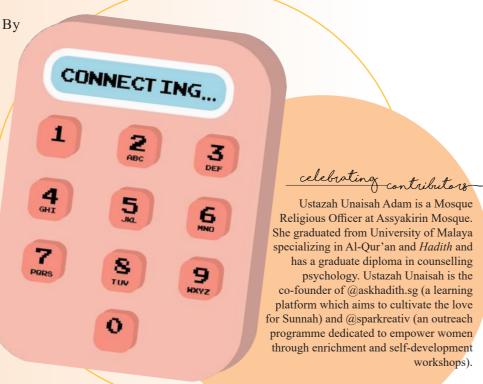
(Suyuti, Jamiu's-Saghir, 2/127; Ajluni, I/310)

In this digital age, we need to revive the practice of khalwa – to disconnect ourselves from our social media involvements temporarily to enhance our relationship and communication with Allah S.W.T. By incorporating khalwa in our life, it is an attempt to increase our inner peace through a meditative process in order to deepen our affiliation with the divine presence of Allah S.W.T.

In conclusion, in Surah Ar-Rad, Qu'ran 13:28, it has been beautifully mentioned,

"Verily in the remembrance of Allah, do hearts find rest."

we need to make space and time to be closer to our Creator and this could be achieved through worship, reflection and remembrance. There is a beauty in disconnecting ourselves from worldly affairs to re-establish our spiritual connection with Allah S.W.T. Prophet Musa A.S, Ibrahim A.S and Muhammad PBUH are exemplary figures that we should follow. They taught us ways to be closer to our Creator amidst the hustle and bustle of life through incorporating spiritual practices in our life. Set Allah S.W.T as our priority and use every opportunity and turn it into a form of worship to Allah S.W.T.



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MUHAMMAD IRFAN BIN JAMALUDIN

Abandoned? Isolated? Forgotten? And have you ever asked yourself why? We would often jump to conclusions and resort to releasing our frustrations and voicing out our unfounded assumptions on social media without identifying reasons for this knee-jerk reaction.

Whether or not we're alone, Satan would always be our constant company. However, being alone makes us even more vulnerable to all the whisperings & doubts which aggravates whatever negative emotions we feel, especially anger. The root cause of all detrimental characteristics within us is anger. Not being able to get what we want or what we think we deserve inevitably makes us angry and frustrated, which could potentially be aggravated into various undesirable traits including envy. We refuse to allow others to enjoy their blessings in peace as we're unable to accept that others are doing better than us, motivating us to taint their happiness by exposing their shortcomings in order to feed our selfish insecurities. This is the extent that we go to just to make ourselves feel better. As such, on the authority of Abu Hurayrah (may Allah be pleased with him), it was narrated that the Prophet peace and blessings be upon him (PBUH) mentioned, "Do not be angry." and repeated these 3 times to emphasise the importance of controlling our anger (related by Bukhari & Muslim).

Imam Al-Ghazali mentioned in his book, 'Ihya' Ulum Al-Din':

"One of the great doors of Satan is bad ideas and opinions about Muslims. Allah says, "O you who believe, avoid most of suspicion, for surely suspicion in some cases is a sin" (Qur'an 49:12).

This suggests that Satan encourages and fuels the need for us to backbite about someone, especially a person you've had a bad impression of.

Also, he highlighted another important point in another section of his book:

"Every man should know the source of his thoughts, whether it comes from angels or devils. He should examine them by deep insight and not by the dictates of passion and low desires. Their sources will not be disclosed to him except by the light of God-consciousness (taqwa) and deep knowledge. Allah says, "Surely those who guard (against evil) when a visitation from Satan afflicts them they become mindful" (Qur'an 7:201). In other words, they return to the light of knowledge."

As such, the reason why we feel misunderstood, abandoned and isolated is due to our negative assumptions which we've created in our minds. The only way for these feelings to be inhibited is when we engage in conversations with the people around us.

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#### Tackling Assumptions through Conversations

Nowadays, our IT-savvy generation has an inexplicable attachment to their smart phones, occupying most of their time in the virtual world and investing most of their efforts in maintaining superficial relationships online. This reduces the intrinsic value of real-time and face to face interactions, leading to an increasing disinterest in engaging with the people around us in the real world.

Every relationship is susceptible to conflicts. With the lack of communication, fuelled by anger which could potentially breed unfounded

assumptions, conflicts would undoubtedly worsen thus hindering our ability to maintain and nurture relationships.

According to a Straits Times article titled "Muslim Divorces In A 5-Year Low", the Department of Statistics stated that the total amount of divorces decreased from a total of 1702 to 1637 between year 2012 to 2017. The contributing factor to the decrease in Muslim divorce rates is the Government's increased efforts in conducting marriage counselling sessions. This proves that conflicts could be defused through having a conversation which could prevent and even address negative assumptions to maintain and further strengthen ties between loved ones.

#### Monitoring the Conversation from Within

Our actions are based on our thoughts, which in turn are based on our desires.

By monitoring our internal dialogue, we would be free from all negative assumptions we have for other people. Our assumptions of others are often negative as everyone of us wants to feel that we are the best amongst the rest. To feel that we are better and superior. This is the doing of our ego. As Muslims, we must constantly strive to purify ourselves from negative assumptions and not comply with our ego (nafs).

These negative and false assumptions must be controlled and could be countered by thinking well (*husnuzzon*) and doing good to others, which Etsko Schuitema has elaborated beautifully in his book entitled "The Millennium Discourses":

"While you want something, your being is held in the clutches of the other. You become peripheral, you become defined, you become weak, and you are not at centre. On the other hand, if you focus on what you should be contributing, you go back to centre. Contribution is, by definition, affirmation. Contribution means, I am not here to negate you, or to get something from you. It means rather that I am here to affirm you, to give you something. I am here to assist you. You are worthy of my care, my love and my reward."

At the same time, one of the ways to minimize negative internal dialogue would be through the remembrance of Allah (*zikrullah*), as mentioned by Imam Al-Ghazali in Ihya' Ulum Al-Din:

"The means of saving oneself from the machinations of the Devil is to shut the doors of thoughts, which are the five senses, sexual passion and worldly connections.

The door of thoughts remains open in the heart and will not be closed if the heart is not kept engaged in the remembrance of Allah. Even the Devil tries to make him forgetful of it. This fight continues until his death. As long as he lives, he is not released from the Devil, and the door of passion, hatred and greed remains open to the heart."

While you want something, your being is held in the clutches of the other.,

Conversations with God: Istightar and Its Benefits

As the internal dialogue in our heads are always ongoing, overthinking is an inevitable. We're always bombarding ourselves with "what if's", questioning the endless possibilities of our affairs which could easily take a wrong turn. With the power of *istighfar*, it serves as a protection from such thoughts.

A daily dose of *istighfar* reminds us of importance of relying on Allah and leaving our affairs to Him which puts us at ease. As Ibn 'Abbas (may Allah be pleased with him) said: The Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings be upon him) said, "If anyone constantly seeks pardon (from Allah), Allah will appoint for him a way out of every distress and a relief from every anxiety and will provide sustenance for him from where he expects not." [Abu Dawud]

Not only does engaging in *istighfar* allow us to attain trust towards Allah, it also reminds us that Allah is in charge, thus relaxing the mind and controlling the inner dialogue. This point is poignantly expressed by Etsko Schuitema in his book "The Millennium Discourses":

"We are His creatures. So, the art of being alive is the art of living unconditionally. Living unconditionally means you do not present life with a list of expectations, but you accept what has been ordained for you. You are unconditional in your gratitude for what has been given. This unconditional gratitude enables unconditional behaviour, and the more unconditional you are in terms of how you behave, the freer you become. The more conditional you are, the more miserable you become."

\_\_\_\_\_\_celebrating\_contributors

I'm currently a full time Assistant Engineer and a part time student. I feel we need to be productive, keep on learning and doing great things that inspire and lead others to doing good!

It's no wonder that the Prophet PBUH encouraged us to *istighfar*. The Prophet PBUH *istighfar* at least 70 times a day. Abu Hurairah (may Allah be pleased with him) said: I heard the Messenger of Allah saying, "I swear by Allah that I seek Allah's pardon and turn to Him in repentance more than seventy times a day." [Al-Bukhari]

As most of us have already known, istighfar is saying "Astaghfirullah" which means "Pardon me O Allah!". However, there is a deeper meaning to istighfar. The root word for istighfar is "ghafar" meaning 'to cover', in such a way that it is protected from dirt. By engaging in istighfar consistently, Allah will forgive our sins and also protect us from filthy things which could potentially taint our hearts such as committing sins and our own ego, which has been summarised concisely again by Etsko Schuitema in his book "The Millennium Discourses":

"Istighfaar is about the capacity to shut down your agenda by covering yourself."

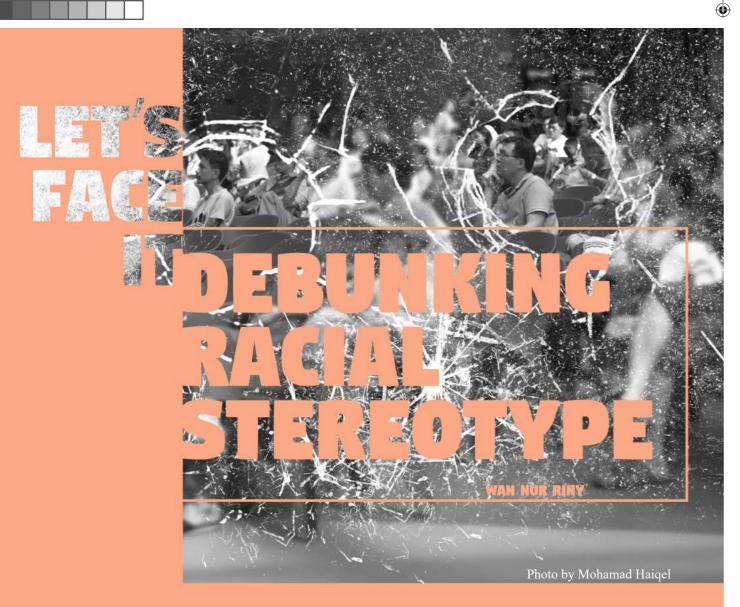
Essentially, consistent *istighfar* would provide daily protection against the evil which surrounds and is present within us – such as the dangers of overthinking, the detrimental negative assumptions we harbour towards other people.

Visuals by Azizah

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ssues involving race are usually considered taboo in multi-racial Singapore that prides Litself in having and upholding racial and religious harmony. Singapore has come a long way since its early days of nation building by embracing its diverse people and establishing policies that champion towards a unified citizenship goal. Now that we are considered a success story of racial and religious harmony, it's time to question how truly successful we are in terms of having absolutely no racial bias and prejudice. For the average Singaporean who has gone through at least 10 years of formal education and tons of Citizenship and Character Education lessons (not to mention 10 years worth of Racial Harmony Day), have we truly internalised the ideal values taught? Have we really sought to understand the racial differences, and embraced them? Have we sincerely made the concerted effort towards an inclusive society by embracing the racial diversity around us? Or have we merely been tolerating the diversity, and suppressing our true preconceived judgments?

O YOU WHO BELIEVE! BE PATIENT AND EXCEL IN PATIENCE AND REMAIN STEADFAST, AND BE CAREFUL OF (YOUR DUTY TO) ALLAH, THAT YOU MAY BE SUCCESSFUL. QUR'AN 3:200

#### WHAT I FACE

As a minority in Singapore, it is not uncommon to find myself to be the only person representing my race in almost every step of my education journey. In fact, I faced discrimination as early as in primary school. At the age of 12, just a few months before PSLE, my Mathematics teacher made a striking comment that has haunted me throughout my education journey since then. As she was returning our test papers, she commended the Malay students (i.e. only 3 of us in the class) for doing well despite the notion that Malays are not, and will never be, good at Math. Her sweeping comment left a significant impact on me and I often find myself questioning my abilities in that subject from then on. Each time I fail to

do well, I tend to attribute it to my race. Such an impact during those tender, formative years was so significant that perhaps it had hindered my confidence and self-esteem till this day.

What about my teenage years? Well, have you ever been in one of those situations when the topic about stereotypes surfaces and you have to endure and cringe throughout as they discuss the stigma behind "Malays are lazy" or "Malays are drug addicts"? Even though it was meant to be teachable moments, and as much as that happened frequently, I will never be able to shake off that uncomfortable feeling. How am I supposed to react when my race—and by extension, me—is being arrowed?

Even throughout university, I would always find myself at the centre of unsaid perceptions and judgements during group projects, during workshops, and most recently, during a privilege walk activity. I get assigned to groups as their token minority representative; I am always expected to share my experiences as a minority at every workshop. How exhausting that the only value they place on my presence is to make them appear more inclusive! Do I even get the chance to value-add in other ways?

#### **HOW I FACE THEM**

How often do we see the media perpetuating racial stereotypes that only reinforces the underlying problem? I figured that the only thing I can do is to prove them wrong. Ever since my Math teacher made that comment, I harnessed that frustration into something productive. Every step of my education journey, I always had to remind myself: I am not going to be another negative Malay statistic as society paints us out to be. So, I keep trying, and trying—to be the better version of myself. As much as it felt good proving my Math teacher wrong by having that A\* for Math, or proving to society wrong by actually being able to graduate from a local university on my own academic merit, how effective and impactful are my efforts, truly? For how long do minorities like myself have to work extra hard just to prove people wrong? Why are we even accountable to them? There is a power imbalance if we

constantly have to prove people wrong. Instead, we need to address this perception at its root. At the same time, we too must be aware of our own innate prejudices towards other races. We need to stop subconsciously perpetuating these harmful and hurtful racial stereotypes. We need to train ourselves to adopt a more open and accepting mindset towards everyone in society. It starts from our mindset, and it will show in our actions and behaviour. Only then, we can progress into an inclusive society.

#### SELF-REMINDERS

Balancing deen and dunya can be a struggle—but I believe it is a struggle that we can get through. But we need to rely on Allah S.W.T. We are competent. We can achieve great things, with Allah's help. On days when I feel down at my inadequacy, I find myself making endless doas for strength and guidance. Some quotes that I hold firmly to:

'O you who believe! Be patient and excel in patience and remain steadfast, and be careful of (your duty to) Allah, that you may be successful.' (Qur'an 3:200)

'And the slaves of the Most Beneficent (Allah) are those who walk on the earth in humility and sedateness, and when the foolish address them (with bad words) they reply back with mild words of gentleness.' (Qur'an 25:63)

The Prophet PBUH said: 'Verily, Allah loves that when anyone of you does something he does it perfectly.' [Al-Bukhari]

Enthusiastic adrenaline junkie with an interest in intersectional feminism, superheroes, and everything pop culture. Also, when I'm not eating, I'm thinking about what to eat later.

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# Representation of Women in Bollywood is still a Work-In-Progress

Nur Laili

s I flipped the channel to Vasantham for its weekly Hindi movies on Saturday, I was served with the movie, Sanam Teri Kasam. While watching the protagonist, Saraswati (Saru), being constantly shoved into one arranged marriage proposal after another, I could not help but squirm in my seat. I was exasperatedly groaning and yelling an ironic "Of course" as I watched how the story unfurled. Of course she had to have a patronising and cold-blooded father. Of course Saru's sister was selfish and only concerned about her own marriage. Of course her mother would never stand up for her daughter.

After all, what did I expect? I was watching that kind of Bollywood romance movie: the kind with a fundamentally flawed society, with subtle prejudices and injustices against women and with women who seem to be wearing rose-coloured lenses that conveniently blocked out all these discriminatory rays (and ways) from their eyes. Well, Saru may be able to quietly accept this unfairness, but – as my cousin heard from my incessant commentary while watching the movie – I could not.

Soon, probably to silence my ranting or to acknowledge the inherent problems of the film, my cousin reciprocated my so-far monologue. She emphasised that many Bollywood movies, new or old, still conform to very archaic notions of a woman's role in society. Many of them reinforce the stereotype of the submissive and passive girl, pushed around like a pinball in a patriarchal society. My cousin also conveniently shattered my pristine and nostalgic image of my all-time favourite

Bollywood romance, Kuch Kuch Hota Hai (KKHH), in proving her point. I had to grudgingly admit that in KKHH, the vibrant and vivacious Anjali (played by Kajol) that was introduced in the beginning was watered down to a quiet and cautious fiancée. I was also unwillingly reminded of how, just like Saru had to go through a makeover to impress her suitor, Anjali too dolled up (from her usual tomboy get-up) to impress her oblivious love interest, Rahul. Anjali's life, just like Saru's, came to a standstill after a man rejected her.

After making me re-think a movie I grew up watching, my cousin made a very poignant point that struck me: a lot of these issues we pointed out about these movies transcends that of the filmic realm; a lot of them are very real, very prevalent issues in our world, even till today. It is a sad truth that art was merely echoing real-life.

Particularly, we noticed two problems that were constantly recurring in the movies and are still prevalent in the South Asian and even the Muslim society in Singapore:

- I. Women must always look, act and behave in a certain way in order to find a future spouse and any less is gravely frowned upon.
- 2. Women are quietly accepting their unjust treatment by the men around them.

I have a bone to pick with both these issues because it takes a fundamental concern for Asian (and Muslim) women and problematises it to an extent that makes being a woman an unending bid to please everyone.

In KKHH, for instance, when Anjali finally realised she had feelings for her friend Rahul, she also realised

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another thing: she was invisible in the eyes of the man she loved because – much like the iconic lines of Taylor Swift's song – "(the other girl) wears high heels (and she) wears sneakers". Her hostel matron perpetually questions her fashion choice. Similarly, our society is not very different from Anjali's. As I mentioned in the first point above, people are quick to dismiss a Muslimah as a potential wife if she has not donned the hijab or if she does not present her femininity. Now don't get me wrong, the basis for these decisions are very reasonable: every Muslimah should strive for modesty and femininity. However, my issue stems not so much from these expectations but rather the community's reactions when Muslimahs fail to live up to these expectations. Some people like to degrade a Muslimah by attacking her level of faith when she is not wearing the hijab. It becomes a topic for gossip in the community. In fact, even Muslimahs who do wear the hijab but whose attire may not be adequately modest to the public eye is also equally shamed.

Unfortunately, harsh shaming-culture is not specific to just Muslims. It is a culture that is normalised and propagated by the media: big household names like Hollywood and Bollywood depict the image of the ideal woman, everyone consuming these movies internalise these expectations and they make use of media (specifically social media) to victim-shame people who do not conform. I believe this is highly unsettling for one main reason, we criticise instead of giving constructive advice. We blame before these women can explain. And this is highly unfair because it disrupts a fundamental belief in Islam which is to husnuzzon (Arabic for thinking positively of others) and not create fitnah (Malay for slander). As such, I believe as a society, Muslim or not, we need to learn to be more understanding of

each other. We need to ask and listen to why people act and behave the way they do before immediately jumping into slander. And even if their reasons seem questionable, we need to learn to politely explain to them why they should work on improving themselves. After all, when Aisha R.A (may Allah be pleased with her) was accused of adultery, our Prophet (peace be upon him) remained patient with her and was not hasty to chastise her based on the rumours. Similarly, we as Muslims need to learn and emulate the patience demonstrated by our role model in Islam, especially when dealing with women who do not exactly fit our expectations.

Moreover, in the case of Sanam Teri Kasam, when Saru was wrongly accused of a pre-marital affair, the father instantly decided on an equivalent to 'honour killing', he pronounced his still-very-alive daughter as dead and exiled her from home. And Saru's voice is absent in this whole dilemma. This ties in with the second point: women remain silent despite men's consistent ill-treatment of them. Understandably, Saru was at a loss for words at such a decision. Yet it hurts to see her and know that many other women are much like her, unwilling to speak up in their defence. I really wish more women realise that they do not have to be passive recipients of harsh or even abusive behaviour. Islam does not condone the mistreatment of anyone, not even women, regardless of the reason.

In fact, there is even an example of how Allah S.W.T supports the rights of women in abusive relationships in the Quran. In Surah Al-Mujadila, it recounts the story of how a woman complained to Allah S.W.T about her husband and He sent down these verses to protect the rights of any woman who has been mistreated by their husbands. Surely, our religion does not encourage any form of abuse as the very name of our religion, Islam, connotes

peace. As such, I advocate for women protecting and defending themselves and their safety. Yet, I suspect that the fundamental mindset that prevents women from doing so is that they do not feel like their voices and sides of the story deserve to be heard nor will it be believed. I don't know about you, but this is completely saddening for me. Ultimately, in this digital age, we should be advocating for the right of every voice to be heard instead of the perpetuation of silence. I believe the media needs to have more nuanced representations of women instead of silencing them with the archetype of passive wife/daughter. As for our part, every brother and sister of Islam should also stand up for any women around them that may be oppressed.

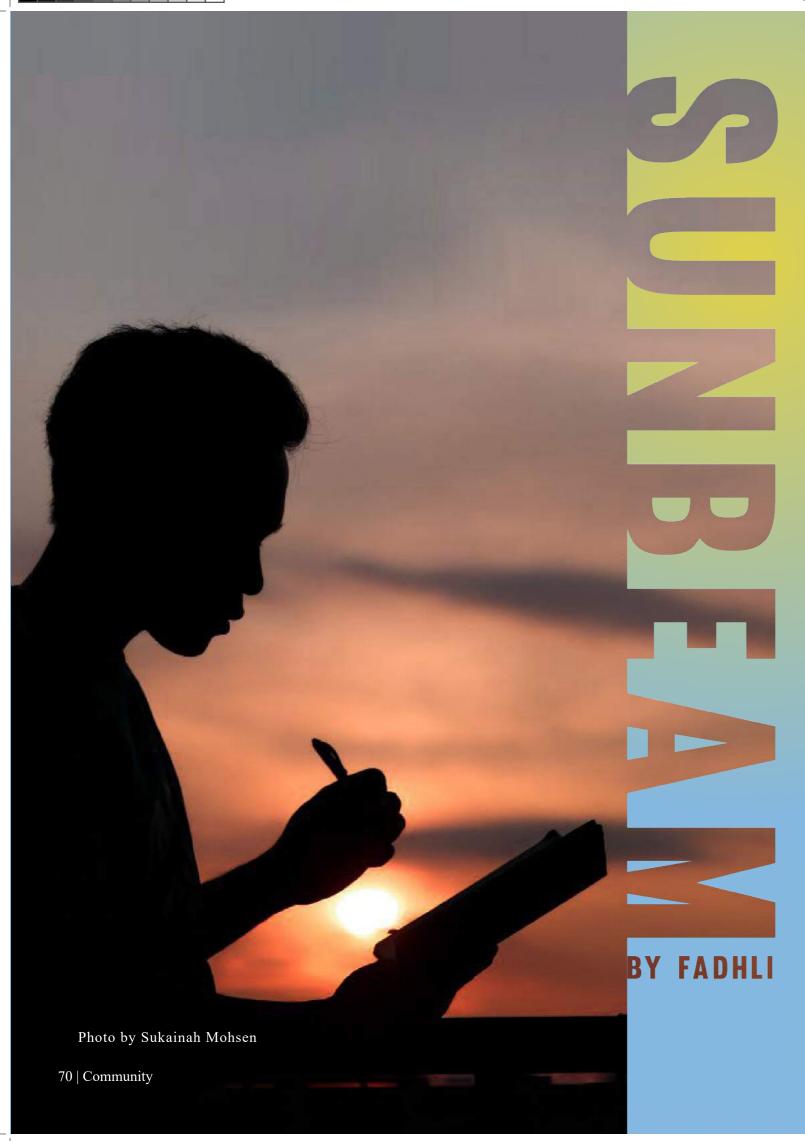
And this is not a far-stretch. In fact, moving on from Bollywood movies, a very progressive Malay drama took the Malay-Muslim world by storm last year as it presented the story of one of the most marginalised groups of women in society, especially a Muslim society, prostitutes. The drama, by the name of Nur, postulated the notion that such women should be judged just like any other brother and sister of Islam, specially if she herself is a Muslim, by her iman. The show juxtaposed her very controversial occupation with her unwavering love for Allah S.W.T. These are the kinds of shows that are important in our society as it reminds us of the core basics of our religion, that every man and woman is equal and only differentiated by their faith, which at the end of the day, is a personal and private endeavour. As such, while I do understand the media has a long way to go before it completely eradicates such stereotypes of women, I at least hope that we as Muslims learn from both the flat and complex representations of women and have meaningful conversations about them so we can grow to be a more inclusive and compassionate ummah insha Allah (God willing).



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Have you ever felt misunderstood?

It's a common feeling. You're trying to get the words out of your head to this other person. You want to get them to understand, to see what you see. Sometimes, you manage to find just the right words and you can almost see that little click in their eyes when they finally understand you. Other times, you're no better off than when you started.

As Muslims, we are misunderstood quite a bit. It's frustrating to see mistruths so widespread and accepted. Considering this, we must do what we can to right it. Or, at least try. One of the ways we can do this is through conversations.

There's a lot to be said about the kind of conversations that we should have but I won't delve into that here. Instead, I want to focus on raising the quality of our conversations. Raising the quality of our conversations would benefit us in a myriad of ways. One of which is to help us be better people. Beyond that, I believe that there are a few principles that we can adhere to, to have better conversations. They are truthfulness and empathy.

Quality conversations are the bedrock upon which meaningful relationships are built. They form the bulk of our most worthwhile interactions with people. The power of conversation is a peculiar one. Its initial appeal lies in its immediacy. However, the true power of conversation lies in its ability to affect us in lasting ways. Good conversations entertain. Great conversations endure. They live on as part of that internal well we draw upon to form our opinions and in turn, our perspectives. As much as we shape them, they shape us in ways we can't see. Thus, having better conversations is a path towards becoming a better person.

As narrated by Sahih Muslim (2607), the Prophet PBUH said: "I enjoin you to be truthful, for truthfulness leads to righteousness and righteousness leads to Paradise...".

#### Truth over falsehoods.

It's a lesson that underpins the stories that we pass down to those that come after us. It speaks to truth's essential place in our lives. Telling the truth isn't a basic moral principle, it's the

basic moral principle for it is the foundation upon which everything else depends on. It is only by consistently telling the truth are we able to build the necessary trust required to build a relationship. The same trust that is required to have a meaningful conversation. It's not that you can't have a good conversation with people who don't adhere to the truth. It's just immensely difficult to do so. Without that implicit agreement that what you speak is the truth, it's difficult to have any meaningful conversation at all.

#### Cultivate empathy through your conversations.

As we lead our lives, there's a tendency for us to get locked into our own thoughts, emotions and perspectives. This is our default setting. The weight of our perspectives is what pushes us to be defensive when we are questioned about what matters to us. However, emotional reactions do not help anyone. It is on us to converse with the intent of cultivating empathy towards the other person. We should try, as best as we can, to understand their point of view. It's not always true but generally, everyone is just trying to do their best. If we come from a place of openmindedness, people would also be more willing to meet us halfway and understand our point of view. In that way, we can foster deeper connections and engage in more valuable conversations.

It's difficult to have great conversations. It's one of those endeavours where we must continually put in effort. When it happens, you can almost feel the subtle shift. It's like riding a sunbeam. You're in the here and now. Everything else fades and you feel like you can go on forever.

It's worth it.

An undergraduate with an interest in technology, design and writing.

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## In the Pursuit of Knowledge Serban Putih man

t was back in the Islamic Golden Age when the I fourth Abbasid Caliph, Harun ar-Rasyid, reigned over the Abbasid Dynasty. It also boasted one of the most prominent scholars of all time, founder of the Maliki school, Imam Malik ibn Anas. The prestige of Imam Malik had attracted Caliph Harun ar-Rasyid who then requested for Imam Malik to deliver him the teachings of hadith personally at the royal palace. However, Imam Malik did

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"O Leader of the Believers, people come in pursuit of knowledge, knowledge does not seek for the people. Drop by the masjid so you may learn the *hadith* just as the other common people."

not just decline the offer, but

had summoned the Caliph to

come by the mosque if he truly

wished to attend his lectures.

At long last, despite his high status as a Caliph, he agreed to join Imam Malik's lecture, which had been attended by all classes of people. Imam Malik reminded him, "If you are late, you may not sit in front of those who have

reached earlier than you."

Caliph Harun ar-Rasyid arrived at the lecture with a lavish chair that he was accustomed to sit on. This gesture of his was rather distracting to the commoners as the rest of them were simply seated on the floor. Hence, Imam Malik uttered, "The lovers of knowledge hold knowledge in profound respect. Not a single one can sit above the knowledge." Noting the irony, Caliph Harun descended from the chair and settled alongside the other students on the floor instead.

Imam Malik did not distinguish Caliph Harun from the other students. The second his students became knowledge seekers, every single one of them was of equal rank. Nothing shall ascend higher than the knowledge itself.

Imam Zuhri once said "It is such a colossal disgrace towards knowledge when an 'alim (a learned Muslim in

religious matters) betakes themselves to the house of a student."

If you ever so wish to seek knowledge, free yourself from the comfort of your home and embark on the noble journey in pursuit of a teacher. Knowledge doesn't pursue you, or anyone for that matter. It's you who should be in the pursuit of knowledge. Knowledge wouldn't enlighten our hearts if we don't actively seek it out in the first place. The value of knowledge is far more priceless than that of all gems combined. For something of the highest virtue, don't expect to own knowledge without having to go through hardship beforehand. One must experience hardship in the quest for knowledge, this is the unspoken rule. True knowledge doesn't come easy, only when you have been stripped off from your comfort zone is when you may finally attain knowledge.

The previous narration serves as a lesson to shed light on the correct ethic or adab in seeking knowledge. Even though it was the great Caliph that sent for the Imam, Imam Malik made a stand that knowledge doesn't

go to a person. Knowledge doesn't succumb to even the highest authority of state. Neither royal nor commoner can measure up to the value of a piece of knowledge. How unbelievably rude it must be for a student to demand that the teacher delivers lectures within the confine of his house no matter how much he pays for it unless there is a sound reason to do so. But as long as the student has the capability to visit the teacher's home for the sake of attaining knowledge, that would be best.

Al-Bukhari Radhiyallahu Anhu said, "Jabir ibn Abdullah embarked on a one-month journey to come across Abdullah ibn Unais for the sake of one hadith narration."

Let's take a moment to ponder upon the admirable story of the early scholarly forebears who held the utmost regard for knowledge to the point whereby they were willing to travel thousands of miles away in the noble pursuit of knowledge even if it be for only one single narration of hadith.

Al-Imam Syafie was questioned pertaining his condition during the pursuit of knowledge, of which he answered, "I seek knowledge the way that a mother would seek her missing child." Other than enlightening ourselves regarding the importance of adab in the pursuit of knowledge, it's crucial for us to understand the difficulty faced by our classical scholars. Although seekers of knowledge in this modern era would not encounter the same difficulties of having to travel a great distance, there is significant merit in emulating their discipline, determination and investing efforts towards building a relationship with their teachers in the pursuit of knowledge.



celebrating contributors

Serban Putih is a young local author behind the success of 3 published books with the latest one titled "Ketika Hati Berfatwa". His books have made into the bestseller chart in Malaysia; Best Malay Non-Fiction in Popular and MPH Weekly Bestseller. His writings focus mainly on Malay poetry and anecdotes.

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