

Help Refugees, Calais February 19th-23rd 2018

Hina Khalid

'Wheresoever you turn, there is the Face of God' (Quran 2:115): embodying a common word of compassion, trust and friendship

Islam's message to our deeply fractured world is one of empathy with the suffering of others, a respect for others beyond national and ethnic boundaries with a realisation that the wisdom of the divine lies everywhere. It is precisely in connection with others that we are drawn more closely, and completely, to ourselves.

It is often said that the basis of any healthy, multicultural society must be an ethos of *tolerance* – an almost tacit acknowledgement of the diversity of beliefs and traditions that our neighbours might hold, but no real desire to delve deeper into those vast and unfamiliar spiritual terrains. Yet, our cohort of interfaith activists has powerfully testified to a very different truth: 'tolerating' the other is no longer enough, for tolerance can, and frequently does, stem from ignorance. With a dramatic shift away from inward-focused and tribalistic philosophies which regard the other with suspicion, young people of faith are actively embodying a deep-rooted, mutual and expansive engagement beyond boundaries. It is, indeed, only through lived encounters with others that we may truly understand how to build peace across both literal and metaphorical borders.

Our time in Calais not only deepened the bonds between us, but allowed us all, in our individual ways, to *live* our spiritual truth of human interrelation and service— whether expressed through the Eastern lens of *seva* (service) or the Arabic term *zakat* (charity), the sacred virtue of *giving* remained at the heart of our circle. Whilst chopping mounds of onions and sorting through dusty bags of clothes, I was reminded of the root meaning of *zakat*: cleanliness, purgation, growth. Principally, as Ghazali advises, the spiritual benefit of almsgiving is to purify oneself of one's miserliness or attachment to wealth - to give away for the love of God and love of creation is to nurture a deep relation with the One from whom all things come and to whom all things return. Yet, my experience in Calais taught me that the act of giving must always extend beyond the material; if the sacred impulse to 'give' is to truly liberate oneself from one's ego, then it demands that we give freely of our time, our energy, indeed of our *selves*. I was made aware of this when out on food distribution one day, and a young Ethiopian refugee asked me about my favourite Bollywood movie. We sang along to Hindi songs (he spoke the language fluently!) and he soon opened up about his family and the land he had left behind. I had nothing to offer him except a smile and a listening ear (not to mention a familiar love of Bollywood!) – yet somehow, in that brief moment of human exchange, that was enough.



Within our group, the diversity of our spiritual backgrounds nourished a beautifully rich and vibrant field of curiosity, inquiry and reflection. A theme which frequently ran through our discussions was that of living our faith and what it means to serve from a place of selflessness and love, in a global order otherwise driven by the logic of profit and self-interest. In relation to the refugee crisis, we are frequently fed the narrative that an influx of 'outsiders' constitutes a threat to the identity and social fabric of our country, a notion that insidiously blurs the line between national pride and outright xenophobia. Amidst this noise, I am called to a verse of the Quran which so gently affirms the reality of distinctive modes of human being, and the beauty that lies therein: '*O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another.*' (Q49:13). The invitation here is one of an embracing openness, a plurality whereby humans seek not to reduce or dissolve the difference of the other, but to get to '*know one another*'. Seeking knowledge of the other is deeply intertwined with the wisdom of *feeling* with the other, and this, for me, breathes new life into my understanding of compassion (literally meaning '*to suffer with*' another). To cultivate

compassion is to endure a situation *with* somebody else, to put oneself in another's shoes, to wholeheartedly be *there* with them - a profound oneness that means the suffering of the other is not separate from myself.

In the preface to her book, 'Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life', the renowned author, Karen Armstrong writes: '*All faiths insist that compassion is the test of true spirituality and that it brings us into relation with the transcendence we call God, Brahman, Nirvana, or Dao. Each has formulated its own version of what is sometimes called the Golden Rule, 'Do not treat others as you would not like them to treat you,' or in its positive form, 'Always treat others as you would wish to be treated yourself.'* [As the Prophet stated, '*you will never be a believer unless you love for your brother what you love for yourself.*'] Further, they all insist that you cannot confine your benevolence to your own group; you must have concern for everybody — even your enemies.' This final statement is worth reflecting on - part of Armstrong's vision of true compassion is that we must examine our own consciousness, discover what gives us pain and determine never to inflict this on others. Yet, this process is only complete if it stretches beyond our own cultural or religious community – purifying us against the urge to curtail our affections and empathy. This is itself is an exercise in liberating the ego, paving the way for a truly boundless compassion. Let the value of this be firmly rooted in our hearts: it is indeed a form of *ibadat* (worship) – 'The best of companions with Allah is the one who is best to his companions, and the best of neighbours to Allah is the one who is the best of them to his neighbour.' (At-Tirmidhi)

Building on this, there was a profound warmth amongst the community of volunteers, as we were collectively bound by a simple desire: to help in any way possible. This gave rise to a certain fluidity of structure, volunteers did different tasks on different days and there was no discernible 'hierarchy' or painstaking bureaucracy. Some volunteers had been there for 6 months, some just a few days, some had been motivated by a deep resentment towards the British and French governments, some had stumbled upon this opportunity by chance. Many of the longer-term volunteers guided those who'd newly arrived – older people sometimes took instructions from 18-year olds who'd been there a while, men frequently took instructions from women, and there was no conflict or bitterness about it. Experienced volunteers often asked us for our advice on things and were so grateful for any feedback, avoiding any difficult power dynamics or frustrations. We reflected on this fact as a group and I was reminded of the time that the Prophet (PBUH) entrusted young Usamah bin Zayd with leading an expedition conducted late into his Medinan career. Usamah was just 20 years old at the time, and many of the companions protested strongly against the Prophet's choice. It is said that most opposed the decision because of Usamah's young age (and some because he was the son of a slave), and by affirming his choice, the Prophet conveyed that neither a person's social status nor his age should prevent him from exerting influence or authority if he has the requisite moral, spiritual and intellectual qualities. It is the ego of the elder that prevents him/her from heeding the advice of his junior, it is the ego of the male that stops him from valuing a woman's words. To truly step out of these prejudicial confines is to allow space for the merits of others to be recognised for what they are, on their own terms. This humility of character extends outwards in the way that we wholeheartedly apply ourselves to tasks that are often painful or monotonous. To truly 'qualify oneself with the qualities of God', as the Hadith counsels us, one must enact the spirit of service, love and attentiveness in all facets of human being and doing. The mundane chores of chopping carrots and sweeping floors were sacralised, marking, for me, an initiation into humility and fulfilment.

On our return from Calais, I distinctly remember feeling both a sense of optimism, inspired by the outstanding work that Help Refugees and partner organisations are doing, and yet a sense of helplessness too – though we might have hopped onto the ferry back to Dover, people would still be battling the cold, authorities would still be confiscating sleeping bags, tear gas would still be used mercilessly. It is the painful realisation that despite all my good will and sincere intentions, my passport affords me the privilege of state protection, and I asked myself: 'what difference have I really made?' Skimming through my notebook of Quranic verses and Hadiths on the journey home, I came across one which spoke right to the uncertainty of that moment: 'if the Hour of Resurrection comes up, and one of you is holding a sapling, finish planting it.' The message I took from this was one of hope, hope in a fundamental goodness and love that sustains all being and is, of its very nature, without end. Even if the final day befalls you, carry on, persevere and plant that tree: it will bear fruit even if we do not survive to see it. We are so fixated on the impact of our efforts and yet the Prophet's message here is one of trust: trust in the intrinsic goodness of sowing seeds of love, laughter and compassion wherever you go – even

if it is momentarily. Part of faith is believing that even our small actions of service are part of something greater than themselves, tapping into the universal current of Divine love that grounds all of creation.

The beauty of living one's faith in communion with others is that one is inevitably transformed in the process: engaging with my fellow interfaith activists at the deepest level has involved vulnerability, openness and risk. I have had to set aside what I thought I knew in order to truly transcend my own ego and *listen* to the voice of the other. In the process, I have learnt, I have questioned and I have returned home to myself with a more colourful understanding of what it is to embody service, to enact one's faith. The Islamic initiative to the Christian world, in the form of the open letter, 'A Common Word Between Us and You' has long offered the basis for reciprocal engagement and exploration between the two faiths, and its message is one that continues to inform my perspective on interfaith dialogue. Christ's injunction to love God with all one's heart, soul, mind and strength (which is, in Christ's words, the greatest commandment of the Bible) resonates beautifully with the Quranic emphasis on the relationship between Creator and creation – a bond that is nourished bountifully by love and mercy. Indeed, the letter reminds us that the devotion to Allah in Islam is no mere sentimental, fleeting emotion but is in fact an existential state of being; to devote oneself to God is to partake in the love that liberates us from alienation. My experience with the Interfaith Activists programme has reinforced this truth, that to be receptive to the divine grace is at once to deny all that works against that outpouring of love; it is to nurture fellow human hearts as we might nurture a new-born child. The love of God is inescapably intertwined with the love of neighbour; indeed, the latter can even be said to constitute a sacred facet of the former. As the letter tells us, in Islam there is no sincere faith in God without the love of neighbour, wonderfully expressed in 1 John 4:7-12: 'Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God...if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.'

The essence of 'A Common Word', for me, lies in the fact that interfaith engagement is not simply a social necessity (due to greater exposure to other faiths), it is, more deeply, a spiritual exercise whose foundation and principles are found within the faiths themselves. It is, dare I say, a moral and intellectual *imperative* to engage with the other and cultivate peace where it is absent. The core principles of 'A Common Word': the worship of God entailing love and service of creation, the necessity of reaching beyond our own communities in honesty and openness and the celebration of our differences as strengthening, energising and facilitating our own spiritual quests, are ones that were distinctly brought to life for me in Calais – far beyond intellectual and physical borders, we all belong wholly to God, so let us devote ourselves in sincerity to healing this world we call home.