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(part 1 of 4)



The conversion to Islam by any human being is always cause for wonder, and the greatest mercy Allah can give to those He loves. Yet in my case, it was so much more. Truly it was a miracle, alhamdulillah (all praise be to God).

Before I ever knew the word Islam, or what exactly a “Muslim” was, Allah guided me by my *fitrah* (God-given inborn nature) to deduce — with my heart and mind — exactly how He wanted me to live. It is an amazing story, and all praise is due to the One who guided me.

Beginning in the summer of 1981, this gift of Islam was bestowed upon me slowly over a period of one year, during the lowest and most challenging point in my life.

I was born and raised in the USA, however my great-grandparents were from Germany and Austria.

I was a devout Roman Catholic — devout as in fully practicing and believing wholeheartedly in my faith. My marriage was failing, due mainly to the fact that my husband was not only a non-Catholic, but an atheist as well.

Although this disturbed me, it was not a cause for serious problems in my marriage until after my daughter was born in 1979. From that point on, it became a constant source of frustration and pain.

While he did allow me to have her baptized, he was not keen for her to be raised in any religion. No amount of discussion would budge him, nor did reminding him that when he married me, he had signed a paper in the church, promising any children born of this marriage to be raised as Catholics.

He simply refused the idea of her growing up believing in any deity or faith at all and in fact began to make fun not only of my beliefs, but of God as well.

I scheduled a meeting with a priest I'd known for many years, hoping he could guide me in this matter. He gave me little comfort. I felt he didn't take this subject as seriously as I did.

He seemed more concerned with my saving the marriage than he was with the issue of my daughter's faith. He couldn't quite grasp the pain I felt each time I heard my husband curse or joke about God.

Nor did he understand how devastating this would be to my daughter, who would definitely receive a horribly mixed message as she grew. I feared the day would come when my husband might actually prevent either of us from going to church.

Somehow, our conversation veered off into another direction, and we began to discuss principles of Catholicism. Although I don't remember it now, I asked a question about the trinity.

I received the standard answer...three Gods in one divine person. When I pressed the issue further, the priest became very agitated and informed me that if I needed to ask questions like that to begin with, I had no faith at all.

While I can understand his reaction now — that it was due to the fact that he had no better explanation for this “mystery” than I did, at the time I was shocked and hurt.

I felt as if I had been literally expelled from the church. With one innocent question, and the desire to come closer to God, I had been deemed a person of no faith at all.

I quickly made my exit, and thought long and hard about the priest's remarks. I simply refused to accept his opinion of me. I knew I was a person of great faith and reliance upon God, and no human could convince me otherwise.

But from that moment on, I no longer considered myself a Catholic. There was so much turmoil in the church at the time, and people were leaving the religion in droves. While I never imagined I would be one of them, suddenly, I was.

Without looking backwards, I went in search of the truth. I tried briefly to just read and study the Bible — a book of which I amazingly had little knowledge. Catholics focus more on church catechism than Bible reading.

I found the Bible difficult to understand, disjointed, and with little guidance on how I was to live my daily life. To me it seemed more like a story book.

In hopes that I was wrong, I contacted a local Christian church and asked if I might join in religious lessons. My first exposure to them was my last. They were

evangelicals and focused heavily on talking in “tongues” and receiving the “gift” of the Holy Spirit.

It was just too out there for me. I needed a religion that I could keep constantly in my heart, not something I had to conjure up with ghosts and dead languages.

After that I turned to the study of Judaism, which I had always been told was the “true” and first religion of man. I soon found myself excluded from this club also because I was not born of a Jewish mother.

Although conversion was possible, it was mostly unaccepted by the Jews themselves, especially the orthodox. Further, it was this belief of Jews as God’s chosen people that seriously troubled me.

I could not imagine a God who made His religion available only to those who were born into it, and then despite their deeds — good or bad, would be the only people admitted to Heaven based on a birthright. It didn’t seem fair, and I was sure God was nothing if not just.

And so began a whirlwind of study of every religion I could find. Hinduism, Buddhism, Tao, Confucius, Hare Krishna...I studied them all and rejected them faster and faster. I looked into everything except Islam. I didn’t even know it existed.

And I understand the reason why Allah allowed me to investigate the other faiths first. So that when I eventually found Islam, I would be 100% certain it was the only true religion.

At that point, I was very depressed. I was in the midst of divorce proceedings by then and living back home, caring for my ailing grandfather. My dear grandmother, my best friend in all the world and truly the only “mother” I ever knew, had died unexpectedly the past winter, and my mother was not interested in my quest for enlightenment. I felt so alone.

I was trying to juggle returning to college full-time, an active daughter, a sick grandfather, housekeeping and worst of all, my distance from God. I had no beliefs left, just the knowledge that there was a God. I was a blank slate.

Every previous notion of God wiped away, except for the certainty He did exist, and based on that alone, I prayed to Him, continuously and always begged for His guidance.

Over an agonizing period of a few months, I tried thinking logically in my journey to find Him. If there was a God, I reasoned, surely He had His own unique way in which He wanted us to know Him.

A way in which we could truly worship and connect with Him, all the while making Him a constant part of our daily lives, not just something to be taken out once a week, then put away for the remainder.

But above all else, in my mind I told myself, One God, One Way. All these religions laying claim to God, yet such divergent paths. No, I could not accept there was anyway to God but one way. I needed only to find that way.

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Further, I deduced that God's path had to be for all people, for all time. No one was special, no one was chosen, and no one was excluded. Neither those of us living, those who had gone before us, nor those who would come after.

I could not believe in a merciful God if He had not made his religion known to mankind since time began. Somehow, back at the beginning, from the creation of Adam, I knew there had to be a "secret". Something I had missed from the very beginning that was the key to it all.

There were problems in my family. My brother, younger than me, was already an alcoholic. He was mentally unstable and given to fits of rage. My mother however, always took his side in any confrontation. I was so extremely stressed. I had to drop out of college because I could not concentrate properly on my studies.

I also hated having to leave my daughter in daycare to attend classes. I wanted to care for her full time. My grandfather was getting worse by the day — early one morning after my mother had gone to work, he set his chair on fire by dropping a lit cigar between the cushions.

I thought I was dreaming when I heard the buzz of the smoke alarm going off in the house. Even the acrid smell of the smoke didn't awaken me. It was my daughter calling from the nursery "Mommy, Mommy" that finally got me up and out of bed.

I opened my bedroom door to a house full of smoke. I grabbed her from her crib, woke my brother, and we left the house. The fire department came but by that time my brother had already carried the smoldering chair into the yard.

He had to first move my grandfather out of the way, as he was sitting on the floor in front of it, trying to put the fire out by beating the chair with a yardstick. It was obvious my grandfather was now in need of more supervision than any of us could provide.

It was at that time my mother began to think seriously about putting him into a nursing home. And thus, my "services" would no longer be needed. She told me

in no uncertain terms I would have to move out. There was no room for me or my daughter in her life...

Without grandfather to worry about, and my brother out getting drunk most of the time, my mother found she would have more time to spend in privacy with her boyfriend. She felt it was her time to “live her life the way she wanted”.

I was petrified. My husband and I were still in the process of a divorce. I could not get welfare payments while still married to him. If I tried, they would have first gone after him for child support — something of which I hadn't seen a penny.

He threatened me if I tried to take child support from him, he would fight for custody of our daughter. His mistress was behind him, urging him on. I didn't know how I would survive unless I got a job. And that meant putting my child in daycare again.

It was agony to feel so alone and with no solution in sight. I was beginning to feel as if I was the only sane person amidst all the insanity, yet sometimes I even questioned that.

I felt like a square peg being hammered into a round hole. I just didn't seem to fit into the family after my grandmother died, and was slowly being pushed out of it entirely. In desperation, I turned to God yet again, begging for the answers to my problems.

One day I found myself alone in the house. My daughter was with her father and my mother and brother were off somewhere. In the silence of my bedroom, I felt a strong urge to pray. But how? I stood in the middle of my room not even knowing where to begin.

I stood as if listening, trying to find some guidance in this simple matter of how to pray. The idea came to me that to talk to God, I must be clean. As if overtaken from a force beyond myself, I headed to the bathroom for a shower. I bathed from head to toe.

Returning to my room, once again I stood, waiting for something — or Someone — to tell me what to do next. Again, I was guided towards the answer — I felt the need to cover myself — completely.

Donning a long-sleeved, ankle-length robe was not enough. I felt I had to cover my hair as well. I wrapped a long scarf around my head and stared into the mirror, feeling strangely comfortable with my appearance. And even though I had no idea what a Muslim was or how one dressed, there I was, basically wearing the hijab.

Anyone who knew about Islam would have thought I was a Muslim preparing for prayer. But glory to God, at that time, I still knew nothing about Islam.

So there I was dressed for prayer, yet still having no idea what to do next. I turned towards the window and just stood there, looking outside on that sunny day. What next? I didn't want to kneel down — that was too much like church.

I felt I needed to humble myself before Him. I wanted to be in a position of complete submission to my Creator (remember that word submission — it's important). The only idea in my mind was to lay flat on the ground.

Again that conjured up images of the church, when would-be priests and nuns taking their vows lay themselves out flat on the floor, arms extended at their sides, basically in the shape of a cross. As much as I wanted to totally humble myself in front of my Creator, I had no idea how to do it.

Finally the thought came to me that I must kneel down on my knees and put my face on the floor. Before I did that though, I realized the floor might not be clean enough, even though my bedroom was clean, I felt the need to prostrate on something I was sure was pure.

Beside me on my daughter's crib was a small blanket I had crocheted for her stroller. It was, I realized later, exactly the size of an Islamic prayer rug. And it was freshly washed! So, I took the blanket and laid it out in front of me on the carpeting.

And amazingly I would later learn that was the exact direction of the Kabah, the direction Muslims face for prayer. Satisfied that all was well, I dropped to my knees, then lowered my upper body onto my hands, and placed my face on the floor.

It brings tears to my eyes and a shiver runs through me as I remember that day. I picture myself in that room, in that position, and see that I was clearly dressed and praying like a Muslim. *Subhan Allah* (far removed is Allah from every imperfection) how merciful was God to guide me this way!

In that position, feeling as if I had finally connected with God, I cried and begged Him again and again to show me the way He wanted me to believe... the way He wanted me to live.

The tears would not stop. I finally felt as if I had found a major truth that day. I just needed to fill in the blanks. And thanks to the guidance and mercy of my glorious Lord, I would soon find all the answers.

Since my mother was still considering a nursing home for my grandfather, and I was still forced to look for a new place to live, Thanksgiving came upon us and I was yet at home.

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My mother became busy with holiday preparations and somehow, outwardly, the days passed peacefully. But in my mind, I never forgot for one minute my quest to find my religion.

After Thanksgiving, the usual round of Christmas parties began, and I was invited by a girlfriend to attend a gathering of college students at a local restaurant. We were a large group and at dinner I found myself seated next to a man from Nigeria, who was working on his doctoral degree at the University of Pittsburgh.

I was fascinated by his dress — Nigerian native garb — his head covered in what looked like a larger version of a Jewish yarmulke. He had a kind face and bright smile, and we began to talk about school.

When it came time to order dinner, he asked if I would help him with the menu. “I can’t eat pork or alcohol,” he explained, and I gladly consented. After ordering our meals I asked him why he didn’t consume pork or alcohol. “Because of my religion”, he responded, smiling.

“And what religion is that?” I wondered aloud. “I am a Muslim,” he replied.

Lights, bells and whistles went off in my head. That’s one I hadn’t heard of before, I realized. I was very anxious to hear more. Already having searched and studied every belief under the sun, I knew exactly what I wanted to ask.

“Tell me please, if you don’t mind, what is the cardinal belief of your religion? What is the one point you would say describes your religion the best?” Without hesitation, he smiled again and said “We believe there is only one God. God is not part of a trinity, nor does He have a son. He has no partners. God is One.”

It sounded so simple. I had no problem with that. I told him that made sense to me. Again he smiled. I then asked him how his religion viewed women. What was their status in his beliefs?

Having suffered as a woman in a society where my religion provided little guidance — or respect — for women, I held my breath waiting for his response. I so wanted to hear something that satisfied me!

Again he was quick to answer. “Women in Islam are equal to men. They have basically the same status and obligations as men. And they take the same rewards and punishments. However, being equal does not mean the same. Men and women were created differently from each other. They are equal but different.”

I wanted to know how the differences manifested themselves. He responded. “In marriage for example... while a Muslim woman has many rights — perhaps more rights than a man — to be provided for completely, she is also required to obey her husband.”

“Obey her husband? Hmmmm. What does that mean?” He started to laugh. It was clear he had been down this path before. “It means”, he explained patiently, “that if a decision must be made for the good of the marriage or family, while a man must consult his wife and ask her opinion, in the end the final decision is his.

Look at it this way — as if marriage is a ship sailing in the sea. A ship can only have one captain who is ultimately responsible for its welfare. A ship with two captains will sink.”

He sat back and awaited my response. I couldn't think of any argument against what he said. It made sense to me. I had always felt, deep inside, that the husband must take final responsibility for the family. I was pleased — more than pleased actually — happiness slowly turned into elation as I asked more and more excited about Islam.

Everything he told me made perfect sense. And amidst the extreme joy and peace I felt, I also wondered how it was that I had never known of Islam before? *Subhan Allah*, everything happens in Allah's time.

I asked him how I could learn more about this religion and he kindly offered to put me in touch with Muslims at his mosque who would give me a Quran and answer any questions I had. He took my phone number and promised to call me. I was ecstatic. I couldn't wait! That was Friday, December 3, 1982.

Next Monday morning found me on the steps of the local library, waiting for it to open. I took out every book there on Islam, which sad to say in those days were few, and not very accurate either, but I didn't realize that at the time.

When I opened the first book, the introduction began “Islam means submission to the will of God...” Amazing! There's that word “submission”! Exactly the word I used myself before I knew anything about it.

I only knew complete and total submission to God's way was required if I was to attain peace. In that very instant I knew I had found the truth. I devoured the books and waited on pins and needles for Ahmad — the Nigerian man — to contact me again. And true to his word, he did.

I was given the number of the mosque and a contact name. Shaking with excitement, I dialed, praying someone would answer. And someone did. The man who answered my call said in a very thick foreign accent the one I was asking for was not there at the time.

Undaunted, I explained that I was very interested in learning more about Islam. Immediately, he welcomed me and gave me the address, inviting me to come right away to speak with him and receive a copy of the Quran!

I was excited beyond words. I made an appointment for later that day, and eagerly got myself and my daughter ready for the meeting.

I laugh now to think of myself that day. I wanted to appear my best. So I put on a pantsuit, curled my hair, applied make-up and perfume, and dressed my 1-year-old daughter in her cutest outfit!

I knew we were embarking on a new life. My daughter and I — together — we were a team! When I arrived and entered the building the first person I met was a Muslim woman wearing niqab. I found her exotically foreign looking and beautiful. I told her I was there to meet a man named Abdul Hamid.

She graciously directed me towards a staircase. “You’ll find him in the office at the top of the stairs,” she said in perfect English, which surprised me. I had yet to learn Islam was not a “foreign” religion, or that it was the fastest growing religion in the world. There was so much yet I didn’t know. But one thing was for certain, I was sure I was on the right track.

When I entered the office all heads turned in my direction, then all eyes were lowered. No one looked me in the eye. But everyone did start smiling! Warm, happy, sincere smiles.

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One man walked towards me, speaking in a strange language. Later I found out he was saying “Masha’Allah, masha’Allah” as he came and took my daughter from my arms. “How beautiful she is” he exclaimed, and proceeded to introduce her to the other men.

For some reason I felt no fear of this strange person taking my daughter. He sat her down on top of a desk and handed her pens and pencils and a stapler — anything he thought might amuse her, all the while laughing and trying to get her to talk. The other men gathered around her as well, and finally Abdul Hamid came to greet me.

I offered my hand but he pretended not to see it — ah, there was still so much to learn about Islamic etiquette between the sexes — and began asking me how I had discovered Islam. I told him briefly about Ahmad the Nigerian, and he proceeded to explain the basics of Islam to me.

At least an hour passed, and then he gave me a copy of the Quran, asking that I take it home and shower before opening it. I quickly agreed. He told me that it would soon be time for prayer so he needed to prepare himself.

I thanked him but had one final request. I wanted to watch the prayer. Having been married to an atheist, for some reason I was very interested in watching this man pray. I always felt a man was not truly a man unless he prayed to God.

Abdul Hamid told me I could watch the prayer from the back of the mosque but to please not make a sound. Again I agreed and we went downstairs where he placed me in the rear of an empty space decorated only with beautiful lush carpeting and a niche in the wall. That niche, I would learn, marked the direction for the prayer.

As I watched the men enter, I was startled by a loud noise — it was the call to prayer. Allahu akbar, Allahu akbar! As I listened I felt as if ice water was running through my veins. It was as if my whole being was awakened by this loud and magnificent call.

Although I didn't understand a word, I felt it speaking to me. Tears filled my eyes and I began to shiver. I crossed my arms and hugged myself, in an attempt to warm myself and calm down.

The tears flowed as I watched the men first bow, and then prostrate themselves in prayer, just as I had done so long ago that sunny day in my bedroom. I was in awe. I was thrilled and moved beyond words. More than that... I was home!

Over the course of the next few weeks, I met more Muslims at the mosque and took lessons in Islam. I began to sew Islamic style clothes for myself, although I wore them only in my bedroom when I attempted to pray alone.

I began to change. I gave up drinking alcohol and refused to eat pork. My personality changed. I became quieter and calmer. I was at peace. My mother asked about the change in me. She thought I was depressed. "You never laugh anymore", she said. I tried to explain to her that I was very happy — just in a quieter sort of way.

I finally found the courage to tell her about Islam. I even showed her the clothes I had sewn and modeled an outfit for her. She became furious. She hated the clothes instantly.

My mother was always a high-fashion kind of woman. She ridiculed their simplicity and the fact they were loose. She thought they looked like sacks. Her unkind remarks hurt me but did not dissuade me. Nothing would separate me from Islam.

My last Christmas before I said the Shahadah was a nightmare. Even during that time I knew this was Allah's way of sending me out of the darkness of false belief with no good memories. Still they were difficult days.

My mother was angry with me for not participating in the holiday, and my brother, drunk as always, destroyed some of my belongings in a fit of rage and threatened to kill me.

Previously he had entered my room and saw me dressed in Islamic clothing. Although not religious — he didn't even go to church — he too was furious with my decision to become Muslim.

The more they raged, the more certain I became I was doing the right thing. I simply no longer wanted to live the lives they were living.

After a few months time, I made my profession of faith. One Friday evening in the spring, I became a Muslim. I gratefully and humbly accepted the gift of Islam.

My mother insisted I leave her house. But Allah in His infinite mercy had arranged a home for me. The night I took Shahadah, one Egyptian man who witnessed it asked about me for marriage.

My wali (guardian) — the man who had taken my daughter from my arms on my first trip to the Mosque — asked my opinion. My only concern was that he be a good believer. My wali had already checked and he was.

Within 10 days I was married and living with my daughter in my new home with my new husband. He raised my daughter as his own, and alhamdulillah, we had two sons after that.

It's been over 26 years now that I have been blessed to live my life as a Muslim. The years have passed so quickly. They have not been always been easy, but they have been blessed nonetheless.

Allah tests those He loves, but as He says in the Quran...“with hardship comes ease.” And it has proven true.

In the meantime, my mother — who separated herself from me for many years — is now living with me in an Islamic country and wearing the hijab voluntarily! I have hope she too will accept Islam one day soon, insha'Allah (by the will of Allah).

Despite the difficult times, I can not imagine living my life in any other way. I thank Allah every day for the mercy of His guidance and for this miraculous journey from darkness to the light of Islam.