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A time comes in everyone's life, or at least I hope it comes, when they realize that they have to not only believe what they believe in, whatever it may be, but get out there and proclaim it to the world. Luckily, that time came early for me. I am 17, and Islam is the belief that I'm proclaiming.

I was raised Catholic. Not internally as much as externally. I went to Catholic Sunday school, called CCD, but the Catholic view of God never played a major roll in my childhood. It was a Sunday thing. Anyhow, I started to enjoy Mass around 7th grade. It made me feel good to do the right thing. I was always a rather moral person, but I never really studied the fundamentals of Catholicism. I just knew that I felt good worshipping my creator.

I really liked Catholicism, but I always saw it as us (the Catholics) with Jesus worshipping God, not us worshipping God and Jesus as one. I saw Jesus (peace be upon him) as my example on how to be a good follower of and submitter to God's will, but not as God himself.

Before I was confirmed in 8th grade, in the fall of 1999, I learned a lot about what Catholicism was. The Catholicism of the Church had a lot on viewing Jesus as God in it. Nothing like my "undivided God being worshipped by me with Jesus as an example" train of thought. It was like they just opened up a can of cold, illogical confusion and tried to feed it to me. It didn't feel right.

I continued with Catholic church, and kept on worshipping. But I talked to many in the church about my feelings that Jesus wasn't God but more of a Prophet, an example. They told me that I had to accept him as God and as a sacrifice, and so on. I just wasn't buying it. I tried to buy it but I guess God withhold the sale for my own benefit. There was a better car out there for me. I continued at the church.

Sometime in mid-December of 1999, for no reason that I can recall I started reading up on Islam in encyclopedias. I remember making a list of bolded words

in the entry for “Islam” in an old 1964 Grolier World Book that I found in my closet, and studying them. For some reason I was amazed by this faith and that it was all about God and that it was everything that I believed all my life - right here. Previously, I had accepted that there was no faith like I felt inside of me. But I was amazed that I had found this faith. I found out that “my” faith had a name, and millions of other adherents!

Without ever reading a Qur’an or talking to another Muslim, I said shahada (declaring your belief in no god but God) on 31 December 1999. As the months passed, I learned more. I went through many periods of confusion, happiness, doubt and amazement. Islam took me on an enlightening tour of me, everyone else, and God.

The transition was slow. I was still attending Mass five months into my change of faith. Each time I went, I felt more and more distant from the congregation, but closer and closer to God and the Prophet Jesus, peace be upon him.

During Ramadan 2001, the second time I fasted (the first year, I converted during Ramadan and did not fast), I went to the library during lunch period. It was better than sitting at a table with my friends, because I got work done in the library. I swear my grades went up. Anyways, I started talking to the only other Muslim at my school, John. We talked about Islam a little more each day. He’s an awesome brother and he took me to the mosque on the last Friday of Ramadan. Going was one of the best things I ever made in my life. God really answered my prayers this time. I thought I would be nervous, but I wasn’t at all. It was the most natural thing I ever did in my life. I felt home. I realized something before leaving. As I sat there on the floor, praying to God, I realized that the room was full of others but it was OK. See, at home when someone asks me what I am doing, I never say I am praying. I never admit it to anyone. It is too awkward. But there, at the masjid, I was praying to God in front of a score of other Muslims and I felt perfectly fine. Better than fine! I felt secure and safe. It was the most liberating thing since I accepted God into my heart that cold New Year’s Eve almost two years ago.

I never told my parents right out. In fact, I don’t plan to. The most significant clue that I gave came around 1:00 AM on 16 December 2001, when I finally told my dad I was going to the mosque in the morning with a friend when he asked me why I was setting my alarm. He told me how he can’t wait for me to move out of the house, how displeased he is with me and how stupid the choices I make are to him. I never told them straight out because I figured it was best to test the waters by revealing clues bit by bit; I didn’t want to send a shockwave through the family. I can only imagine what my dad would do if he knew I was actually a practicing Muslim. He seems to hate my guts just for studying the faith, which he thinks is all I am doing. I understand that my dad is a depressed man, so I don’t

really hold this all against him. I mean, it is his fault for thinking himself so smart that he doesn't need God. That thought is what got him so depressed. But I don't think he realized how hard one's heart can be when you deny your human need for a relationship with your Creator. So I don't hold it all against him. He didn't know what he was getting into. My mom doesn't know that I am a Muslim, but at least she hasn't shown her anger over me going to the mosque. She is upset over it but never told me that I displease her, at least. As God commands, I'll continue to try my best to be nice to my parents as long as they don't attempt to take away my Islam. The best thing that I can do for them is to be a good example so that maybe one day, inshallah, they can see that there is a better way of living than living in the dark world of God-denial.

I've never been to the Mid-East, but I am studying Islam every day. Right now, I am 100% a Muslim and that will never change, Inshallah. I thank God that I've gone through so many periods of doubt. When I look back I see that it was not God leaving me but God telling me that it was time that I asked myself how much I loved God, and what I was willing to go through to understand my faith. A week of crying, depression, prayer, reading to the extreme, and ignoring most other things in life sounds harsh...but the reward - knowing so much more about yourself, God, and the relationship between you (Islam) - is worth more than any material things. Through my interrogation of Islam I gained God's most precious gift - Islam. I've heard Christians say that with Christianity you "know God on a personal level." In Islam, your relationship with God is so much deeper than that. God is with me every moment, guiding me, teaching me, loving me, protecting me, liberating me, enlightening me, comforting me... Alhamdulillah for Islam!

Islam has done a lot for me. More than I could have ever guessed. And every day, it just gets better. I went from living my life on a trial-and-error basis to embracing guidance, and now knowing what the best choices are for me to make. From seeking who I am and spending a life in confusion, I am being guided. I can't find the words to say what its like, but I'll try again: God reveals to me what life is. I don't have to guess anymore.