

FOREWORD

It's been my experience that the answers to life's questions never come when you want them – they come when you need them. We are all, in one way or another, in search of the meaning of as well as the truth in our existence. The interesting thing about this journey towards the ultimate truth is that I doubt very much any of us have thought about whether or not we truly want to reach the destination.

Do we want the answers to our most perplexing questions? What would happen if we received them? How would that change our paradigm of life? How much more accountable would that make us? Axiom doesn't claim to be the end all and be all – much the opposite. It will put life in true perspective and allow you to look at your own being from a vantage point that most of us never realized exists. On the road to discovering the truth we realize that the destination is the Journey and this Journey is the most fulfilling we'll ever make. *By Kasim Aslam.*

AXIOM

Meaning of Axiom: "A self-evident and necessary truth, or a proposition whose truth is so evident at first sight that no reasoning or demonstration can make it plainer."

BEGINNING OF THE QUEST

Formative Experiences

My story is not terribly unusual. Yet, it is not the stereotypical story of an immigrant from a third-world country that fuels typical American ideas about the relationship between underdeveloped and powerful countries. It is common, yet it is also unique. My personal journey has led me to this new spiritual and cultural understanding that I am sharing with you here. The only reason for sharing my life's experiences is that they are the reason for my personal evolution and a glance into what made all this come together.

My parents were born in a small village in a remote part in Pakistan. My father was not born into privilege. He studied at the village school, essentially a mud shack. He was a good natured yet serious young man, devoted to his future. He put himself through college and became an officer in the British Indian Army, before India was divided into India and Pakistan. He quickly rose through the ranks and became a very well-respected officer. I believe it is the example of my father's life that gave me the courage to try and make a difference.

My mother was uneducated, but radiated a simple wisdom that has remained with me throughout my life. I had five siblings, three brothers and two sisters, and ours was a joyful, exuberant family full of warmth. My mother was at the center of this warmth. I remember her putting me down for my afternoon nap; she would rub my back and sing lullabies to me as I drifted into that treasured state of childhood sleep. The truly amazing thing to me is that when I woke up hours later, she was still sitting by my side, rubbing my back and singing these songs. I believe that the songs she chose, which gently insisted upon my own limitless possibilities and my power to change the world, were deeply imprinted upon my subconscious and have remained with me every step of my life.

My mother was quite superstitious. In our home, clipped nails had to be disposed of far away from the home because they were thought to bring bad luck. A dog was unclean and thus would take away God's blessings. Wasting food meant starvation in hell. Throwing away salt meant having to pick it up with your eyelashes in the next life. The list of superstitions that peppered my childhood could go on and on. Looking back at these little beliefs now makes me realize just how easy it is to take a highly suspect idea and transform it into a terrifying truth that really can cause much anxiety on the part of the beholder. The superstitions of my childhood were like mini-religious tenets in that way. The dynamic whereby something speculative becomes a feared

truth is embodied in each of these. The belief becomes so strong that even when it is contradicted by scientific evidence, it is difficult to dismiss. It took me years to get past these superstitions, no matter how silly they now seem. My siblings still follow most of them religiously, fully knowing that they are not true, but they are too afraid of what will happen if they are wrong. It is an example of the power of fear to shape our beliefs and thus our actions.

My grandmother had never left the remote village where she grew up, and she had never sat in an airplane or a train. In response to her inquiries about the weird creatures she was seeing in the sky, we told her that these were airplanes that fly with hundreds of people inside them. She appeared shocked by our explanation, and that evening she sat a group of us children down to explain that there was no such thing as airplanes. She explained that the story we were told about “airplanes” was simply a ploy by “Westerners” to weaken the religious convictions of our people. The Westerners felt that they could make themselves look like gods, she explained- if they demonstrated an ability to make strange creatures fly in the air with people in their belly. We all knew she was wrong, but no one tried to argue with her.

When I was a teenage boy, a war broke out between India and Pakistan. Growing up in the backdrop of war, or its constant possibility, was something that left a great imprint on my consciousness. I saw bombs falling, buildings demolished, and people torn to bits. As my father rose through the ranks and became a senior military officer, ours became a very influential and powerful family. Because of my father’s position in the military, our family occupied a lavish house with many servants. A memory that stands out in bold relief in my mind is getting in the flag staff car with my father and going off to school. Outside our front porch, the military driver would occupy his hours shining the car to a brilliant sheen until we entered the car and drove toward the main gate. At the main gate, the guard would offer my father an elaborate salute. My father would then ceremoniously exit the car and inspect the guard and oversee the changing of the guards. As we drove to school, the police on each intersection of the small town would stop traffic when they saw dad’s staff car. I remember observing the respect given to my father with great pride. He embodied everything good and true to me, and he wore his power with great good will. He was social, jolly, and learned: a self-made man who used his power thoughtfully. I tried to emulate my father’s work ethic and nature; I excelled in school and when I was thirteen, I earned seven academic awards, more than any other student that year.

The Rebellion

One incident from that time seems especially meaningful to me now, in analyzing the path I have chosen for myself. At one time, my father received word of a mini-rebellion amongst the small group of soldiers who worked in our house to serve us and maintain the property, mainly enlisted ranks. There was a new soldier who had just arrived; he was a Christian and most of the other soldiers, who were Muslims, shunned him and refused to sit and eat with him. My father didn’t allow segregated eating and with the new guy, that became a problem. Their feelings were

deeply held and rooted in centuries-old traditions from the times of the Mughal emperors, a complicated history of conflict between Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and Christians. Their distaste for eating or coexisting with those of another religion was a combination of religious doctrine and longstanding cultural traditions and class systems that instilled in them very real fears about their own cultural standing and spiritual security. Especially in the Hindu religion, the mixing of different classes of people even from within the Hindu faith was regarded with deep fear. The Brahmin class would never come into contact with the “Achoots,” who were considered the untouchable class. In fact, if a Brahmin Hindu even had a shadow of an Achoot cast upon him, he must go through a process of purification.

The kind of intolerance my father had to contend with in this situation was deeply held and difficult to shake. The soldiers’ fear and suspicion of the new soldier became like a ticking time bomb among the ranks and became the talk of the military base. It became imperative for my father to intervene. The situation was very sensitive, and dad received a warning from the military command to handle the situation very carefully. They suggested that no matter how small the group in question, he should not forget the lessons of the Rebellion of 1857. This rebellion started with a handful of soldiers, wherein the British rulers of the time underestimated the strong religious and cultural convictions of the Indian army under their control and insisted that the soldiers use ammunition that required the soldier to bite off the top of a cartridge that was covered with pig and cow fat. Of course, consuming anything to do with pigs is forbidden in the Muslim religion, and cows are very sacred to the Hindus, so soldiers of both faiths refused to bite off the top of this new ammunition. The British officers ordered the Indian soldiers to use the ammunition or face consequences. The Indian soldiers rebelled, and many died in the subsequent rebellion.

Cognizant of the deep feelings involved, my father faced a dilemma in regard to the new soldier. He could not afford a rebellion, and yet he could not allow the soldiers who were servants in our home to refuse to eat and share dining utensils with the new member of the staff. Others in our home had tried to solve the problem by remonstrating with the soldiers. A couple of sergeants came by and tried lecturing to convince the soldiers to change their position on the matter, but this only inflamed them and the situation worsened.

This problem was not uncommon. The military was made up of almost all Muslims, considering that 97% of Pakistan’s population is Muslims. This sort of discontent was often present, but it usually existed only as an undercurrent of feelings during the rare occasion of mixing of people from different religions. This situation, however, seemed on the verge of becoming explosive. So, my father decided to intervene. He had just picked me up from school when he sent a message for the enlisted men working in our home to meet him in the military “Lungar”, which is a huge dining hall for the soldiers. Other officers thought he was making the matter worse by bringing it in front of thousands of soldiers rather than solving it privately at home. The news of what was happening at the general’s house had spread, and the soldiers, coming as they did from

many different faiths, were angered by the situation. My father was the senior-most officer in that city, and when we arrived at the mess hall, the scene was extremely tense. The soldiers were willing to die for their convictions; after all, their very souls were at stake. Everyone waited anxiously for my father's speech. They knew him to be a religious man, but most of all, a fair man.

The Silent Speech

While my father was expected to give a speech, he did not. Instead he ordered one plate of food, some bread, and one glass of water to be brought to a table in the mess hall. Everyone watched in amazement. The Muslim soldiers from our home were expecting my father to issue an order, forcing them to sit and eat with the Christian soldier. They were mentally prepared to refuse an order for the first time ever and face a court-martial; but my father surprised everyone. He ordered the shunned Christian soldier to sit down and eat; and the confused soldier did. Dad stopped him halfway through his meal, sat down next to him and slid the soldier's plate in front of himself. As everyone watched in amazement, he ate the leftover food of this man who was of a different religion and very low in the socio-economic and caste structure. There was absolute silence in the hall, and I could hear myself breathe. My father then asked the soldier to drink the water. Again, he interrupted him halfway, took the glass, and finished the water himself. He then got up and shook his hand, welcoming him to his home and his military command. He took my hand and we left.

Transformation

As I walked beside him, my mind was spinning with a mixture of admiration and confusion. When we got home, my father received a phone call from the mess sergeant who reported that after we left, all the soldiers had miraculously sat down and eaten in mixed groups, something they had never done before. Usually the dining hall was segregated by religion if any non Muslims were present, but that day, soldiers sat with men that they had previously considered untouchable. The soldiers, for the first time, chatted with people they never thought to befriend before. It was as if tolerance was a virus that was spreading like wildfire through the group. The sergeant also reported that one particular Muslim soldier, who had a reputation for being tough and was feared by others, stood up during the meal and said, "Anyone touches this man," pointing to the Christian soldier who was shunned earlier, "or treats him bad, will have to face me. From today, he is my brother."

A miraculous transformation had occurred in almost an instant. With just one decisive action, my father had done more than could have been accomplished with volumes of books, a litany of words, or caches of weapons. He had used a human gesture of goodwill and connection that disrupted and altered thousands of centuries of entrenched behavior. When I realized what had

happened, my eyes filled with tears and my chest became full of violent emotion. It was a lesson that I carried with me on each subsequent day. Change is possible. This insight set in motion a chain of ideas that links the dutiful son that I have described, to the person with this message I present to you now.

The Rogue Tribe

In subsequent years, my father became known as someone whose humanity came into conflict with, and often won over, his very serious devotion to duty. A couple years after that incident, the remote tribal area in which we lived became unsettled by a particularly rogue tribe. The area was made up of a few small cities surrounded by different tribes. These tribes did not recognize the government or the laws of the land, and it was a constant struggle for the authorities to keep them under control.

My father continually received complaints about one particular tribe that lived in the mountains nearby. Members of this tribe kept breaking the law, stealing animals, bikes and motorcycles from the people in and around the city, harassing travelers, shoplifting from local merchants, and committing other petty offenses. These outlaws were well armed, and the small local police force was unable to control them, and their reign of terror continued for many months. Being the senior officer in the area, my father was viewed as an unofficial governor. Every time he asked the military high command for permission to act, he received strict instructions not to take any action because the leader of this tribe was politically connected and powerful, and the government did not want to anger him. My father followed his orders, but it was extremely difficult for him. People in the town began to wonder why he was being uncaring and not taking action.

Brutal Rape

One day a frail, elderly man came to our house and reported that his two teenage daughters had been kidnapped by the son of the rogue tribe's leader and his friends and taken to their tribal area. The old man was trembling for his daughters, fearing what might be happening to them. He cried hysterically and begged my father for help. I saw him throw himself at my father's feet and say, "You are the only one with the means to help me. I hear you have daughters also, so you know how I feel. Please, for God's sake, help me get my daughters back and get justice."

My father took action. He sent a messenger to the tribal leader and demanded that the girls be released immediately. Indeed, they were released and made it back home, but their lives were devastated. They had been gang raped by the tribal leader's son and his friends for two days. The girls not only had suffered through a terrible ordeal, but in that culture, no one would ever marry them. Their lives were over; these villains might as well have killed them. At that time, I saw my

father in tears for the first time in my life; he was shaking with anger. I remember him telling my mother, “If I ask the headquarters, they will tell me to do nothing. And to do nothing is worse than death to me right now.” I remember my mother’s response. She spoke gently and told him to do what he must do, and then bear the consequences.

Justice by Force

My father ordered an emergency training exercise. He did not need anyone’s permission because it was not a military operation, just a training exercise. All the soldiers and officers knew what had happened to the girls, and they were full of anger and desire to act. Without a word being spoken, everyone became aware of what my father’s intentions were and all the soldiers supported him wholeheartedly. A large military force moved with all its armor and artillery and surrounded the area where this tribe lived. They pretended to be engaged in a simple training exercise, but they had never been so willing to fight. The tribal leader came to meet my father and threatened him. He said that he would have his job and have him court-martialed. My father said, “Look at the hardware and firepower I have at my disposal. Every man in my command is itching to take revenge for the girls. You may have power and connections, but by the time you contact someone, your little clan will cease to exist.”

The tribal lord asked in scornful amazement, “You would throw away your career for some poor girls who do not matter?” My father responded, “They matter to me, and I am willing to die for them today.” The tribal lord then offered a large sum of money to my father and this infuriated him even more. By now, the tribal lord fully understanding the righteousness of my father’s anger and the extent of his resolve, backed down and gave in to each of the demands. Not only did he return stolen items from past crimes, but he also handed over the men, including his son, who were responsible for raping the girls, for them to stand trial.

When it was all over, my father did not even receive a reprimand from the high command. In the face of such an action, the regulations and fears of the institution melted away. They saw the result- justice had been done, the tribe had been tamed, and the region was a safer place. Again, the actions of my father had revealed to me how acting out of simple human spirit of goodness, and flinging off the shackles of fear, can transform a situation that otherwise may appear to be hopeless. My father was a man who trusted his heart and his mind and although he showed great respect and devotion to the institutions around him, his independent thought led him to do truly miraculous things.

A New Career

A few years after this incident, dad retired from the military and suddenly, we did not know how we would support ourselves. Dad had not saved money or made arrangements for a post-military career. We went from being extremely privileged and secure to having nothing. My father's only experience had been his lifetime of military service; he had fought in the Second World War and two local wars. How did one make a living off such experience? My father, though, was undaunted.

My mother told me a story once, and I remembered it during the time Dad was looking for a new line of work. She told me the story of a little bird sitting in a tree hiding from a predator bird. As the little bird watched the predator bird fly overhead trying to find and kill her, suddenly she looked down and saw a hunter aiming his gun at her. She knew if she stayed in the tree, she would be shot to death, and if she flew off, she would be eaten alive. So she prayed to God, in spite of the hopelessness of the situation. At that moment, a snake bit the hunter, who was in the middle of pulling the trigger to hit the little bird. His hand jerked with the pain of the snakebite, and the bullet hit the predator bird above. The hunter and the predator bird both died. My mother said, "Don't ever consider something hopeless, overwhelming, or impossible. If God is on your side, nothing is impossible."

In a similar manner, something amazing happened in my father's search for a new line of work. He decided to go to the city to visit a friend and explore possibilities. While he was there, he attended a party with his friend where he overheard a prominent businessman talking about his factory that was located in the tribal areas of the country. The businessman was lamenting that the factory had the potential to be extremely profitable, but they had been unable to continue business there because of local tribesmen terrorizing the workers and periodically attacking them. The businessman had to shut down the factory because of his inability to defend the workers against the armed attacks of the local tribal outlaws. Many workers had been killed, and the rest of them refused to work. My father approached the man and boldly told him that he could get the factory operating in a short period of time if he were given an equal partnership in the business. The businessman had nothing to lose and a lot to gain, and so he agreed. Of course, my father's military training and experience were the perfect tools for this situation. It does seem to me upon reflection that there were great powers at work behind the scenes, helping dad find a way to market his skills that had no demand in peace time, until this situation was revealed.

Fighting Terrorists

In his initial investigation, Dad discovered that the tribal leader was ordering the terror attacks because he wanted to own the factory himself. He reasoned that if he prevented the owner from operating the factory, then he would be forced to sell it for a fraction of its value. The tribal leader figured he could make millions on the deal. When the factory was reopened a few months

later under Dad's control, the terrorists were very agitated. They planned their biggest attack to date to take care of this problem once and for all, but when the terrorists approached the factory, an amazing thing happened. Dad had organized a small but well-armed security force for the factory made up of retired military personnel. He set up a comprehensive security plan including observation posts, wireless communication devices, and an alarm system. When the OPs warned of an attack, the workers were to go to their designated safety zones, which were rooms in the factory that had no windows, and the security forces would man their battle stations.

The plan worked beautifully. My father's combat experience allowed him to outsmart the terrorists every time they attacked the factory, and the factory remained open and began operating smoothly again. As a result, my father became a partner in an extremely profitable business without any investment or business experience. Again, I felt strongly the hand of divine power in this turn of events. Rather than being incapacitated by circumstances, we felt a strong hand guide us through our hour of need. This incident enhanced my feelings of comfort, security, and strength in the world around me. I found in myself a fearless man, willing to take chances and attempt the impossible. I had faith that a power far greater than me would be there to assist me if I only had the courage to attempt great things. I explain this just in case you were wondering why an ordinary human like me can even think of attempting to change the world.

Effects of War

Our family went from a state of power and influence but limited wealth as a military family to an extremely wealthy existence as my father made millions from his partnership in the factory. We enjoyed a very luxurious and happy lifestyle, but then another war broke out between India and Pakistan in 1971, and my dad was recalled into military service to fight the war. At this time we lived in Karachi, Pakistan, a city that was under severe air attacks from Indian air force and artillery, resulting in a staggering loss of life, so my father decided to move us to a safer place. We all packed into two cars and started driving to a city far away from Karachi where we would be safe. During this journey, an amazing incident occurred that further enhanced my faith in the incredible potential of the individual.

On our journey, we reached a river that was home to one of the country's most important bridges. This bridge had been under air attack for many days, but that night the attack had reached a new intensity. The enemy was planning a major offensive, and the destruction of this bridge that night was imperative to their strategy. My father parked our cars at the river's bank away from the road because of the heavy strafing. The planes approached with a thunderous roar and bullets were flying everywhere. An absolute blackout was in effect to keep the attacking planes from seeing their target. We huddled in the cars, shivering with fear and anticipation.

During the most intense period of the air attacks, the airplanes began concentrating on strafing the anti-aircraft artillery batteries on and around the bridge to take them out so they could bomb the bridge without being shot at. The strafing was so severe that the brave soldiers who were manning the huge number of the anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) guns started running away from their guns. It was a horrifying sight: men being blown to bits and plummeting off the bridge like they were little dolls. It seemed inevitable that the bridge would be lost to the enemy, when an amazing thing happened. Dad jumped out of the car and ran up to the center of the bridge, screaming orders for the soldiers to return to man their guns. We were all screaming for him to come back, but our voices were being drowned out by the sound of the explosions. At this moment, in the dim moonlight amid the flashes of explosions, I could see with horrifying clarity the bullets raining down all around him, bombs exploding, and fragments of destruction framing him in his desperate attempt to restore order to chaos. This image burned itself into my young mind.

My father, the hero, the man who was everything to me, seemed destined to die on that horrible night. He ran into the fire, driven by the need to be seen by the soldiers, to lead them back to man their AAA guns. He did not duck down or take cover; he stood tall in the middle of the bridge, with no weapon in his hands and screaming at the top of his lungs, ordering the soldiers to do their duty. I was sure that none of the soldiers would be brave or crazy enough to return to the anti-aircraft guns, but I was wrong. The soldiers saw a senior officer standing unarmed in the middle of the bridge, fueled by duty, ordering them to return to their guns. Soon a few soldiers started going back and eventually almost all of the soldiers who were still alive and not wounded ran back to man their guns. Even other soldiers whose primary job and training was not to man the AAA guns went to fill in for the gunners who were dead or wounded.

That attack failed, and the bridge remained standing. At the end of it all, my father started to get back in the car, and every single eye was fixed on him. Somehow, when all the soldiers saluted him that day, they reflected more than simply the routine fulfillment of their duty. They were saluting with their hearts, their faces awash with an indescribable look. Father seated himself in the car, and we drove off as if nothing had happened. Amazingly, after seeing all the violence, the planes, bombs, bullets, people being killed, and my father in danger of being killed, the one image that remained strongest from that experience in my mind forever was the way those soldiers saluted my father; the look on their faces. When I saw the NYPD fire fighters run up the stairs of a burning skyscraper during the 9/11 attack, they reminded me of the bravery of my father, and I salute them with the same feelings those soldiers showed for my dad that day.

My Father's Death

My father was diagnosed with cancer in his later years. He became frail and slowly lost his strength. In the end, he lost the ability to carry out even the simplest of tasks like feeding

himself. He could barely move. The day before his death, an amazing thing happened. He was sleeping in his bed, and my brother was keeping watch. All of a sudden, my father sat up in his bed, totally alert and in control of his faculties. My brother was shocked because in his condition, even lifting a hand was difficult. My father then spoke to my brother. "I must go. They are here to take me away." My father was seeing visions, and he said he was seeing a peaceful, bright light and people that were there to take him somewhere, and obviously, he was not scared of them, but eager to go. Something gave him great power for those few moments. As fast as his power came, it went away, and he collapsed in my brother's arms and went back to his lifeless state. The next day he died. This event greatly affected my belief in a life after this one.

Coming To America

Going back to an earlier part of my life; in 1979 I was a teenager and had just finished O levels (equivalent of 11th grade in the British system of education). I felt stalled at that time and was just biding my time and not doing anything constructive. One day my father asked me about my plans for my future. I replied that I wanted to continue my education and that I would like to go abroad to do so. He asked where I wanted to go. I had known for a while that I wanted to go to the United States because my brothers had come back after living in England, Germany and France the previous year, and they had expressed that they had faced quite a bit of discrimination there. My brother-in-law lived in the United States and was visiting at the time. I asked him what he thought about discrimination in the States. He smiled and simply said, "I have never really felt anything like that." I knew that day that I would rather go to the United States for my education. So we decided that I would go to school in the United States and go back to Pakistan to join my father in his multi-national business.

I was getting ready to leave for the United States, and as I packed, my mother cried. At the airport in Karachi we stood in line waiting for our passports to be checked for the flight to Europe and on to the United States. The official checking the passports was enjoying his power and being extremely rude to everyone. The people were quietly bearing his rudeness because they did not want to risk any delay or interference with the flights they had gone to so much trouble, expense, and time to arrange. The officer demanded the passports rudely and treated each passenger with scorn and derision. When he finished with a person's passport, he threw it back rather than handing it to them politely. I began to get a little nervous because I knew that my father did not tolerate such behavior, and I so desperately just wanted this exciting journey to begin without a hitch.

When it was our turn to deal with the immigration officer, the man, without looking up, curtly demanded, "Passport." I quickly tried to hand the man my passport, but my father grabbed my hand. My heart sank. "Here we go," I thought, seeing my dream journey fade away in front of me. The immigration officer, still looking down at the documents in front of him simply barked again, "*Passport*," this time in a louder and very angry voice. My father just stood there.

Everyone in line and around us stared at Dad in disbelief. You could hear a drop of sweat from my brow hit the cold tile floor as everyone awaited the consequences of my father's insurrection. The officer looked up and said slowly and with much malice, "I said passport!" Dad looked at him calmly and said, "Ask respectfully, as you are supposed to." The man looked slightly dumbfounded, and to save face, he merely said, "Passport" again, but a little less rudely this time. My father had a presence and personality that demanded respect from those around him. The change in tone did not satisfy him. He repeated his demand very calmly, "You will say, 'May I have your passport, please, sir.'"

By this time I was nearly crawling out of my skin with anxiety, wondering how far the official could be pushed on the matter. The entire room was staring in disbelief, shocked at my father's audacity. The immigration officer stopped and sized up the situation for a moment. You could see that he intuited that this was not the man to confront. He seemed to shrink an inch in height as he said, "Your passport, please." Dad still was not satisfied, however, and suggested in a pleasant enough tone: "Ask me by saying, 'May I have your passport, please, sir?'" The officer broke down and repeated the statement exactly as Dad had specified. At that, we gave our passports to the man, who stamped and returned them without even inspecting them. My father then added, "You are a government official and here to serve the people. So please make sure that you ask every single person after me in exactly the same respectful way." We then boarded the plane.

As the plane took off, I watched the lights of the city below me. It was then that the reality of the situation came to me. From this day, my whole life would change. It is amazing how much a single decision can change a person's entire life; (Or the fate of a country or a whole species). The suddenness and the unexpectedness of this turn in my fate made me feel as if I was being guided into the sky by a gigantic, invisible hand. I looked at my father's hand as I sat next to him on the plane. I was glad to have him beside me on this journey. When they announced our final descent into New York, I was ecstatic. The excitement of this colossal change in my life was giving me goose bumps. I was about to enter this great and perfect land that I had only seen in movies and on TV—the land that in my perception was perfect. The bad guys always lost, the women were beautiful like the movies, and there was justice, opportunity, wealth, organization, happiness, and cleanliness the likes of which were unheard of in the rest of the world.

First Impressions

Once inside the terminal, we approached the immigration officer. I was scared because my experience at the Karachi airport was still fresh in my mind. But to my surprise, the immigration officer was very pleasant and welcomed us to the United States and stamped our passports after a couple of questions. When I came outside and saw the main JFK airport, I was shocked. There was litter everywhere and people were not friendly. Everyone was in a hurry and people spoke with an accent that I could barely understand. I was surprised. This did not fit the United States I had dreamt of and seen in the movies. How could the people be rude and the streets of the airport

littered? I quickly realized that the “perfect” perception my young mind had created in pre-internet, satellite era, from movies and T.V. was not close to reality. Then, I thought about what an American would think of India or Pakistan if all he ever saw was Bollywood movies. A smile crept up on my face because that would be a perception so far from reality that it would shock him when he visited the country. I realized my mistake and prepared myself for further surprises. I was right in doing so, because many were waiting for me.

Our first evening, we ate dinner at a restaurant in the hotel where we were staying. The waitress could tell I was out of my element, clearly brand new to the country, so she took it upon herself to give me some much-needed advice. She warned me not to walk alone outside in certain areas and not to take the subway at night. I was shocked again. Here I was in the United States- a culture I had long dreamed to visit for all it had to offer- and now I find it wracked with lawlessness and danger. Litter on the streets of the airport I could handle, but her comments shocked me. I was wondering if I was in for a rude awakening. In Karachi, I had never worried about being out and about at night.

She woke me from my daydreaming when she asked to take my order. I decided to try a good old American steak. She asked me how I wanted them cooked. I was again surprised. *What kind of a bloody restaurant was this asking customers how to cook the food? Just bring me the dish the way it is supposed to be cooked.* I was also embarrassed not knowing what to tell her. I asked her what my choices were and she said, “Rare, medium, medium well, or well done.” I did not know the difference between any of these so I just asked her to cook it the way she liked her steak. She said she liked hers “rare” but was not sure if I would like it. The response to her comment in my head was, *You don’t know who you are dealing with, lady. I have had the spiciest food you can ever imagine. I can handle a ‘rare’ steak.* But I just smiled and requested her to bring me the steak cooked rare. Next, she asked which “sides” I wanted. I was again crawling out of my skin. I did not want to come across like I was stupid and did not know answers to these evidently simple questions, but I had no clue why she would ask so many questions and not just bring me a dish I ordered with whatever it comes with. The level of exposure to the western culture such as American food in Pakistan and India today is entirely different. Most major food franchises are there and they have internet and satellite T.V. When I came to the US in 1979, I came with a different perception than someone would today.

So I again asked her for my choices and recognized “baked potato” and immediately made my choice. I was glad I got that done, but no such luck. My next dilemma was what I wanted on the potato. Again, I asked for my choices and did not understand most of them. I had never heard of sour cream, chives, bacon, etc. So I picked the familiar word “cheese” and ordered that. Now I was hoping that she would leave and my interrogation by the USDA and FDA would end here, but again, no such luck. What type of salad did I want? Okay, there are many types of salad here, and I obviously don’t know any of them. I again asked for my choices. I could tell that she was aggravated with me and yet was enjoying my naiveté at the same time. I picked the first salad she mentioned and she smiled and asked me what type of dressing I wanted. I was ready to

cancel my dinner and run up to my room, but I could not be so rude. I again asked her for my choices and picked the first one she mentioned, and I was almost in tears. I was just glad I got past my first hurdle in United States and anxiously waited for my dinner.

When my dinner finally arrived, I could not believe my eyes. It had blood around the meat, which was very raw. I was not sure if it was a practical joke or just a bad dream. I just thanked God for the potato and salad and had that as my first meal in the United States. I could not believe how difficult getting a simple meal could be in a different culture. Even simple things can hold many surprises for a newcomer. I have never ordered anything cooked “rare” since.

Culture Shock

We went to live with my sister and her family in Albuquerque, New Mexico. I was surprised to see people of every race, type, color, and religion in the United States. For some reason I had assumed that most of the people were white and a few were black. I guess movies don't always project a culture accurately. One of my first ventures out in this community was to the neighborhood convenience store to buy a pack of cigarettes. I remembered the advice of the waitress in New York and decided to leave my wallet at home. I went out with two dollars, which I calculated would be enough to buy cigarettes. (It was the 70s, after all.) The clerk at the store said, “Dollar ten please.” I thought, *Wow, this country is very expensive. Ten dollars for a pack of cigarettes? That is ten times the price in other parts of the world.* So, holding my two dollars, I said, “Sir, I sincerely apologize for inconveniencing you, but I did not bring enough funds for this purchase. I will be right back with the rest of the money.” The clerk looked at me with surprise. “You got two bucks right there, man,” he said. I understood then that “bucks” meant dollars, and I replied, “Exactly. And you said ten dollars.” He replied, “I didn't say ten dollars. I said dollar ten.” I had just picked up another American idiom. Back in Pakistan, I had tested at a genius level on an IQ test, but I felt like a perfect idiot during my first few weeks in the United States.

I was in for more surprises, including people driving on the wrong side of the street. My early experiences in the United States had my head in quite a spin. The process of moving to a new culture was indeed a shock, but not in quite the same way that is detailed in countless tales of immigration whereby an impoverished third-worlder gasps at the bounty of the United States. Having come from a very privileged background, it was difficult for me to adjust to a more prosaic lifestyle in the United States. Because it was extremely difficult to send money in any foreign currency from Pakistan, I was forced to live on a budget, something to which I was not accustomed. I had to cook for myself sometimes, clean my own apartment, and wash my own clothes! I had never before dreamt of doing such things. In my former home, we had nine full-time servants and many part-time ones. I would not even have thought to get my own glass of water. But I soon became accustomed to the “do-it-yourself” ethos of my new surroundings.

Life in the USA

The initial sense of personal deprivation was countered by the amazing bounty I saw around me; so much merchandise, so many choices, so much complexity. It made my head spin. Take, for example, the grocery store. The size of the store was beyond my ability to fathom. In Pakistan in the 70s, I was accustomed to the smaller marketplace in which small stores or outdoor stalls would sell chicken, spices, and vegetables. The variety in the American grocery store was breathtaking to me. How could people possibly require so many types of cereal or soda? I had never imagined there were so many types of simple things like milk, yogurt, and chicken. Milk was just milk, after all, and here I was confronted by skim, 1 percent, 2 percent, milk in plastic, milk in paper, milk in gallons, milk in pints. I found it simply unbelievable. Another aspect of the grocery store I found shocking was its cleanliness. The fruits and vegetables section contained no dirt from the fields. The chicken and fish section did not smell like chicken or fish. It was amazing. I so enjoyed my early trips to the grocery store.

People, I noticed, possessed the tools and equipment necessary for any happenstance in America. Say the weather turned cold; Americans had the gear to deal with it. They pulled out their coats, hats, boots, earmuffs, snow shovels, portable heaters, and four-wheel drives. Should you experience a heat spell, a whole alternate set of merchandise was marshaled: a different wardrobe, sunscreen, portable fans, and a convertible car. Americans seemed to have a tool to accomplish any purpose. Where I came from, people had a limited number of possessions that they adapted for different purposes. One tool might have to imperfectly fulfill many roles.

I was overwhelmed with the readily available quantity of stuff. Even a modest store clerk or janitor could expect to own a car and have an air-conditioned apartment chock full of possessions. The decadence of this consumption was beyond my comprehension in the beginning. I had come from a privileged background and was used to power and money, but the proliferation of merchandise in the United States was simply unreal to me. Rather than feeling satisfied with a lifestyle in which most of their needs were fulfilled, people seemed caught in a never-ending cycle of desire for new items. They didn't just want these superfluous luxury items; they seemed to grow to need them. Girls in their early teens had more make-up and clothing than grown women in most of the third world could imagine. People had to have designer goods and lots of them. Huge cars carried a single person around. One person being ushered through life with six cylinders and a good deal of horsepower: I just couldn't fathom the waste. In Pakistan, even today, a 0.8 liter engine pickup truck will be carrying ten or more people. I noticed how people often replaced things before they wore out or broke, just because they did not like the color or the design.

I found the food service in restaurants strange. Instead of the food coming in a common container and everyone helping themselves onto individual plates, a separate plate arrived for each individual, making the amount thrown away much greater. The portions were so large for an individual that they could easily feed two or three people. It scared me at first to see the amount of food that was constantly consumed and discarded. Growing up, we were used to eating everything to try not to waste. Even though we were wealthy, this was important and there

were so many poor people to give it to, that it would be almost an act of impudent cruelty to toss it in the garbage. But in the United States, even family members or friends usually did not seem interested in eating each other's leftovers. I had heard a statistic before coming to America that a child born in the United States would consume 3,000 percent more of the world's resources than a child growing up in India. Now I could believe that this was true. Something troubled me about this way of living. I remember having a hard time throwing away so many plastic containers and bags. I was not conscious enough to worry about the environment at that time, but I kept thinking *this is such a nice container; I will use it for something else*. However, within about two months, I was throwing away disposable containers and bags without a second thought.

Right and Wrong

One incident that gave me insight into American culture and how it differed from mine took place at my university. I was telling my girlfriend how a company with whom I was doing business was overpaying me by mistake. I was looking forward to profiting from the error. She responded by saying, "But you cannot do that!" I replied, "Sure I can. There is no way for them to know or for me to get caught." To this she replied, "But you still cannot do that." I tried explaining the logistics of the situation, how I was totally "covered" and could not get caught, but she only repeated, "I understand all that, but you still cannot do that." I was aggravated at this point and asked, "Why not?" She replied, "Because it is wrong."

Growing up in my culture, my main concern was whether or not I could get away with it. Her answer hit me like a steamroller. We all know that not everyone in the United States thinks this way, and there are those in Pakistan or India that would have focused on the moral implications of the matter. But overall, I have encountered a greater emphasis upon right and wrong amongst the American people -not the government- and a "what can we get away with" attitude in the culture in which I was raised.

Insular Culture

Aside from the charm I found in American culture, I did notice that the culture of the United States was very insular. To me, this is the most problematic feature of American culture. In other areas of the world, countries are very interdependent and aware of each other. There is an international spirit in much of the world: international politics, international sports, international music, an understanding of different cultures and their histories. However, because the United States is so large and has such a bounty within its borders, the majority of American citizens seem completely unaware and uninterested in anything outside their own country. In fact, this ignorance of the current events was not just limited to other countries. Most people could not tell you the names of most of their local or national elected officials, or what was happening in their cities or the nation in any great detail. I was puzzled at the blithe ignorance that I encountered. The average person knew little about the affairs of their own country: the Civil War, the

American Revolution, America's involvement in World War II, and so on. Also, they knew almost nothing about the rest of the world (1970's). People asked me: "Do they have cars in India?" "Are there tall buildings or just mud shacks?" "Does your family own a camel?" When I mentioned that India is highly industrialized or that it has one of the largest militaries in the world and so on, people were surprised.

I was also surprised about the scarcity of people's knowledge about anything outside of the United States. I had assumed that a nation so great and powerful must have a well-educated citizenry, versed in history and world affairs. I wondered about the meaning of this. Was knowledge of history and of the world of little use in this culture? Whose interests did this ignorance serve? I began to wonder about the consequences of such a powerful democracy limiting its understanding and interaction with other cultures to only small pockets of its population. No matter what happened in the world- genocide in Rwanda, or if the monetary system in Europe was undergoing a radical transformation, or if hundreds of thousands of people were being slain in a distant revolution, it really did not seem to matter to the majority of Americans. The rest of the world I had visited would become swept up with such events. You would expect to hear discussion on the streets, but in the United States, people seem to regard these events from the very corner of their eye for a split second and then discard it as if it was something concocted in Hollywood for their momentary amusement. This frightened me, even as a young man. I could see the danger in such isolation. If it were a tribe of aborigines in Australia that was ignorant of the rest of the world, this wouldn't hurt anyone. But if the stewards of the greatest superpower with the world's largest economy and military are isolated and lack understanding of the rest of the world, then there is an extreme danger to the United States and the whole world. The people, in their naiveté, can easily be misled and manipulated, like they often are.

New Beginnings

All of the new impressions that surrounded me interacted with the insights and security of my upbringing. I was filled with new thoughts; things that seemed natural or given to me suddenly gave me pause, caused me to wonder and think. Entering new cultures and observing things from an outsider's standpoint provides a person with incredible analytic energy. For the first time one can really "see" the texture of one's own life and analyze one's upbringing and at the same time: only the newcomer can really "see" a culture. Nothing is invisible when it is strange, and all that was invisible about the familiar, becomes visible when compared with something so entirely different. When you grow up in a culture, things around you are so familiar that they become considered "natural," and so people cease to notice. Traveling from one culture to another also allows you to evaluate your "home" country. What was "natural" to you before opens itself up to analysis and you begin to see things in an entirely different light that did not shine before. You suddenly see things to which you had been blind in your former life. It is like being surrounded by trees in a forest and then suddenly being given a bird's eye view of the entire forest.

When you have experienced different cultural approaches to life, you begin to see that very little is truly natural. Most of our cultural practices are simply longstanding habits that could easily be altered. Again, I learned that change is possible. There are so many ways of arranging our lives, so many ways of living on this planet. While I did experience great influence, both positive and negative, from my new homeland, I did not entirely assimilate. Rather, I became something new—something not of my past home or of my present. I was filled with newness; new perceptions, new ideas and new energy. My own insularity in culture, family, and religion was broken down and the process of rebuilding my life and my psyche with all I had learned became an immensely creative process. It became obvious to me that there were both magnificent and offensive aspects of every culture and the best possible reality would be one forged in a combination of the best things that a variety of cultures have to offer. I could see clearly that this was the fundamental reason for the magnificence in the American culture, the true melting pot of our planet.

Lessons in Tolerance

One of the most important lessons that a global traveler begins to learn is tolerance. My first United States-inspired lesson in tolerance came to me in my first few days in this country. When I arrived, I was a young man eager to meet other young people from Pakistan in this land that was so foreign to me. My family introduced me to a bunch of people, among them many young men from Pakistan. Many of them said things like, “Let’s get together sometime,” and then I never heard from them again. I did not even have a driver’s license in the United States and was not yet used to driving on the “wrong” side of the street. So I was immobile. Within a few days of living in the States, a friend of the family came by. It was a very uncomfortable experience for me. He was an Indian. I had grown up witnessing bombs falling and people dying in the wars between India and Pakistan, and so I grew up hating Indians. As a child growing up in a military family, all I wanted to do was to grow up and join the Pakistani military to fight them. Here was the first “Indian” I had ever met in person, and I was trying my best to not like him. He made this effort very difficult; he proved every one of my preconceived ideas about his “type” wrong. He was very nice, friendly, and easy to get along with. He invited me to come with him and his girlfriend to dinner the very next night.

We got together regularly for many years, and he showed me how narrow minded I had been. How shallow of me to judge someone so negatively before I had even gotten to know him. I was disgusted with myself, and I promised myself never to judge someone based on any preconceived ideas about their “type.” I determined that I would let them show me who they are. I realized that I had acted like the soldiers in the mess hall before my father showed them a better way. I could not believe I had forgotten such a wonderful lesson. The Indian I met then is one of my best friends to this day. I am sure that if Indians and Pakistanis were to meet each other and become acquainted as my friend and I have, the animosity between the two countries would dissolve and they could live in complete harmony and socialize together regularly. This is

another example of how our behavior towards each other is more a product of our surroundings rather than a thoughtfully planned and loving behavior.

Discrimination

I encountered another instance of racial stereotyping in the United States after I had lived here for many years. I was exhibiting in a trade show for the first time in a small town with my business partner at the time, a tall blonde woman who was once a model and continued to dress like one. We became aware of strange “looks” from the other exhibitors. There was an uncomfortable feeling there, and we knew that we were at the center of it. During the setup period, the people around us were very unfriendly and would not even look at us or would look away if our eyes met. We were very uncomfortable and wondered why we were being treated this way. So we decided to give them a taste of their own medicine and started ignoring them and adopted an unfriendly attitude towards them.

The morning when the show was opening to the public, my partner and I were having coffee at our hotel. Both of us were dressed in suits and we looked very different than the informal, small-town people who were all around us and at the show. I tried to imagine how the people of this small town must have felt seeing us there. We might as well have been aliens. We were such different people than they were accustomed to seeing. We looked different. We acted different. It occurred to me that maybe these people were not unfriendly, discriminating or antisocial at all. Maybe their reactions were just a result of the fear of the unknown, of people and things that are unfamiliar, that many of us experience from time to time.

I conveyed this thought to my partner, but she disagreed. She maintained that these were just narrow minded and unfriendly people. When we got to the show, I decided to test my theory. I went straight to the neighbor in the booth next to ours, extended my hand, and introduced myself with a big smile. She was taken aback, but shook my hand warmly and introduced herself. I chatted with her, telling her who we were and that we were from Los Angeles and it was our first visit to their city. I also asked her about the good places to eat and visit. She turned out to be the nicest lady I could possibly have imagined. Encouraged, I repeated this greeting with every person in all the booths around us, and except for one person, who seemed angry at life in general and with everyone there, everyone met me with warmth and with great respect. We all became friends. Everyone smiled at us every time our eyes met. The couple in the booth in front of ours invited us to their home for dinner after the show. The lady to the side baked us cookies. Two friends who managed a clothing booth had drinks with us. We became such a lively bunch that the show ended up being absolutely wonderful.

Please excuse my simplicity, but I believe in this pleasant instance lie the seeds for global change. I truly believe this and I beg you to believe this with me. So many of our problems stem from our ignorance and fear of each other and the way we view our differences. I had people ask me in Pakistan, “Do the Westerners really not wash after using the toilet? Do they really just wipe themselves with paper and stay dirty without washing themselves?” I also have had close

friends in the United States ask, “Do people really wash themselves after using the toilet? Is that not very unhygienic to clean yourself that way?” (In many countries around the world, people wash themselves with water directly after using the bathroom.) Excuse the unusual example, but this is just a simple way of seeing how perceptions can be different about the same thing. I have tried both methods, and I will attest to the fact that when executed properly, they are both very good and work perfectly well.

In my ancestor’s village, men gather for after dinner Hookah, and burp and pass gas at will. They are not being rude, it’s a natural function to them and they can never understand why someone will consider it rude.

I have been asked by my American and European friends why men in Middle Eastern cultures like to keep their women in prison-like conditions? I also have faced a question from conservative Middle- Easterners regarding the western man flaunting his woman half naked in public, and not being a man and protecting her? The difference in our perceptions can seem like we are not even talking about the same subject.

So the men, fathers on both sides, are doing exactly the same thing; wanting the absolute best for their children, based on their culture and understanding. In the mind of the conservative Middle Easterner, his love for his daughter is infinite. He would die for her any given day. He wants her to have the values and culture of his ancestors, and that’s why he has her follow the traditions that he feels are beautiful. They protect her from harm, keep her safe and pure. She loves him for giving her such a sacred and safe environment to grow up in.

The westerner has infinite love for his daughter, wanting her to live life to the fullest. Play sports, enjoy outdoors, have the freedom to dress the way she wants and be safe in her life.

It is so easy to find faults in one another, to find the other person’s culture or beliefs as weird or wrong.

A Unique Vantage Point

Fast forward to today. I am past my mid life. I am a Pakistani and American. I believe in all faiths being different paths to God and have lived amongst different types of people on three continents. I am not talking about having visited different places and seen different people, but believing in different things from different faiths and cultures that at times were opposites. This vantage point is unique; actually having “thought and felt” from different sides. I grew up in Pakistan in a very conservative family where it was unimaginable to even think of one of my sisters ever dating. My mom would be angry with me for even making a reference to this if she was still in this life. I grew up living all over Pakistan, including the tribal areas of Frontier and Baluchistan, and understand the culture of these tribal people, including those whom we call the Taliban. Although some of them are a prime example of being victims of the brainwashing that people can be subjected to by special interest groups, most of them are just decent people wanting to make a living and peacefully raise their families, and let their children fare better than them. But I have also lived in the most liberal cultures of the world. It feels like I have lived two

lives as two different people, in the same lifetime and that has given me the ability to see things from different perspectives that I would not have been able to otherwise; and thus my realization that the divine and magical attribute of love and tolerance are key ingredients in bringing peace to our world, and the quickest way to loving and tolerating each other is understanding each other.

Morality and Perception

After being in the United States for many years, my wife and I were in the swimming pool with some friends, and I realized that we were in our bathing suits and were exactly as “naked” as people had seemed to me when I first came here. This made me give some thought to the different perceptions of “modesty and morality” I had witnessed in my life. Once I put them all together, it just blew my mind. When our family lived among the tribal people in the frontier areas of Pakistan, I remembered the tribal men looking at us with disgust because the women in our family were not only out in public with us, but also not covered in “burqas”. There was a military officer serving with my dad whose family was very liberal and his daughters would wear blue jeans in the late 60’s in Pakistan. We used to think of him as an immoral person for allowing such vulgarity in his home.

I have known people in the United States and in Europe who have clothing-optional rules in their home and swimming pools. After analyzing all these different views on morality I had encountered in my life, it became clear to me that:

The ultimate mistake is to judge another person based on one’s own vantage point on the huge spectrum of opinions on morality.

There is always someone more conservative and more liberal than any one of us, and we are definitely not the only ones at the only right spot.

An Epiphany

After I had been in the United States for some time, my wife and I returned to my birthplace in Lahore, Pakistan, to see some close friends. We were invited to dinner by my friend Nasir, who was a generous fellow and gave us a list of fine restaurants from which to choose. Since he knew the area, we insisted upon leaving the choice to him. He seemed a little hesitant, but finally he smiled and said, “You may not like my choice. It may be too strange for you.” We assured him that anything would be okay with us, that we were easygoing about such matters. So that evening we departed from his house and drove for quite some time, leaving the high-end parts of the city behind. The traffic was crazy in the area we left behind, but it was absolutely insane in the internal parts of the city that we were now traveling through. The thick black smoke spewing from the tailpipes of three-wheel rickshaws and overly decorated buses and trucks was unbearable. Every driver was making full use of the most important instrument on every vehicle in India and Pakistan—the horn; My ears always start ringing within minutes of going out on the streets in these countries, and tonight was no different. Every few minutes I witnessed a near-miss accident. The most tiring part of visiting India and Pakistan is always the traffic.

The sun was going down and the shadows of the night were beginning to engulf the city. An amazing thing happens in this part of the world at night, when the biggest “rush hour” starts in the evening at about eight to nine p.m. It made me realize how so many cultures in Europe and Asia work to live while we in the United States seem to live to work. I started thinking about how precious time off is to everyone. Even people who can barely afford to eat make sure they take a lot of days off from work. A huge number of events, celebrations, and religious and national holidays ensure that people keep taking time off. My mind wandered off to my life in the United States, and I started thinking how my six days a week lifestyle was so different from the more relaxed way of living on this part of the globe. The previous day we had attended one of the ceremonies that are part of the month-long wedding process and there were over forty couples present for this celebration in the middle of a work day. I could not believe that so many of them could, and did, take time off from work to attend this ceremony. I started wondering about the two extremes between these two cultures regarding our priorities in life.

Red Light District

All of a sudden my daydreaming ended with a sudden realization that we were heading toward the red-light district of the city of Lahore, which is called the “Shahi Muhalla,” which means the “Royal Neighborhood.” There are many sub sections of this area, the most famous of which is called “Heera Mundi,” or the “Diamond Market.” Prostitution is quite common in Pakistan and India, so sitting in my comfortable space in the car, I was not unsettled. I found the area through which we drove an amazing scene, as it resides right next to one of the most magnificent mosques in the world: the Badshahe Mosque. As we took in the sights, I felt sure that we would drive right past the red-light district on our way to some other destination. Imagine my surprise

when we drove right up to its edge and parked. I reminded Nasir that our wives were present—hardly an appropriate moment for a visit to an area known for prostitution for centuries. He just laughed and said, “I warned you, and you insisted on leaving it to me. So now you must trust me.”

Getting out of the car, I was shocked when I saw signs indicating that almost every man on the street ahead clearly made his money in the prostitution trade or was looking for a hooker, and most of the women there were for sale. It was unnerving. The dark and painful life of the neighboring streets seemed to spill out onto the sidewalk our feet seemed to cling to in horror. I harbored a secret fear of being arrested for merely being in the proximity of this neighborhood, and being a foreign national in Pakistan, I did not need that trouble. I worried about being seen in this disreputable area, and I worried most of all about our safety. Yet, I let Nasir lead us. Our wives received stares from men passing by. This was a common occurrence in that part of the world, but being so close to the Shahi Muhalla made these men particularly lustful with their stares. They were clearly wondering if our wives were “available”. My level of discomfort was steadily establishing new records and by now I was sure that I would regret letting Nasir lead us into whatever he had on his mind for this evening.

I was seriously debating grabbing my wife’s hand and getting back in the safety of the car, but we just followed Nasir toward an ancient building that was on the other side of where we had parked. To my surprise, the man at the door greeted Nasir as if he knew him well. He obviously visits this strange place frequently. For some reason, this door man knowing Nasir was very comforting. We jumped over a small stream of sewer to reach the old building next door that we were being led toward. There was a cigarette shop nearby that was a four-by-four foot wooden box with the shopkeeper somehow shoved inside and a huge amount of cigarettes, snacks, and paan around him. Paan is a local favorite that is somewhat like chewing tobacco. The men who were standing around the cigarette stall were all staring at us, and I felt like telling them to look away, but I certainly did not act on that stupid idea. I looked toward the main part of the Shahi Muhalla and could see girls on balconies talking and acting suggestively to the men passing by, trying to attract good customers for the night. You could hear traditional musical instruments like sitars and tablas being played at a distance.

Strange Restaurant

The door man accompanied us to the second floor, through a narrow, winding stairwell of old mud steps. I wondered if this passage was safe; it was clearly not up to any building code of which I had ever heard. I found it claustrophobic, and this feeling, mingled with my nervousness about being in such a torrid environment, put me in quite a state. On the second floor, my feelings of unease began to deepen as I saw old wooden tables and chairs scattered about like a restaurant, but there was no one there eating at that hour. Dinnertime in that part of the world begins at about 9:00 p.m.; I guess it was even later in this area that comes alive at night. There were paintings all over the walls like nothing I had ever seen. Some of them were huge, sprawled

across the wall in what seemed a grotesque display, and all of them seemed very unusual to me. I squinted around the room and noticed in a sort of half-conscious way that within each painting there seemed to be a contradiction. A painting would contain one aspect that was very happy and another that was very sad, housed on the same canvas. The paintings each seemed to exude both positive and negative energy, and I began to feel as if I was inhabiting one of those surreal scenes. Was this a bad dream? On one hand, I felt nearly panicked and profusely uncomfortable. On the other hand, I felt a strange sense of expectation, as if I had stepped into a new world.

We sat down at one of the tables while Nasir spoke rapidly to a man I assumed to be the waiter, though at this point I was still unsure that it was dinner we would be receiving. Before I knew it, plates were being laid upon the table—a wonderful profusion of colors and smells that quickly turned my mood from apprehensive to jolly. The food that was eventually served was absolutely magnificent Pakistani food—the best we had ever tasted. After the meal, we pushed our chairs back and complimented Nasir on his choice. We felt glad to have been brought to this odd place. He smiled and a hint of sadness entered his face, reminding me of the paintings all around us. He paused and then said, “I know, the food is wonderful here. But that is only part of the reason I have brought you here today. There is a story—a history—I want you to know.” What he told us next left us forever changed.

Born Into Prostitution

There was a little boy who was born to a very good mother. She loved him dearly and raised him as well as her situation would allow. He also had a sister to whom he was very devoted. The siblings did not like to see their mother rise each day only to go off to work, but this was the reality of their lives, and they grew used to it. In their early teens, the sister and brother began to look about them and notice things about their environment. They watched various male relatives escort unfamiliar men through the rooms of their house. This made them feel uncomfortable and alien in their own home. They saw the women in their family—their beloved aunts, the friendly in-laws, their older cousins, and even their mother herself—enter rooms with strange men and then emerge later, sometimes after long sessions of singing and dancing, and sometimes after just silence. Some men would only come around once or twice, but some the boy saw over and over. Through a slow process of realization, the two siblings discovered that they lived in a home where sex was sold for money, and that their entire community, the “Shahi Muhalla,” was what is known as a red-light district—a place where “respectable” people did not live. As they grew to maturity, they grew to learn what this meant for them. In this world—the only world they had ever known—almost every boy who grows into a man will become a housekeeper and caretaker of the children or a pimp, while the women “worked,” and every girl will become a prostitute. The little boy received this knowledge with the natural sense children have for fairness and the openness they feel toward change. “Why can we not just leave this bad place and run away to a better one?” they asked their mother repeatedly in many different ways. The mother, with tired eyes, patiently explained to them that wherever they might go, Shahi Muhalla would follow

them. “If you are of Shahi Muhalla, no other place will ever accept you. You must stay and accept your lot.”

A Human for Sale

The brother, though, could not accept his situation as inevitable, natural, or right. He was discontent. Others continually told him to accept his place in life, and that it would never change. But something in the young man would not let him accept that. He silently and with great determination, decided to take on fate. He began secluding himself away, educating himself when he should have been doing work in the sex trade. He devoured books and took up painting.

One day when his beloved sister was only thirteen, the women in their family started a long process of giving her baths with skin softening oils and potions that made the skin fairer. Finally her hair was done nicely and she was dressed up in beautiful but provocative attire, and was “displayed” in the main room of the house. A few special guests arrived and started checking out the merchandise. They started an intense stage of negotiations with the elders of the family, and the last two finalists in this human auction were also allowed a few minutes alone in the room with her. They were allowed to check the goods for sale with their hands. The final winner of the bidding process was one of the most respected businessmen-turned politician of the city, who was married with children, including daughters. The young girl was sent off with him for a month. When she returned, she was a different person. Being raped and physically abused by this old man for a month took a toll on her body that she could possibly have recovered from, but the emotional and psychological damage to her was beyond any medical procedure. This event started his sister’s life as a prostitute and a bread earner for the family. The young man was absolutely disgusted with this life.

Breaking the Shackles

Finally, when the time was right, this young man accomplished the unthinkable and penetrated respectable society. One by one he broke through barriers, attended a university and gained a prominent reputation as a writer. But he did not forget his tortured community. He took the risk and wrote about his experience in the red-light district for one of the major newspapers, providing priceless insight about the injustices there to a wide audience in his country. His writing career remained successful, and he started teaching at the local university. Somehow, what everyone told him was impossible became reality. He had changed his fate and had become a “respectable person”. People who had once been unforgiving, willing to throw him away as “undesirable,” became sympathetic to his story. He had also changed the fate of his community, just a little bit.

I now realized that the restaurant we were eating in belonged to that boy from Shahi Muhalla. He was the brother in the tale to which we had just listened with rapt attention. He chose to open a restaurant right outside the red-light district where he had grown up, to stay close to his

community and to help them. Filled with emotion, I looked around again at the paintings on the walls. Suddenly they didn't seem strange or repellent to me; they completed the story.

In most of the paintings the woman and the girl, who I now knew were the man's mother and sister, were wearing very nice clothes and jewelry. This was common with most of the prostitutes in the area. But in the paintings, the jewelry intermittently incorporated big bulky chains, locks, and handcuffs. In another painting, a happy image of a family seated eating dinner was transformed by a grotesque monster lurking in the background. One of the largest paintings suddenly hit me with emotional force—it showed his mother's dead body on the day she died. She was lying on a bed and the young boy and his sister sat next to her, their shoulders hunched and eyes shining in desperate grief. Several figures were playing a "shehnaee" next to her bed. This might have been puzzling on first glance. A "shehnaee" is an instrument played at weddings and other happy occasions. I saw clearly how his mother's death was indeed a mixture of profound grief for an adored mother, but also a cause for relief and celebration that a miserable existence had mercifully ended. My opinion of the paintings now transformed; they were immensely brilliant, meaningful, and moving. I was in tears and in deep thought. This experience changed my life forever.

The Search for Answers

As we got up to leave, Nasir suggested that we climb to the top of the building and see the view from the roof. We followed another narrow and treacherous stairwell as we ascended to the roof. There we were able to see a deep and dramatic contradiction of our world. On one side of the roof sprawled beneath us was the red-light district in all of its busy squalor. On the other side, brightly lit with a golden incandescence, we beheld one of the world's most cherished and holy places: the Badshahe Mosque. It is there that God's children come in prayer, vowing to lead good, clean lives. That evening standing there on that rooftop, I came to many precious realizations—realizations about fate, our Creator, the unfairness in the world, and the human purpose. That night I decided that I would use my life for more than just living. That night I decided that I will do everything in my power to make the world a better place.

Because it was the scene of such personal transformation for me, I could not stop thinking about the strange subculture of the Shahi Muhalla. What had previously been something I would want to avoid with disgust began to fill me with concern and wonder. Somehow, the vision of this neighborhood seemed to be whispering to me that it was keeping some secret, some strange insight for me to uncover. So began my attempt to understand this strange subculture. When I told my friends that I was planning to research the Shahi Muhalla, they laughed and made all sorts of jokes. "Oh yes, many people enjoy researching this area." "Very pleasurable research, huh?" And so it went. It felt strange to have such suggestions made about me, but I did not let it dissuade me from my mission of opening my mind and filling it with a new understanding.

Breeding Prostitutes

The Shahi Muhalla is the one place in that region where the birth of a girl is celebrated while a boy's birth is not heralded as good news. This is opposite of the mainstream regions of India and Pakistan where a boy's birth is met with celebration and congratulations, while a girl coming into this world brings a sobering realization of the huge expense of marrying her off and providing her with a dowry, which is usually demanded by the boy's family as a pure business transaction. Usually parents go deeply into debt taking care of this obligation. The "unlucky" parents of a daughter may even be offered condolences following the birth. In fact there is a horrible problem of ultra sound abortions in Pakistan and India; people find out the gender of the baby and if it's a girl, they have an abortion. This is also causing an imbalance in the gender of the population. But many such social norms are turned upside down in the Shahi Muhalla. Observing this strange culture was like watching an apple rise from the ground and go to the tree; a defiance of all the usual forces.

I discovered that the prostitutes of the Shahi Muhalla fall into two categories. They are either kidnapped, bought, or otherwise "acquired" through some criminal means from different parts of the country. However, the majority of them are a result of a controlled breeding process. Once a prostitute has lived her productive days as a prostitute -which usually begins when she is about thirteen or fourteen and ends when she is about thirty- her purpose in life changes. She is now responsible for giving birth to one or more beautiful girls, who will then be trained to support the family and join the family business. To ensure that their daughters are beautiful and fair complexioned, an important commodity in that part of the world, the mother will choose a good looking man amongst her customers to become the unknowing "father" of her offspring. This seemed to me a deep irony. These men go through extreme measures to ensure that their families, especially their daughters, are kept in a very safe environment far away from the filth of the prostitution trade. But what they don't realize is that in their illicit support of the prostitution trade, they may very well be conned, and the future prostitute may be their own daughter.

The grooming of a prostitute has historically followed a well-choreographed sequence. After the girl is born and the celebrations are over, she is well protected and almost never let out of sight. She begins her singing and dancing lessons from a very early age and an "ustad" (teacher) is assigned for this training. Once she is ready, she is presented in front of special clients for a suggestive dance called "Mujra." The better she looks and performs, and the more seductive she acts, the better her chances of attracting a good offer for her first "sale". The girl's virginity is zealously guarded by the family as the most precious commodity in this culture. The deal with a client is called a "shadi," which means marriage. The girl is showered up and prepared for the client by her family and then sent off to be his sex slave for the duration of the deal. This process is called "Nuth Utarwai," which basically means the loss of virginity. The "recent" virgins are pawned off again in the same fashion, and future clients are arranged, attracted again by the seductive dance, the "Mujra." There are a lot of functions and celebrations in India and Pakistan for which a Mujra is arranged. Sometimes no sex is involved at all; it is just for the dance.

Another discovery that I made in my investigation was that a real threat in the district is the police, who are known to harass, rape, jail, beat up, and create every imaginable form of trouble for these people and their clients, so that they can extract money from them. In fact, a police inspector posted to this area must pay a huge bribe, called “pugri,” for the post because it is so lucrative. The inspector in this district also knows that he will be transferred in a short period of time, and the position “resold” by his superior officers. So he must recover his investment and make a profit quickly.

The Lesson

I now wondered what was next for me. What did I intend to do with my research? I now understood a shameful process that exploits helpless people who are no different than others, except by virtue of the circumstances of their birth, or a result of kidnapping or human trafficking. I learned how they are exploited by others for money and lust. But I still had no idea what my new knowledge meant for my own destiny. This realization did not come to me right away. It gradually became apparent when I let go and just let it all percolate in my consciousness for some time. Now the lesson is clear to me, and it is so incredibly simple and obvious in its meaning, but so magnificently powerful in its implications:

Our core beliefs are not always a product of logical evaluation. They are usually the result of the environment into which we are born, where the messages that we are sent from birth are accepted as reality, and most of us will not question that reality for the rest of our lives.

What If?

Imagine this: if you could go back in time and take a very decent family and cause them to be born into the Shahi Muhalla, the chances are overwhelming that their daughters and mother would be whores, and be pimped to strangers by the father and brothers. And in the same vein, if you were born in Afghanistan to a Taliban family, chances are incredibly high that you would engage in the fight against the “infidels” who have attacked your country and be willing to die for that cause. If you were a woman, you would think it quite natural to wear a veil and you might even fight against the evil Western influence that might seek to “free” you of such restrictions. If you are a woman from one of the more conservative eastern cultures, and you were born in the Western world instead, chances are great that you would be perfectly comfortable wearing a bikini in a public pool. The differences between us are almost entirely created in the cultures in which we live and the religion we are born into, something that we cannot control. We can control, however, our ability to see beyond cultural differences and recognize our common humanity. We can evaluate our religious and cultural beliefs and make sure we are following a good interpretation and that they make sense.

The Power of Brainwashing

It is incredible how powerful brainwashing can be- especially by what we are taught as children and young adults by those we trust the most as the “only and absolute truth”, and what we know as “normal” in the culture where we grew up. Many of us are suffering from this most incredible brainwashing power which has caused a state of hypnosis or blindness. This power is evident from events all throughout history and all around us today; everything from suicide bombers in the Middle East, to other religious extremists in so many forms all over the world, including my now home country; USA. In India, in a very small sect of the Hindu religion, when a girl has her first period, she is taken to the priests in the local Mandir by her parents for a religious ceremony. This ceremony includes the priest’s gang raping the little girl, sometimes as young as nine years old. The parents are not only present in the Mandir, but they insist on this cleansing ceremony for their child. Thousands of girls each year suffer from this despicable religious ritual. Is it surprising at all that these priests came up with this ritual? Do you think that these lustful men wanting an endless supply of virgins to rape had something to do with the making of this ritual? Most parents all over the world are full of love and affection for their children and are willing to give their lives for them. Then why do some of them get convinced to put their daughters through the misery I described above? I know that many Hindus from my region of birth will hate me for telling this story, but it is a documented fact and there have been documentaries done on this ritual.

In Africa, one third of the girls go through female *circumcision*, without which they would be considered unclean and immoral. Female *circumcision* is a technical name for cutting off the clitoris of these young girls so they can never enjoy sex. Again, the parents of these girls absolutely insist on this procedure. In case you are assuming that such miserable things only happen in some remote third world countries, then just look at the cults in the United States that have convinced their followers that it is a sacred religious act for their children to be used for sex by the leader of the cult.

I am not trying to scare you from world’s religions, including yours if you follow one, but I definitely am trying to open all of our eyes to the interpretation given by others of these religions that their followers need to evaluate with open eyes.

Heaven on Earth

We are meant to create a heaven on Earth. This is no chip off the shoulder of the heaven that most of us believe we will get into in the next life. But we have been given the goods, mentally and materially, to create a heaven in this lifetime, not just for us, but for all mankind. But to create this heaven, we have to first get rid of the hell that exists in many parts of our planet.

Change Is Possible

The thoughtless acceptance of things as they are is a significant problem for our world. Accepting the status quo as natural or right just because “it is the way things are” is the way to assure that things will never change. The truth is the reality that “we” try and understand, not one that is spoon fed to us. If the reality is unfair, painful, or damaging, we must change it. Many of us believe there is nothing we can do to change “reality” or that it is someone else’s responsibility to create positive change. This is how evil and injustice continues to exist and prosper in the world. There are too many good, intelligent, and logical people in the world to allow such conditions to continue. I look around and notice that everywhere “reality” varies and the way we behave as humans is very malleable. We can change; we do change. If you grew up in a society where bathing once a week was the norm, believe me, you would bathe once a week or maybe twice if you were the cleanest bunny in your colony. When I lived in Pakistan, cutting someone off in a line was the norm, but I don’t do that in the United States.

Learning about the “norms” of the Shahi Muhalla culture made me see how we are tyrannized and tyrannize others through the various “realities” we accept unquestioningly, generation after generation. Finally, I understood why I had been so drawn to study the painful history and traditions of this “secret area.” It was an extremely bad and unfair deal that these people had been dealt, but they accepted it as their “reality”, their fate, the norm for them. When I started blaming them for just accepting their reality, I realized that we are behaving in exactly the same manner. I believe that the feeling I had after listening to the story of the boy from Shahi Muhalla was calling me to beg the world for thoughtfulness and positive change. I can’t stand the thought of another generation of young girls being born into prostitution, the hatred between another generation of our planet’s citizens caused by differences, another murderous rampage like what mankind has embarked upon numerous times in the past and is repeating, or the irreversible destruction of our planet in the name of progress. *We simply must stop the practice of turning our faces away from injustice, evil, suffering, and destruction. We must face it. We must investigate it. We must change it.* All it takes is for us to open our minds regarding what constitutes “reality” and take action. *Whatever is “acceptable” today, is only so because we accept it.* Think about that- the majority of the time, all it takes for something to change is for us to stop “accepting” it and it becomes “unacceptable”, and thus changes sooner or later.

This change can only come from logical and good-natured effort from good-hearted humans who have the courage to look around, think, speak, write, brainstorm, act, and bring about positive change with their combined positive energies and efforts. Ordinary people like you and me must examine our experiences and add our wisdom to the complexity of the times. A great number of us together become an unstoppable force, compelling every major institution, government, and industry to listen to us. Inaction will ensure the destruction of much, the murder and rape of many, and eventually the destruction of our planet and our species. What do we choose? I cannot

tell myself that others will fix our planet's problems, not while I look into my son's eyes knowing that we are destroying his future as I am sitting on the sideline not only watching, but being a party to this atrocity. No one else can do what you and I can—no one. I read a great saying; "I wished someone would do something about that, and then I realized that I am someone".

When I look at the world and the huge set of problems and the astronomical changes that are needed, then just the thought of people like you and me even attempting change of any kind at a universal level seems simply foolish. Then I wonder what would have happened if the half-naked man from India, who brought one of the greatest empires in history to its knees, thought of the monumental difficulties he would face and never tried. He changed the thinking of hundreds of millions with his simple message. I idolize this man, Mahatma Gandhi, and consider him to be one of the greatest people that ever lived on our planet. I truly believe that it does not matter whether he was a Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Sikh or Jew; I guarantee that whatever the reward is in the next life, let's call it heaven, he is enjoying that reward.

A Shaken Faith

I now wondered what was next for me. What did I intend to do with my "realizations"? I now knew of the existence of many shameful processes that exploit helpless people who are no different than others except by the circumstances of their birth. I learned how people all over the world are exploited by others for money, power and lust. But still, I did not know what my new knowledge meant for my own destiny.

I realized that what we are taught from childhood by those whom we most trust seems normal, rational, and very "right," even when it's exploitative, misguided, or illogical, and clearly seem as such to outsiders. Most of us are born into a culture, a society, a government, and a religion, rather than choosing one. It takes a great deal of effort to view our place of birth from an objective "outsider's" position. However, it is that exact position that is required, in order to question the rationality of our beliefs. For example, a child born in the United States would never tolerate the government dictating to him which state he must live in, but a child born in the former Soviet Union accepted such a regulation as normal, natural, and perhaps even "right." Until recently, a girl born in Saudi Arabia did not even dream of being able to drive, but in the Western cultures, we would have severe civil unrest if anyone tried to take this basic right away from women. If a child is born in a particular faith, that child is very likely to believe, practice, and be willing to fight to defend that faith his entire life. If you were to go back in time and transplant that child, at birth, into a family with a different faith, he would likely adopt that faith with all his heart and soul. Just look at your own belief systems; did you evaluate and compare different ones and choose the one that made the most sense, or are you following what you were taught? I am not saying this to convince you against the religion you are practicing, quite the contrary; I think the majority of our spiritual beliefs have a very positive effect on our lives, and the lives of the communities we live in. I just want to convey that if what you are taught doesn't

make sense, or is violent towards others, then don't follow it blindly. God gave you a brain for a reason. *Faith is a pillar of strength for mankind; blind faith is its nemesis.*

Brainwashing

So, are all or some of the world's religions wrong, bad, or evil? Definitely not—all of them that I have studied are institutions that were founded with very good intentions, and have had great and positive effects on their communities. But in most cases, a group of extremists will convey their hardcore interpretation, or in some cases an absolute misinterpretation of the religion and use it to enslave the thoughts of God's children. I beg you please don't fall for this gross misuse of divinity and everything that is good. I am sure you will agree that our Creator is loving, fair, nurturing, and a greatly positive force in our lives. Expecting God to do anything to cause divisions amongst us or to show favoritism is just not very godly.

But the effect of when these beautiful faiths are hijacked by powerful men or groups for their own agendas, using their interpretation to cause divisions between us, is just devastating. Imagine the cost in not just the wars that have been inflicted upon us, but also the cost of preparedness for war. I am not advocating becoming weak- we must always be strong and ready to defend ourselves- but not the mad hysteria that has been created by perpetuating this atmosphere of hatred, for trillions in profits for some and millions of lost lives and devastated dreams for we, the people of the world.

Do the recent terrorist events remind you of the sort of brainwashing that I am talking about? Is this not a prime example of the brainwashing by a few for pushing their agendas? Should any of us be surprised at how a young man can be convinced that blowing himself up and killing others in God's name will instantly transport him to heaven? Imagine a child with no education, no exposure to world news, who never sat in an airplane, raised in a very remote tribe or village and is convinced that he is fighting evil people who are there to destroy his home and rape his sister and mother. This young man has been told by those he trusts the most and believes them to represent God's word, that blowing himself up will protect his family and country, provide him over seventy virgins and boundless rewards from God in Heaven. Is it surprising that some of them fall for this.

The Only Right Path

A great thing that I observed when I immigrated to the United States was the huge diversity of religious thought coexisting in one place, under one government. I had regular contact with people of many different religious backgrounds. Coming face to face with people of other religions caused me to think; "Is he so deluded? Is she living a life that is false, ignorant of the real 'truth' that I was given by my religion? It seemed somehow an unkind thought. I began to see the lines that religious differences can draw between people. No matter how civilized or kind

people of different religions try to behave toward each other, in their hearts they experience mistrust and fear when they believe that they are right and hold the key to salvation, and their neighbor is wrong and may be damned. It's easier when one is thinking these thoughts only in an abstract way about a group of people from a distance. But in day-to-day interaction with people, having these perceptions about one another can be very unsettling. It seemed unimaginable to me that the Creator, who is perfect in vastness and minuteness, in timing, coordination, and magnificent creation, would want us to be so divided and imperfect in our relations with one another as a result of our faith in Him. I began to sense that something was wrong with how we were conducting ourselves with each other in our spiritual quest to know and pray to our perfect Creator.

When I started to blame some of these religions for this behavior of mankind towards each other, I realized that in the sacred text of many world religions, including Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Deists, Mormonism, Zoroastrianism, and Buddhism, there are some fundamental messages that are common, and I believe these messages to be the essence of each one of these magnificent faiths.

Don't hurt others. Don't steal from others. Love your neighbors. Be kind to your loved ones. Be good to mankind and your environment.

So there truly is an incredible unity in the messages of all the teachings of these great religions. We can so easily not only get along with each other, but live as neighbors and protectors, if we can just take our collective heads out of the sand on two realities:

- 1) If we switch our focus on the fundamental positive beliefs in common between our faiths and not the superficial things that are different, we can change the way we live and interact on our planet.
- 2) We are being kept ignorant, and in conflict with each other, because that is the source of unimaginable wealth and power for a few around the world, that go to great lengths, including incredible amount of planning, expertise and finances, to keep us hating each other.

So one of the most peaceful and loving paths in our spiritual and cultural beliefs is to believe that all peaceful faiths to be just other paths to the same destination, and never to see someone else's beliefs as misguided, inferior, or wrong. Just imagine the effect of this one change around the world.

Power of Questioning

For so long, much of the world has been afraid of questioning. We have left discussions of "higher things" to a small coterie of powerful individuals who frequently have exploited this power to the detriment of the human race. The power of the question belongs to everyone. It is a

dangerous proposition when we allow a few to formulate answers and then to lead. We must restore our ability and right to question; only then are we all involved in the spiritual “quest.” So, how about some questions that have been on mankind’s mind forever; is there a God? If yes, then who is God? Is there one God or many? Were we created by a group or species like ourselves but much more advanced? How did we get here? Do any of the world’s religions reflect truth? If so, which one? Or is it a combination of many? Why is there so much evil in the world? Why is there so much unfairness? Is God benevolent? Or does he create the evil to which we are subjected? Does God love us beyond our imagination, or does he play with us like a bored ruler torturing a helpless animal? Is there a life after this one? If so, what is it like? Is there accountability for our actions in this life or in another life? Are some people truly evil? Or are we just going through a learning process in which facing evil and disease are components of our learning process? Is there a negative force like Satan beyond God’s control? Is there a battle between good and evil?

If we let our minds begin questioning, questions manifest themselves from one to another in rapid succession, as naturally as streams of water moving down mountains, breaking into rivulets and forming tributaries, merging and forming connections, and separating and joining naturally as it encounters multiple terrains, rocks, and obstacles. We should let our minds flow naturally over our spiritual lives. It is natural and healthy to ask these questions. For instance, why keep women from being spiritual leaders and communicators? Women are one of God’s most magnificent creations—mothers, sisters, passionate partners, daughters; why can’t they preach the message of faithfulness in God?

As a species, we are still very young. I don’t think we have the mental capacity to understand such a grandiose idea as God. And I am convinced we won’t know until after we die. Maybe that is why the after-life is such a mystery. But working within our limitations and to the best of my ability I have theorized that God is energy. And energy is in everything. It’s in you. It’s in me. It’s in everything that has ever been created—thus making us all connected to each other.

This brings us to some very important questions about God’s powers. These questions are very difficult to answer for anyone who believes in God and are probably the single biggest argument for the beliefs of atheists or agnostics. If God is “all powerful” (omnipotent) and “all knowing” (omniscient), then why does he allow so much evil and suffering in the world? Why did Hitler massacre six million people without God lifting a finger?

The three obvious possibilities are A) God does not stop evil. B) God cannot stop evil. C) God does not exist. All of these are against the core of any “theist” belief system. I already explained why I have absolute faith that God exists. But how could God be incapacitated in front of evil? Or how could God be willing to allow this evil? I have pondered these questions the most in my quest to come to an understanding about God and developing a belief system that I could absolutely love.

I have absolute faith in the existence of a Creator and it seems obvious to me that God, the Creator of all universes, cannot be powerless against these events. So there must be a reason why God allows bad things to happen. Some of the possibilities that seem most probable to me are that either this life is so miniscule compared to what's next and there is a way that the next life makes the unfairness of this one fair or balanced in some way. Or we all go through different good and bad experiences during different stages of our life, or lives, and so it all becomes fair in the end. Or some divine reason is hidden from us because it is beyond our understanding in our current level of consciousness. I am okay with leaving it at that. When God wants us to know more, we will. But I am absolutely convinced that it is not because God is powerless in certain cases or doesn't care or doesn't exist.

Discussing my views with some of my extended family was very painful and a big mistake that I paid a great price for, because they never spoke to me again. So it was with great reluctance that I started discussing my views with other people around me. But once I did, a question that always comes up is, "So do you believe that the world's religions are wrong?" No, not at all. To the contrary, I believe that all peaceful religions of the world are right and just another path to God. They are all God's creation because the burning desire in the hearts and minds of our species to look for our Creator is something that our Creator filled in us, and so the resulting religions of the world are also a result of His plan.

Have you noticed how all of us never blame our parents for stories they told us, like where babies come from? It was an explanation required and understandable at that time. A lot of the explanations given to their followers by world's major religions for centuries or thousands of years ago were explanations to best explain concepts that had to be explained, given the evolutionary stage of mankind when they were introduced and by limitations of the languages and cultural beliefs of the time. So even when we find conflict in our beliefs with some of these teachings, we must not call them wrong or blame anyone for it. For the true believers of any of the world's religions, who live their lives peacefully, all I have to say is "Good for you." There are many roads to the destination we call God and as long as you lead a good life, the path you choose to God is a great one. Your path is as right as mine, and mine is as right as yours. I love your God and hope you love mine, because they are one and the same. I will respect you and your faith, and hope you do the same for me.

Although I still had many questions, the only certainty was that I felt God in my heart and soul, in my every breath, and in everything around me. The one thing about which I am absolutely certain is that a supreme being exists and that He loves us. I imagine Him right now smiling with patient admiration at our scientific attempts to find Him, as a father might lovingly admire his child wrestling with the mysteries of the universe with his baby mind. If you find my examples and explanations of things to be very simplistic, I intend for them to be just that. Simplicity can be the key to seeing through a great deal of complexity; such an approach helps us to understand and explain difficult concepts. Simplicity is the common sense that God has given to guide us.

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Axiom

Birth of Axiom

I hope that Axiom will touch your heart and soul, as it has touched mine. Axiom will give you logical and honest answers to life's most difficult questions and present a magnificent ideology. Axiom combines love, logic, knowledge and faith in beautiful harmony in a magnificent way of life.

Like most of us, I grew up in the comfort of my birth religion, and the absolute proof of the righteousness of our faith was the unquestionable divine presence I always felt when I went to our religion's places of worship. All of this combined with the millions around me believing the same thing I did was enough to make my faith etched in stone in my life.

Something changed when I migrated to the USA. Among my close friends were Christians, Muslims, Jews, Sikhs, and others of different religions who believed as much in their faiths as I did in mine. I had a very hard time believing that a God that I believed to be like a merciful and loving parent, would have so many people walk around misguided or believing in the wrong faith, because of a factor that was beyond their control: the address of their birth. The resolution to this problem for me was when I ended up at the places of worship of different faiths with my friends and felt the same divine presence I had felt in the place of worship of my own faith.

My spiritual life would never be the same again and the two life lessons that this transformation taught me were; 1) In spiritual matters, no one's path is the only right one 2) Adapting wonderful messages and traditions from different religions and cultures is very life enriching, especially spiritually.

What followed was 3 decades of soul searching, studying major religions, and a quest to find a belief system for me; the criteria being an honest, tolerant, logical, evolving, flexible, bettering life on Earth and spiritually satisfying. This was the beginning of Axiom. Now, 30 years since this quest started for me personally, I am introducing Axiom to the world. I have spent years of my time and resources developing Axiom without any desire for money or power. All I want is to make a difference in the world before its time for me to go to the next phase of my existence.

Meaning of Axiom: "A self-evident and necessary truth, or a proposition whose truth is so evident at first sight that no reasoning or demonstration can make it plainer".

Mission Statement: "To bring happiness to all individuals, peace and unity to mankind, and well being to the Earth through love, thoughtful action, and purposefully living a magnificent life".

The name- Axiom: I could not think of a name for this organization, belief system, and movement I wanted to start, and for years I tried with no luck. My son, Kasim, knew I was struggling with this and asked me for some words that describe what I was doing. I responded by saying; "Good, honesty, spiritual, happiness, unity, peace, love, humanity". He started researching for names with relevance to these words and a repeated result was "Axiom". I then looked up the meaning and knew instantly that I had the name.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES OF AXIOM

Different Religions

All peaceful religions are different spiritual paths with a similar purpose; *no one has a monopoly on God*. Respect all religions; never consider anyone's peaceful beliefs wrong, or inferior to your own.

It takes a generous serving of arrogance and ignorance to make one believe that theirs is the only right opinion.

Rituals

Spiritual rituals are good, but not a substitute for leading a good life, which is the true testament of who you are, and the quality of the beliefs that guided your life.

Discrimination

Never discriminate against anyone, for any reason.

Cultural Beliefs

Respect everyone's cultural beliefs regarding modesty and morality.

Whether you prefer a veil or a bikini, it is ignorant to believe that your opinion is the only right one.

Fighting in God's name

To hurt God's creations is a horrible act, but to do so in God's name is the ultimate sin.

“What difference does it make to the dead, the orphans and the homeless, whether the mad destruction is wrought under the name of totalitarianism or the holy name of liberty or democracy?” Mahatma Gandhi

Demanding Answers

Don't demand answers to every question; not having all the answers at this evolutionary stage of our species is important to our growth, and our purpose.

Earth

We are borrowing this world from our children, so leave it a better place.

Your Life

Live a magnificent life. Consider your mental, physical and spiritual development as your ultimate quest.

“Dance like no one is watching. Sing like no one is listening. Love like you've never been hurt and live like it's heaven on Earth.” Mark Twain

Strength

Stay strong and always be prepared to face evil; to protect yourself and other living beings.

Blind Faith

Never be led blindly by anyone, especially in the name of God. God would not have given you a brain if he did not want you to use it.

To have “blind faith” in anything is like being blind by closing your eyes, when you have the gift of sight.

The use of our God given faculties in religion is as important as their use in science; thus logic must be an extremely important part of our faith.

“Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind.” Albert Einstein

It is far easier to sway people by fear than reverence, but the latter is such a magnificent sight.

Life after Death

I believe that there are adventures beyond our wildest imagination waiting for us after this life; death is a transformation, not an end.

What happens after we die had to be a mystery. If we had proof of heaven and hell, only the insane would do anything wrong, thus eliminating faith, the struggle to be good, and our growth. Maybe God kept the magnificence of our next life a secret, to keep us from ending this one to expedite the transition.

God

There is a God, a Creator who loves you enough to shower such magnificent gifts upon you as this planet, your life, body and spirit.

Human Effort

The spiritual aspect of Axiom is not being channeled from God. It is "our" best understanding of spiritual matters and thus we do not have all the answers; this understanding allows our beliefs to evolve with the evolution of our species.

Life in the Universe

We do not know for a fact if other forms of life exist in the universe, but every ounce of logical thinking points towards a universe full of life.

I believe that nature does nothing without a reason, so when I think of the trillions of heavenly bodies, I am convinced that we are not alone in the universe.

God bless us all

CORE BELIEFS

I'd rather live with a good question than a bad answer

As the founder of this belief system, I am suggesting the following basic beliefs which are what I have set for myself. You don't have to agree with all of them and you should not follow what I am saying blindly. Evaluate them using your God given faculties and see if they make sense to you. *Faith is great, blind faith is extremely dangerous.*

So, based on these founding principles, I present you with a timeless and spiritual way of life; Axiom. For a great majority of us, there is a need to look toward and pray to a higher being, to believe in our Creator and His love. The Creator programmed this need in us, which is why we have so many religions all through the history of our species. Axiom is an ever improving faith, evolving with our species and our better understanding of our Creator, this universe, and the grand purpose our Creator has for us. We do not offer eternal salvation to Seekers just for being part of our faith. We don't consider our life philosophy as the only right path for salvation or to our Creator. The founding principles of Axiom are designed to ensure that this faith never becomes a source of power and financial benefit for a few. Axiom must always remain a belief system for the people, to help them lead wonderful and spiritually fulfilling lives and to constantly quest for betterment of self, mankind, mother earth, and our universe.

God

There is a Creator, let's call him God. I mention God as "him" only due to the limitations of the language I am communicating in; otherwise God does not have a gender. In view of the overwhelming evidence that I see of God's existence and his immense power in everything from a human body and mind, to the stars and planets in the universe, I have absolute faith that there is a God.

What is God? I believe that due to the limitations of our mental capacity at this stage of our existence when we only use a minute percentage of our brains, we are not capable of understanding exactly what God is. To try and understand everything about His existence at this stage would be like a newborn trying to master Metaphysics.

I also cannot discard God because of reasons I mentioned before, and we are reminded of what Paracelsus said; "Men who are devoid of the power of spiritual perception are unable to recognize anything that cannot be seen externally".

So working with the limitations of my human mind, I have come up with my best understanding. God is a form of energy. This energy is a part of everything and everything is a part of it. So we are all part of God, and God is part of all of us. This spiritual statement goes hand in hand with the best scientific explanation of our creation so far, the Big Bang theory. Also, Einstein's $E=MC^2$ implies that energy creates matter, so everything around us, all the heavenly bodies, water, air, and all living things on earth are made from energy. I believe that this energy that made us all is what God is.

God & Us

I believe there is overwhelming evidence that God truly loves us. Just look at us when we take the role of creator. We make things just for our use in an unemotional way, power them with toxic materials and discard them when we are done. God could have done the same if He didn't love us. But instead He gave us the most passionate and loving way of conception and birth. Our source of nourishment could have been just a tasteless material that we consumed and got the nutrition we needed to serve our purpose. But we have a huge number of things to consume that fascinate our taste buds. Our interaction with each other is not mechanical but bursting with feelings of love and passion. This shows me that our Creator loves us and wants us to have great pleasures and experiences; otherwise we could have been made to reproduce, interact and get nourishment in very mechanical and non pleasurable ways.

Life after Death

I believe that when we are born we transform from our pre-birth state as part of this form of energy that is God, and when we die we just simply change form from our human existence back to this energy, or to whatever else is in store for us by God, remaining a part of this energy all along.

"Maybe we are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience." Teilhard de Chardin.

I very strongly believe that there is life after death and death is a graduation, not an end. It seems like when we have matured enough, learned enough to truly be productive and achieve great things, we die. It would be such a waste, if life just ended and there was nothing else. Again, this seems contrary to how nature seems to work. Also, the tens of thousands of experiences of people who died for a short while and were revived, are all similar accounts of a peaceful white light and a destination that they are going towards, rather than eternal darkness and emptiness.

Maybe God kept the magnificence of our next life a secret to keep us all from ending this life to expedite our journey.

Heaven & Hell

The good and evil in the world makes me believe that there is an accounting for our good and bad deeds. This accounting may end up in us being sent to places like "Hell" or Heaven." Or we may be punished or rewarded in this life or both. Or we may simply be sent back until we get it right. Or maybe the bad people in this life are simply there to perform a function to train us, for our growth and challenges. Maybe our deeds in this life dictate what our next existence will be. We don't know. But it is our duty to strive to be good and take care of the gifts our Creator has given us; this life, this planet, and everything around us. It's just the right thing to do and that is a better and more selfless reason than a ticket to heaven or fear of hell.

Salvation

For the sake of our lives, and those of future generations, let's think, question, evaluate, and then go with what makes sense. Let's start with the biggest carrot most of us want when choosing our spiritual paths; Salvation. How do we determine how many sins will prohibit us from an eternal

life of happiness and peace? Is there a quick path to gaining God's forgiveness? Can you buy such forgiveness by sending a check to the religion of your choice? Can you have it over and done within an afternoon through a confession or some sort of ritualistic penance once or a few times in your life? Again, using our God given skills of analysis, one can see that this makes little sense. Salvation is not a carrot. Salvation is not like some diploma a religious institution can hand you. Salvation is leading the best life you can, doing good things, not hurting others, and making your life positively meaningful for yourself, your loved ones, and the planet we share with all living things. *Salvation is a destination after a long journey of spiritual questing, day by day, through moment-by-moment behavior and a million small choices.* Each day is an opportunity to reach for salvation. You may have made a religious pilgrimage, gone to confessional and said your prayers, but if you have done negative things such as hurt children, taken advantage of the vulnerable or showed disregard for the health of the planet, you have not done your duty to the Creator. Doing one's duty is not easy. It is a lifelong commitment that requires hard work and a certain degree of sacrifice. I wish I had an easier answer for all of us, a simple formula for admittance to a glorious afterlife, a simple set of rules that we can follow. But unfortunately, I see no such easy path, no shortcut to salvation. One must do one's best on a daily basis, make mistakes, but never stop growing. Let your good deeds outnumber your bad ones by as great a margin as possible. That's the best I can offer you for the eternal salvation.

Our Origin

There is extensive evidence that the theory of evolution is correct. Thousands of scientists worldwide believe this due to scientific evidence, which holds a lot of weight with me. Evolution is also in line with the way nature works in everything from the minutest life form on earth, to the greatest cluster of heavenly bodies in the universe. But it is always possible that we came to earth, or were brought here from another planet. There could also be other ways that we ended up where and who we are now, that we have not yet discovered.

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Life in the Universe

It seems extremely likely that there is life in the universe in large numbers and many forms, simply because nature doesn't waste anything, and if we were the only life in the universe that that would be a colossal waste. The only other option that makes sense is that we are supposed to populate other planets. But considering the trillions of heavenly bodies and billions of years everything has been around, it seems illogical that we are the only life in the universe. We will leave it at that until we find evidence one way or another.

Quest for the Truth

When you find truth, realize that you have found "a truth" and never "the truth". There is no such thing as the only truth or the only right way to God.

Truth is something to pursue, rather than enforce. I'd rather live with a good question than a bad answer. We don't know everything and don't have all the answers. So Axiom demands constant evaluation and a constant quest for the truth that will engender a perpetual evolution. Questioning is the dominant method by which Axiom will always grow and evolve. *When you believe that you have found the answer, this immediately ends the quest for that answer. Yet, the*

quest is the most important part of our spirituality. The digging and longing for truth is what keeps us growing.

This questioning and the quest for the truth demands that we be flexible to change when faced with concrete evidence that may improve upon or contradict our existing beliefs. Wouldn't it be amazing if we evolve in our spirituality at the same rate that we evolve scientifically? There is no reason we cannot.

Our Faith Is Human

Our belief system Axiom is “our” quest to find and understand our Creator and His plan for us. Thus Axiom is human and imperfect, like all things human.

Evil

One of the most difficult questions I encountered was; how do we account for the presence of evil in our world? Are there really “bad guys” who are on a direct route to hell? Maybe the presence of evil in the world is really just like the pathogens that enter our bodies from time to time and end up energizing our immune systems and making us stronger? What if the only reason evil exists is our own weaknesses. *Our evolution as a species and our understanding of our powers and responsibilities to remove evil from our world is the catalyst to finally eradicate it.*

Calling evil “natural,” however, does not ease our responsibility for eradicating it. We cannot stand by and watch our world be consumed by cancerous growths. *We must strive towards the health of our planet and our species so that we can continue on our journey and fulfill the destiny for which we have been created.*

Destiny – Fate

The questions that arise when we ask ourselves about the afterlife and human accountability are extremely important. They help us to think about the larger purpose in our lives and they help us to see beyond the transitory material rewards we often pursue in this lifetime. Thinking of our journey beyond the border of death helps us to develop a plan for ourselves rather than allowing us to live life randomly until we meet our unexpected demise. Developing a plan for ourselves and living our lives thoughtfully means that we have faith that our actions do make a difference and that we are not locked into an unchangeable destiny. Yet, if it is all in our own hands, where is the Creator? My experience has taught me that just as scientists are increasingly discovering that our lives are shaped by a delicate balance of genetic predispositions forged in our DNA and the influences of our environment, as well as the choices we make, so our lives are very much in our control as well as in the hands of a higher power.

Nature teaches us that these things are not mutually exclusive. We work to shape our lives and the destiny of our planet. There are things that are completely a result of our actions, and thus in our control. As well, there are things that are totally beyond our control, decided, planned and implemented by a higher power. There is abundant evidence of both in everyone's life. It is also very necessary for our lives to work this way. If it was one or the other, we would either become

powerless and thus totally incapacitated, or God would have been irrelevant and powerless in our lives.

Mother Earth

Axiom has an environmental message at its core. The ultimate gift from our Creator (so far) is our planet. I say so far because greater gifts are going to unfold in the future. On this planet we have all the food we need, all the energy we could use, and a wealth of resources adequate to make every human life a joy. Yet, every human life is not a joy, for we have disrespected that gift. We have pillaged, hoarded, and wasted. We have sentenced our children to a future of deprivation. A people that truly honor their Creator and show gratitude for His gift of this beautiful planet should not disrespect and misuse this gift. This is simple. This is obvious. This is essential. We must always remember the famous Native American quote; “Treat the earth well: it was not given to you by your parents, it is loaned to you by your children.”

The Axiom Mission Statement:

“To bring happiness to all individuals, peace and unity to mankind, and well being to the Earth through love, thoughtful action, and purposefully living a magnificent life”.

My idea of an individual’s mission statement is as follows. This is just for your reference. YOU must write your own.

To live an extraordinary life; mentally, physically and spiritually. To love and protect my loved ones and make this world a better place by thoughtful action.

Betterment of the self is step one to everything we want to do. Your physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, and financial well-being is essential not only to a great life for yourself, but to everything else you want to achieve for your loved ones and the world around you.

A primary concentration of Axiom must always be the betterment of the individual, mankind and planet earth. We don’t need to spend all our time just praying to God. God doesn’t need our prayers. Praying is for the one praying, not for the one being prayed to. The true prayer for us humans is to ensure that there is peace, harmony, happiness, and prosperity for self, and everything else living on our planet, including the planet itself. *The actions toward peace and mutual tolerance and prosperity on our planet, for us and our future generations, should be at the core of our faith and daily life.*

Equality – Discrimination

We must have equality as a central tenant of Axiom. We should have equality among people without regard for their gender, race, religion, life preferences, nationality, handicap or any other factor. Never consider anyone inferior or superior to you. To do either disregards the Creator’s beauty inherent in every human being. Women are at least as entitled to be leaders of Axiom as men.

Balance

Axiom promotes balance in our lives and our world as one of our core principles. Extremes are harmful and balance is the one quality that is great in every situation. Going for peace is great, but becoming weak in the process to where some evil entity can wipe us out is what we must protect ourselves against. Enjoying food is great, but becoming obese because we eat too much is not the purpose. Enjoying our success and wanting material things is okay, but becoming so materialistic that we consume an unfair amount of the earth's resources and material things mean more than anything else is a danger to our God-given planet. Enjoying life is great, but becoming an alcoholic or a drug addict, or dying of a disease because we abused substances is an abuse of the body God gave us. Sex is a wonderful and passionate experience, but overindulgence and making it a source of disease or infidelity negates the reasons behind it. We must create a balance in every aspect of our lives. This is one of the fundamental truths that we should embrace.

Messenger & Leaders

The role of individuals as leaders in this new faith must not obscure the centrality of God as the simple core of the faith. Any leader of this new philosophy is a flawed human being like anyone else and is just one of many seeking to understand the Creator and bring humanity in closer touch with our Creator's will and plan for us. The people who help shape the message, the people who deliver the message, and the people who manage or organize Axiom must never be considered anything more than what they are—managers, humans fulfilling a valuable role in their society. We don't need another symbol of divine power in any man. We have the ultimate one; God.

The leaders of Axiom MUST always be held to a higher standard than others without any massive rewards of money or power. They must not be motivated by a drive for wealth or power. Such a role requires an individual who is willing and able to shoulder a greater responsibility and adhere to a higher standard than others, for extremely pure reasons. This will ensure that anyone with ill intentions will not even apply for the job and only true believers wanting to promote this ideology become our leaders. As an example of this higher standard, if our leaders and preachers molest our children, they deserve the harshest punishment allowed by the law of the land where they live and must immediately be thrown out of Axiom. We must have zero tolerance in this regard. I know this seems like an extreme example, but sadly, it is a very unfortunate truth that men have used their position of religious influence to commit such atrocious acts on children.

The leadership positions of Axiom MUST always be open to both genders and must never discriminate against women or anyone for any reason whatsoever.

Buildings & Symbols

The place of religious worship by members of Axiom should not be afforded an undue significance. They should be accessible, benevolent places for people to collectively or individually communicate with the Creator, to search for the truth, to pray, to ask for forgiveness, and to show love and affection. The best gathering places are the internet, family home, a local park, etc. This would decentralize the power, avoid waste, and provide a friendly, family oriented place of worship. For large gatherings, we should rent an existing building that will contribute to the community by supporting a vital organization like a school, park, or a local restaurant that could use the business.

We should also be perfectly comfortable to pray in any religion's place of worship; Church, Mosque, Synagogue, Mudir, Gurdwara, etc.

Separation of Religion & State

Our ideology and our government should always remain separate. Mixing the two is a guaranteed disaster that will ensure discrimination against those with different beliefs and contrary to a core principle of this new system of beliefs.

Resources

The resources of Axiom need to be handled carefully and allocated responsibly on advancing the core missions of Axiom. Our responsibility does not end with writing a check; we must ensure the proper results from our donations. There is a lot that can be accomplished when like minded people bring together their resources to achieve mutually desired results. But do not just write a check and pray that it gets spent in a good way. Be involved, oversee, ensure.

Decentralization

Axiom must always remain basically decentralized. A concentration of wealth and power encourages mismanagement and abuse. We simply do not require grand monoliths, whether they are people or places. Let us have many great leaders of Axiom. Let us have many role models. A questioning, dynamic, evolving belief system needs many minds at work.

AXIOM: THE ORGANIZATION, MOVEMENT, AND BELIEF SYSTEM

Axiom is founded to change the world. Our purpose is to provide the tools needed to help the individual lead the best possible life, and for like-minded people to come together to change the world and make it a loving, fair, and prosperous place where everyone can exist in peace and pursue happiness. We welcome people of every race, faith, gender, life preferences, and nationalities. Our organization has the following segments:

Life

The Life segment is all about the individual's mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual well being and provides tools for living life to the fullest extent possible.

Come together as ONE

We are starting a global movement called; “Come together as ONE”. Its purpose is to bring people everywhere together who want to live a peaceful life in pursuit of happiness, and let others do the same, no matter their faith, gender, nationality, race, beliefs or preferences. We can keep our energetic debates going on political and social issues, but if you agree on this one basic human right mentioned above, then I beg you, please join this movement and make a difference in this world.

Solutions

We are starting with some of the founder’s ideas that we believe have the true potential to transform our world. This will be combined with ideas and from Seekers and then some of the best ones chosen to be implemented worldwide, for a better life for everyone.

Please visit us at www.axiomnow.org or email us at info@axiomnow.org for any further information, or to join our organization, and/or movement; “Come together as ONE”.

INTERVIEW WITH GOD (FICTION)

What if we could talk to God? What would He say to us?

When I arrived to interview God, I could not believe my luck, or my eyes. Was I really here, about to talk to the All mighty? My only recollection is that after my repeated prayer requests wanting to be the first human to interview God, I woke up in this place, knowing that my request had been granted and that I was about to speak to the Big Guy.

My surroundings were beautiful, calm and peaceful, and somehow I knew where to go; I guess the All Mighty doesn't need normal modes of communication. When I arrived in this beautiful garden, I saw a beautiful woman sitting in an easy chair sipping on a beverage. I didn't know what to say or how to greet her, and I was extremely nervous until I got close to her; all my fears and apprehensions melted away and a peaceful calm came over me. I felt like I was in the presence of a loving mother;

Me: God? I said with some apprehension.

God: Yes, are you surprised?

Me: I just had a different image in my mind, God.

God: I know - the angry, bearded old man. I got so tired of you guys always portraying me like that. Don't you people think I have feelings? Hahaha.

Not knowing what to do with God cracking a joke:

Me: Thank you for seeing me God. I have so many questions for you, and as the first human to have been granted an interview, I want to get to them right away; is this where you live and how you look?

God: This is so you can see me in a way that makes sense to you.

Me: So, then what are you? What's your shape, form, and age? What do you look like?

God: For you to try and understand that at your current stage of evolution, would be like an infant trying to understand the most difficult of mathematical equations; it is also important for the development of your species to not have these answers at this time.

Me: Is there life after death? Is there a judgment day? Why don't you just "show up" and eliminate any questions about you and religious in-fighting and make our planet a wonderful place?

God: If I just "show up", that will end the quest, learning, development, struggle, faith, and all that is imperative to the purpose of your species and its development.

Me: Why do you allow evil and so many bad things to happen?

| God: Does a child getting an injection from a doctor look at the parents and wonder why they are allowing someone to hurt him? There are reasons beyond your understanding for such things. One of them being that if you eliminate the negatives, you automatically eliminate the positives, and the struggle that helps you develop.

Me: But it's so unfair, what happens to some people, things like murder, disease, rape, genocide.

God: Yes it is, but there is a way that it all balances out and becomes fair, and you cannot know or understand that now.

Me: Why did you create so many different religions, or are they all man's creations?

God: Both. On one hand, why would I create so many different religions? I would just create one perfect one, so this does not look like my doing; but then everything that happens is because of the elements and abilities I created and you must struggle to find out what is the right answer. Does a child who is told the answer to a math equation learn math or just the answer? You must learn the math.

Me: Ok Ma'am, understood. But is there one religion that is closer to the truth than others? What is the best one, or at least your favorite?

God: That is like children asking a loving parent which one of them she likes the most. All religions are my children's attempt to know me, to love me, to pray to me, and all of them are just different paths to me and I love them all. Their main fault is their "I am right and thus going to Heaven and everyone else is wrong and going to Hell" attitude.

Me: Some incidents seem like there is divine intervention and other incidents seem like we are on our own and you are on vacation.

God: It's both; if I never got involved, you would destroy yourselves, but if I always got involved you would never fulfill your purpose and develop.

Me: What is that God? I mean our purpose.

God: To have me answer that would hurt that purpose and the abilities you need for it. You must quest to learn that on your own.

Me: OK, I understand God, this quest business is very important for us. By the way, are women inferior to men?

God: Don't expect such discrimination from me. All of my children are equal. This is one of the reasons I chose this form today, to let you know how I feel about this; knowing you will ask me this question.

Me: But how did you.... oh sorry. God, please give me an explanation that I can understand about who you are, where we came from and where we end up? Something that even our

underdeveloped minds at this stage of our species can understand; throw me a bone God. I have to go back with something.

God: Oh God... ha ha... just kidding. See, I have a sense of humor, one of the best qualities I gave to your species that you do not use nearly enough. Anyway, before I get distracted, consider me a form of energy, more intelligent and powerful than anything you could possibly imagine. Consider this energy to be everywhere, in everything. Consider yourself changing from a part of this energy into your human form, with the energy becoming what you call your "soul". Then after your passing on from your current state of existence, you change back into this energy and the next phase of your existence starts. Everything you see on your planet and all the heavenly bodies were all created by me, including you. I think your species tried to explain it as the "Big Bang" theory and $E=MC^2$.

Me: You just let me know there is life after this one All Mighty. You made a slip.

God: Oops, ha ha. Maybe I meant to give you a glimpse so that you try and stop hurting each other in my name.

Me: What about that God? When someone hurts others in your name; do you like that effort, that dedication, that service to you?

God: Nothing disgusts me more. That's like asking a parent if one of her children hurting another is liked by her. Saying it in your human sentiments, I hate that.

Me: Won't it hurt mankind when I go and tell them of the answers you gave me? Will it not hurt the "development"? The "quest"?

God: Who would believe you, silly boy? Sitting in a garden talking to God, who looked like a pretty woman and was sipping a beverage and cracking jokes... haha.

And then I woke up...

YOUR LIFE

The well being and optimum growth and life of the individual is at the core of anything we want to achieve in life. It doesn't matter whether you intend to change the world or just do great for your family and loved ones, unless your mind, body and spirit are at optimum levels, whatever you try will be a mediocre effort. This is why the individual's life is of such extreme importance in Axiom.

The Greatest Gift

Your primary spiritual responsibility is to take care of this greatest of all gifts you have been blessed with by your Creator; this life. You cannot fulfill any of your dreams and reach your life's destinations traveling in a weak vessel. Taking care of your mind and body are the most important and fundamental of your obligations to yourself, your loved ones, and your Creator.

The following is a simple formula to achieve your dreams, fulfill your destiny, and live life beyond your wildest imagination.

To purposefully live a magnificent life;

1. Set incredible goals. Revisit them often.
2. Make a plan to achieve them. Revisit it often.
3. Learn how your life works; your conscious and sub-conscious minds, your body, spirituality; the cosmic force (some call it God) and you.
4. We live in a time of utility. Make sure to seek out and utilize the best tools for constant self-improvement. Learn about and practice meditation and the law of attraction. Control your habits. Constantly evaluate your habits, eliminate bad ones and install good habits. No single effort will give you more results in your life than this.
5. Make the world shine brighter because of your life; your loved ones, mankind, all living creatures, and this planet we share.
6. Look forward to the transition to the next phase of your existence with a smile. We may not know what's next for us, but if Mama Nature has given us any clues, it's going to be a wild ride.
7. Understand that we are all connected, every single living thing on this planet is connected with everything else. We cannot hurt one without hurting ourselves.

LIFE PRINCIPLES

Planning

The biggest tool for fulfilling our dreams and living life to the utmost of our potential is a life plan. Most of us will live life like it's a rudderless raft in the ocean and we have no control over its direction or destinations. Control your life, plan this journey, and you will infinitely increase the quality of your life and the chances of fulfilling all your dreams.

Goals

The first step of planning your life is to follow an organized goal setting and revisiting program; this simple act will exponentially increase the chances of achieving your dreams. We don't plan a trip from one city to another without a map and a plan for the journey; but most of us will go through the longest and most important journey, our life, without a map and without planning for it. No one should live life without a road map to their destination.

Understanding How Your Mind Works

The most complicated computer on Earth comes without a user's manual. Master this computer; your mind, and you will master your life. Understand the difference in the functioning's of your conscience and subconscious minds and the principles of pain and pleasure that controls them. Understand the universal laws of attraction that govern our existence; even though we don't fully understand them at this stage of our existence, but what we do understand can help us immensely. The Universe has ways beyond our known senses and means of communication that connect all of us. Somehow, what we constantly concentrate on, in a negative or positive way, ends up having a great chance of materializing. Expect great things, concentrate on positive things, and you will attract them into your life.

Habits

Control your habits and you will control your life. Control your mind by understanding the principles of pain and pleasure, and you will control your habits. Nothing will affect your life more than your habits. This obvious fact eludes most of us and affects our lives to an extent and in ways that are beyond our wildest imagination. One of your life's greatest and most consistent efforts must be to control your habits.

| Axiom will give you scientific methods to plan your life, set goals, and have control over your habits. You will not be able to imagine the effect this will have on your life, and the lives of your loved ones, and the planet you live on.

Praise

Praise publicly, honestly, and immediately.

Procrastinate about anger

If you have to reprimand someone, or say anything on a subject you are angry about, wait a day or two and then see if you still want to say something, and if so, what you want to say. Never do it randomly, publicly, and reactively. Organize your thoughts, be very fair and honest, and communicate them alone in a short, private meeting, with a positive outcome in mind, then drop it like it never happened.

Apologize

Don't wait to apologize; do it sincerely and right away.

Education

Consider education to be a lifelong quest that only ends with the graduation to the next phase of our existence, or death as we call it.

"Live as if you were to die tomorrow. Learn as if you were to live forever." Gandhi, Mahatma

Balance/moderation

Try and create balance in every day and every aspect of our life as one of the most fundamental principles of our daily lives. Balance is like the North Star for life, a principle that is applicable to all aspects of life. Avoid extremes and achieve balance in everything.

Organization

Organization is an extremely important habit for the ultimate performance in our existence. Live an organized life. *Lack of organization in life is like having a great destination and a great plan, but taking the tires off the vehicle you intend to use for the journey.*

Hygiene

Make hygiene and cleanliness central tenants of your daily life.

Health

The greatest gifts given to us by the Creator are both our body and mind. Take care of them. Pursuit of ultimate health and fitness, physical and mental, should be very important goals of our lives. Practices like Yoga and many others are great for both. Make exercise a consistent habit until your dying day. Your health will have the greatest effect on every single aspect of your life.

Gatekeeper to body & mind

We watch what grade of gas and oil we put in our vehicles, but usually pay less attention to what we put in our body and minds. Be the gatekeeper to your body and mind. "Garbage in - Garbage out" is not just referring to your computers.

Resource management

Managing your resources should be a very high priority. The two most important resources to be managed during our current state of evolution are time and money.

ROUTINES

A well designed lifestyle can be the greatest tool in your desire to lead a good life and achieve your goals. Some of the following habits, routines, or suggestions for self improvement are just what are recommended by Axiom as guidelines.

DAILY:

Prayer- daily, individual: Pray at least once a day; preferably start your day with a prayer.

- a) **State:** Don't just recite words and get it over with. If you are going to do that, then save your breath. If you are in a rush in the morning, save the prayer for a different time that day. But pray with all your heart. Wear clean clothes and find a nice, clean place without distractions. Sit comfortably and close your eyes. Think of your Creator, a powerful force that is everywhere; inside you, all around you, part of you (Some call it God). Feel its presence, its magnificence, its love. Feel the joy of becoming one with this force. Do not fear it at all. You cannot say the wrong thing or get in trouble in any way. Feel your love for it, your admiration, and your awe for its unknown and limitless powers. Feel the gratitude you have for everything you have ever had, and everything you are about to receive. Feel like you are in the arms of a loving parent and feel the comfort, peace, love of your Creator. Just stay in this state for a short while.
- b) **Communicate:** Don't recite the same words everyday or some written prayer. To do that will be like playing a recording of your prayers, and expecting results from it. Communicate with your Creator. Pour your heart out.
- c) **Forgiveness:** Ask for God's forgiveness for whatever you may have done wrong or less than your abilities. This also works well for self-awareness of your wrong doings.
- d) **Gratitude:** Thank God for what you have been blessed with; your mind, body and spirit, your strengths, loved ones, health, happiness, material things.
- e) **Blessings:** Ask for future blessings, health, happiness, peace, and prosperity for you, your family and loved ones, and for all living things on earth and everywhere else. Ask for help in what you and your loved ones want to achieve in your future.

Glass Half Full

Make sure you answer the following questions with multiple answers every morning: What has been great in my life so far? What am I most grateful for today? What do I look forward to the most in my near future? You will be astonished at what an incredibly positive effect this simple ritual of showing your gratitude and reminding yourself of what you have and are about to receive, will have on changing your perception of your life from half empty to half full. In the same life under the same circumstances, have you had days when you were singing in the shower and life was wonderful, and then days when you felt awful about your life? This focus on the half full or half empty is the difference and this daily exercise is a great tool.

Selfless acts

Do a few selfless and nice acts every day. This can be something as simple as opening a door for a stranger, a true compliment that makes someone's day, or running an errand for someone; just small things that make someone else's life easier or happier. Before going to bed, take just a minute to visualize your selfless acts for that day. You will sleep better.

Daily Journal

Make it a daily routine to document your life. Just spend a few minutes to write about what happened that day and any other thoughts you may have, and add a weekly and monthly summary. You will create great memories for yourself, a magnificent self evaluation tool, and a priceless gift for your loved ones.

Organization

Start every day with about half an hour organizing your day; analyze what you did yesterday and what needs to transfer over to today, and what needs to get done today, in what priority.

Daily Tasks

Divide the things you have to do into a hierarchy of urgency and importance. Rate each task on a scale of 1 to 10, for urgency and importance

- a) Daily Tasks: These get done every day because they are **important and urgent** and they usually don't require any special attention.
- b) Forced Tasks: Amongst the middle scoring tasks, these are **urgent but not important**. Spend minimum time on these and control how and when you handle these. These are tasks that others usually throw at you and consume your time; emails to answer, follow up documents to send.
- c) Life Changing Tasks: Amongst the middle scoring tasks, these are the ones that are **important but not urgent**. Schedule these as frequently as possible. This is where the greatest improvements in your life will happen. Put these tasks in a separate list and study it daily. These tend to get avoided and put off for a later time that keeps getting pushed. But if implemented, these daily, weekly, monthly tasks could revolutionize your life.
- d) Least Important Tasks: Avoid the lowest scoring things as they are neither important nor urgent and do them only when there is nothing else to get done.

Exercise

Allocate around an hour a day for a workout of your choice; preferably at 3 to 5 days a week. Consider working out a sacred responsibility.

Law of attraction

Understand the law of attraction, the working of the force in our daily lives that made us and is all around us. Always expect great things to happen; prepare for adversity, but expect wonders. The law of attraction will make things happen for you and it will bring sunshine into your life.

Meditation

Learn about the magic of meditation and what form of this incredible tool works best for you, because it is different for everyone. There is no better vehicle to bring peace to your mind and heart, and get everything you ever dreamt of in your life and the world around you, than to meditate for it consistently.

WEEKLY

Group Prayer

Get together with fellow Seekers once a week. It is not imperative which day this gathering is held. If you live in a nation where Sundays are the holiday, then Sunday is a good day. However, if Friday is the day off where you live, then that's just as good.

There is something magnificent about a group of people getting together with love to pray to their Creator. The energy it creates is absolutely magnificent. Invite anyone who wants to join you; doesn't matter what faith they believe in. Let's all pray together. If you are not near a place of worship for your chosen faith, then go to the nearest place of worship of another religion and pray with them. God listens to all in all places- there are no monopolies on God.

Prayers certainly have a magnificent side benefit of clarifying your own life's direction; where you want to be heading, what you are doing right and wrong, what you have to be thankful for, and your future plans. Your prayer will become the greatest self improvement mechanism in your life.

Gathering of love

Gather family and loved ones once a week, or as often as possible. This will create great joy in your life.

Review Daily Journal

Once a week, preferably on the day your week starts, review the last week of your daily journal. This will have a profound effect on your life; realizing where you are headed, how certain things are affecting you, what you need to change, etc.

MONTHLY

After-life Communication

All of us have regrets about things we wish we had said to loved ones when it's too late. Once a month, choose someone you love and assume one of you is not around anymore and you can never speak to them again. Now think of what they mean to you, what is so truly great about them, and what you would say to them if you have just one more chance to speak to them. Write these thoughts down and communicate them to this person. You will fill two lives with absolute love and joy, and eliminate some of life's greatest regrets.

Time travel

Once a month, visit yourself in the future; Sit or lie down in a quiet peaceful place without distractions. Shut your eyes and project yourself into the future based on your current choices and plans. Go one year ahead, stay there for a minute, visualize different aspects of your life; see where the current direction of your life is going to lead you, how has your life been with your loved ones, what effect have you had on their lives. How are your existing habits and decisions, you current course of life, effecting your emotional, spiritual, physical, and financial aspects of your life. Are you where you want to be? Then do the same at 5 years ahead, 20 years ahead, and your final days. When you open your eyes, you will have a very clear idea of what you need to do to improve your life.

Then take a break for few minutes and do this again, but this time imagine yourself with improved habits and life choices the way you wish they were, and do the same projections for the same periods of time. Your conscious and subconscious minds will have very clear ideas about where you are headed, where you want to go, and what you need to do to get there.

Habits

Make a monthly evaluation of your habits and an organized effort to improve a lifelong goal. There is no single effort that will pay off greater dividends in every imaginable aspect of your life, than the effort you spend on changing your habits. Change one bad habit a month and replace it with a good one and your life will change beyond your wildest imagination.

Give & Save Generously

Once a month evaluate your finances and decide what is the maximum amount of money you can spare; about 20% is a good guideline, but try and ensure it is not less than 10%. Donate half of it and save the other half. Both these factors will enhance your life in many ways. What you give will definitely come back to you with an exponential increase, and in many different forms. What you save will not only affect your financial well being, but your life in general in numerous ways.

Review Daily Journal

Once a month, preferably on the day your month starts, review the last month of your daily journal. This will have a profound effect on your life; realizing where you are headed, how certain things are affecting you, what you need to change, etc.

God bless us all.

To join Axiom, please visit www.axiomnow.org or email me at info@axiomnow.org

“Come together as ONE”

Why is the majority of the world being manipulated by special interest groups and we feel so helpless against it? Dictators keep millions under their tyranny for the benefit of a few, like in Iran, Syria, North Korea and other countries around the world. Powerful companies in industries like war, medicine, food, and many others are devastating millions of lives without any repercussions. The extremists all over the world are causing terror in our lives and they are the ones dictating the agenda and being heard loudly through their guns and bombs. The problem we are facing is that in spite of the massive numbers of people who are tolerant of each other's faith and culture, and believe in similar principles as I have outlined here, they are quiet and not organized in a group with a powerful united voice. But the ones who promote hate and intolerance are the loudest, and usually organized behind the leaders who taught them this intolerance. Inaction will take us in the direction we are already headed on, and that may lead to the destruction of mankind and our planet Earth as we know it.

"If you do not change direction, you may end up where you are heading." **Lao-tzu**

The time has come for the peace loving and tolerant people of the world to come together with one voice, in an organized manner, and save our world from its current destructive path. Imagine a billion of us with a united voice making sure that the negative influences get drowned out by our strength, unity and incredible numbers. I have people from many countries, cultures, and majority of the major religions of the world who are already committed to this movement. Please join “Come together as ONE” and add your voice to this movement and let's take our future out of the hands of dictators, terrorists, and special interest groups and bring it back into our loving and caring hands. We will be organizing chapters worldwide and we need like minded people to come on board and carry this message of peace and tolerance to every corner of the world.

“Come together as ONE”

1. Communicate with people from around the world, different cultures and religions, one on one, or in forums.
2. Speak with a united voice on subjects of vital importance to our world, become a strong group working for betterment of mankind. It doesn't matter how many things we disagree on, as long as we can agree on one basic concept; to live a peaceful life in pursuit of happiness, and let others do the same, no matter what their faith, gender, nationality, race, beliefs or preferences.
3. Become active in our movement working towards world peace and spreading the word of what we are doing.

To join Axiom or the movement “Come together as ONE” or just for further information, please visit www.axiomnow.org, or email us at info@axiomnow.org

OUR FUTURE

The Nightmare and the Dream

The Nightmare

The little girl sat on her grandpa's lap. The whir from above lifted her hair gently as the machine pumped in the breathable air, perfectly adequate for low to medium intensity exertion. Her grandpa pushed forward a drink and her nutrition tablets and smiled at her. She grimaced as she chewed the salty tablets. She was determined to grow. As the light dimmed, the computer cast night images onto the ceiling—a blue-black background strewn with twinkling stars. It was lovely, she decided. In the morning, the computer would project light into the room and the stars would disappear. Oftentimes, her grandpa would show digital images to her of the place that his own father had lived in as a child. It had beautiful, lush, green forests and wetlands teeming with mysterious creatures—places where humans walked right out under the big sun, air blowing past their cheeks without danger. They entered in and out of buildings, coming out with packages in their arms. It was filled with people, animals, forests, rushing streams, and a blue sky hung with clouds.

The images passed before her. Some people spoke of a land called heaven. This must be that place. The place where water simply pours from the sky, making green things grow. The little girl remembered reading about the smell of rain. She tried to imagine such a smell. The digital images flashed upon children playing outside with real, soft grass under their feet. The girl thought of the scratchy turf in her own playroom. People ate food; real food that not only made you grow but had a million different tastes. She could not imagine such tastes, but she could tell that people there enjoyed their food.

As she watched the images, she asked, “Grandpa, did this place really exist?” He replied, “Oh yes. This land existed all right; it existed for millions of years. The place you see on the screen is the same place we live now. But things changed. The land was broken up into nations and different religions, and they were at odds with each other. They each wanted more and believed their religion to be the only right one. They warred with each other over the earth's resources and their ideologies and destroyed the planet. They fought over it, rather than taking care of it. They wastefully plundered the natural resources without regard to the affect of their lifestyles on the planet. That is why we live here, safe from the radiation and the toxic chemicals.” “Those people who lived there were lucky. They lived right in paradise.” “Yes, my dear. Though they are long gone, I feel angry at them for destroying our future irreversibly. It would have been so easy to preserve the paradise they were blessed with for their future generations. All they had to do was care,” Grandpa replied sadly.

The Dream

She was sitting on her grandpa's lap in the garden. It was a beautiful day, the sun peeking out behind the clouds in a majestic sky. Over the bubbling of the fountain nearby, she heard the scrabble and call of quail in the distance. The little girl sat amid the colorful flowers and the green plants, unaware that she lived in paradise, for this is what she had always known. Grandpa interrupted the silence when he said, "Well, dear, are you ready to load up the boat and do some fishing?" The little girl looked out over the lake and squinted her eyes. "Grandpa, I learned in school some very sad things." "What did you learn that would make you so sad?" "I learned about the wars between people. That people here were once killing and hurting each other and that some people had nothing to eat. That people owned each other and hurt each other. I heard about bad things happening to little girls. People consumed the world's resources without regard for the future of our planet or their future generations. It was a scary story and my friend said that it was true. Was it really true, Grandpa, that people did all those terrible things?" The little girl looked up at her grandpa with tears in her eyes.

Her grandpa took a deep breath and looked deep in her eyes. "I'm sorry to say, honey, that it is true. Things were very different before the twenty-second century. In the twenty-first century, the earth was made up of a combination of advanced people, who would eventually evolve into the people you and I know today and barbaric tyrants who led people in hate and greed to hurt and use others and damage our planet. In fact, we came very close to losing everything we have today. But that changed. Our forefathers and mothers stood up to the tyranny and hatred. They formed the world organization for peace amongst mankind that we have today. Now we all work together to make sure everybody has freedom and happiness. We take care of our planet and share its beauty. With the help of our Creator, decent people stood up and simply did the right thing and we have them to thank for this beautiful day and all the fish we will catch today." The little girl felt better. The grandpa dusted off his pants and took her hand as they headed down to the dock at the edge of their garden.

One of these stories will someday be true. It is up to us to envision which one we prefer and formulate that into a goal for our planet. The problem is that to go the direction of devastation and loss, all we have to do is do nothing and stay the present course. To improve our condition and leave a barbaric and destructive path behind us, we must take an exit and build a different kind of road. I truly believe that together, we can definitely accomplish the dream of a wonderful world.

Please visit www.axiomnow.org or email us at info@axiomnow.org for joining Axiom or for any further information.

I COULDN'T HAVE DONE IT WITHOUT THEM

Ayesha Saeed. She was my wife for thirteen years and my friend for life. Ayesha has traveled the world, lived in different cultures and seen life from different lenses. I could not have done this project without Ayesha's incredible patience for years with me spending our personal time working on Axiom. Ayesha provided great insights into Islam, the eastern culture, and helped me bring balance to Axiom.

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From the bottom of my heart, thank you all for your love and support.