

## **LISTENING: CONNECTION, CORRECTION AND DIRECTION**

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I would like to start by telling you who I am, because who I am and my personal journey is the prism through which I can share my experiences of listening to the “still small voice” within me. My journey is about the challenge and struggle to follow this voice amidst the daily challenges. My hope is that some of my experiences may resonate with you even if your background and life experiences are very different from mine.

I was born in Spain, come from Egypt and studied medicine in Australia. I continued my postgraduate studies in England and continue to work in Liverpool. I am proud of my Egyptian, Arab and Muslim traditions but I realize that over many years my life has also been greatly enriched by my encounters with people of other backgrounds and faith traditions.

I spent my teenage years in Australia where my father was the Egyptian Ambassador. There I became aware that the western stereotype of the Muslim, Arab world as uncultured, uneducated, with oppressed women and widespread extremism did not match up to my extended circle of family and friends. The integrity gap between the theory and practice of some religious people I encountered from all faith traditions made me question the relevance of a belief in God and the moral values for life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

As I was going through the usual teenage inner upheavals, I was invited to take part in a youth conference where I met people who were part of “Initiatives of Change”. I was immediately struck by the quality of life of the people I met at the conference. They were all Christian but they had evidently found a way to bridge the gap between theory and practice of their faith and had an integrity that I admired. To try and capture a experience similar to theirs I embarked on my first experiment of “Listening” while sitting on a hilltop surrounded by gum trees.

The few thoughts I had in that very first time of quiet were rather unexpected as they both related to members of my family. My father had a habit of leaving his loose change on the dressing table when he returned from work and I had routinely helped myself to this change without asking his permission.

I also realized that I was jealous of my older brother who is much more gregarious and outgoing than I was. My thought was that I should apologize to both of them. I was very skeptical that these thoughts were of any significance. But being a true scientist I decided that I would follow these thoughts through before I abandoned the experiment as a complete failure! I apologized to both my father and brother. After that apology I felt that a burden that I had not even been aware of had suddenly lifted. My relationship with both of them became much deeper and richer as a result.

So I decided to continue this experiment of “quiet times” a bit longer. Each day I had a short time of quiet to search for any inspired thoughts for the day.

The thoughts that came seemed to fall into two categories: either thoughts about things I had to put right or unexpected thoughts that gave my day a different direction or emphasis. Occasionally my thought to reach out to specific people coincided with a point of need in their life that I had not been aware of. As I continued to have these daily times of quiet, gradually the gap between the theory and practice of my faith narrowed and I started to pray, fast and read more about my Muslim faith and be inspired by it.

I realized that there was no contradiction between living my faith, adhering to absolute standards and living life fully in the 21<sup>st</sup> century embracing all that science and technology have to offer. A few years later while at University I decided that my experiment needed to go a step further – a decision from that point to submit my life totally to God. From that point I wanted to consciously seek God's will for all aspects of my life: my work, my relationships, where I lived, how I spent my money. The central driving compass on which I based my life was my faith as a Muslim.

But I felt that I had two other callings: to treat children in my professional life as a doctor as if they were my own and to build bridges of understanding between people of different cultures and traditions wherever I was. One of the constant personal tools in this journey has been times of quiet reflection in addition to times of prayer. As a Muslim I pray 5 times a day. This time is vital to connect me with God and pray for issues that are on my heart. But I personally find I still get additional benefit from a separate "quiet time".

A time of reflection, turning the torch light inwards for a personal inventory to ensure that I constantly review my life as well as seeking direction for the day.

In my pressurized work as doctor, clinical director and lecturer this time of quiet represents a lifeline to a sense of peace that can sustain me through the day's demands. The "when", "where" and "How" of quiet times is different for each person and each of us must discover the way that enables us to be refreshed, rejuvenated and inspired from this inner well that connects us with the Divine. My personal preference is after the dawn prayer. To focus and free my mind from all the distractions of the previous day and the pressures of what lies ahead, I read the Koran, or a passage from an inspiring book to focus and connect with God. If any thoughts come into my mind, I write them down. Sometimes I get no thoughts at all, but I still find the discipline and time itself gives me a sense of peace as I go about my day. As my life has got busier I have increasingly found the need to have times of quiet at other times of the day as well: when I need to collect my thoughts for a difficult meeting, a decision that has to be made or just to renew my sense of peace when my life and work overcomes me.

Have these thoughts affected my daily life? At the most basic level it has meant simple decisions such as not using the hospital telephone for personal calls or the photocopier for any personal work. Teamwork is never easy and differences of opinions are inevitable, so I have had to make a personal decision after any points of disagreement to reach out to those I have disagreed with to demonstrate that it is the issues that are the point of

disagreement not the persons at the heart of it. As clinical director when I have made a mistake in my handling of a difficult situations or colleagues I have apologized for getting things wrong.

At another level some of the thoughts I have had in my times of quiet have been much more challenging, causing me some inner struggle and a degree of discomfort in obeying them. I wanted a world free of corruption - was I prepared to return \$100 that I had been paid extra in my salary for a shift I did not work? My thought was "God will reward you ten fold for your honesty" but I still hesitated to follow this thought. The day after I decided to send off the \$100 a letter arrived from the same hospital telling me they owed me overtime money – it contained a cheque for \$1000.

I felt as if God was trying to encourage me to continue on my chosen road even if it seemed difficult at times.

Was I really prepared to work wherever God led me – did I trust his leading enough to turn down a job offer because of a thought in my quiet time, without knowing what next?

I took a deep breath when I turned this job down and felt the real grip of fear when I realized I had risked a job. But 6 weeks later I was led to my first job in Liverpool and felt clear this was the right one to accept. It has been my home ever since and a base from which God has enabled me to continue to pursue my calling to build bridges between people of different cultures and faiths in a very real and tangible way.

In all the years that I have searched for Divine inspiration through times of quiet, I can only recall one really dramatic sense of God's intervention and leading. During the last years of my father's life he needed to live with me in Liverpool due to increasing health problems. He was happy to be there but I knew that it was his deepest unspoken desire to die in his home in Egypt. Given his rather precarious health and the fact that we only spent 4 weeks in Egypt each year, I thought that this was unlikely to happen. One winter his illness took a turn for the worse and I cancelled our planned holiday flights to Egypt. Then he seemed to improve so I wondered whether we should make the trip. In a time of quiet my thought was that we should travel on one of two dates and that I should let my father choose. The day he chose happened to be the first day of Ramadan and we were due to start our journey at 5am. Midnight before our due travel date, he complained of severe chest pains for the first time in over 9 months. After taking some emergency medications, I encouraged him to rest.

I was left with the dilemma of whether or not to travel with him and felt the burden of this decision. My choice was no longer just a personal one as it would affect my father as well. After much prayer and reflection I had a single thought "If your father sleeps for 3 hours and wakes up OK, travel, have no fear and trust in God". We started our journey with the help of friends travelling via Paris to Cairo. Despite an airport strike, we were fortunate to have the help of a porter who turned out to be a physiotherapist from Costa Rica. Together with the other passengers we carried my father's wheelchair

onto the terminal bus arriving in time for our connecting plane 15 minutes before take off.

We were in our family home in Cairo later that night. The next days my father's spirit and health revived, he spent three wonderful days at the start of Ramadan seeing close relatives and meeting his best friends. On the third night as he lay in his bed and we were praying together he died suddenly. I felt overwhelmed by God's merciful leading and timing. Whenever I have doubts or fears I remember those days to give me the courage to obey those thoughts that come in the time of quiet and to remind me that whatever the circumstances God walks with us through the difficulties and often gives us more than we long for and deserve.

I guess like many people in this room, I struggle to understand life's complexity and to reconcile myself with so much pain and suffering. I sometimes feel helpless and downhearted in the face of world events outside of my control. As I grow older I am less sure what the right questions are and even less sure that I have any answers.

Based on my personal journey, the only thing I have learnt and am SURE of is that in silence, in the depth of each of our hearts is the answer to any question we long for, if we truly listen and search for the truth. Each one of us can be led step by step if we make a choice to listen.

I would like to end with a poem from Jalaludin Rumi, a 13<sup>th</sup> century Sufi poet:

Why are you so afraid of silence?

Silence is the root of everything.

If you spiral into its void

A hundred voices will thunder messages

You long to hear.

Omnia Marzouk

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