

**THE EXPERIENCE OF TURNING TO A SPIRITUAL PATH
AND HEALING THE EMPTINESS**

By

Inayet Sahin
212-19-3186

Advisor: Dr. Francine Hultgren

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Professor Directing Seminar Paper

Date

Advisor

Date

Associate Dean for Student Affairs

Date

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SECTION 1: TURNING TO THE PHENOMENON

Awakening

Emptiness inside--an emptiness that would make me feel like doing something but I didn't know what and nothing I did made it go away. Music would frustrate me and I would find myself switching from station to station, faster and faster, trying to find something that would make a dent in the void. The same with TV: no relief, just more annoyance. Friends became tiresome because they did not have the answers to my questions. My family was always there, neutral. My baby sister always brought me joy and for a while not only helped me forget the emptiness, but the stresses and demands of the day as well. Her innocence and the remembering of her primordial vow manifested in a calming presence.

What is the primordial vow of the soul? How does the fulfilling of her vow to remember the One affect my emptiness? What does it uncover within the spiritual realm? What is the experience of emptiness? How does one experience a soulful remembering? In this paper, I will be exploring the phenomenon of turning to a spiritual path and healing the emptiness. To open up the discussion, I turn back to my own experiences with emptiness.

I tried to fill the void with social service work...that should make me feel better right? That is what I was told; this is what I wanted to believe. If I want to get close to *Allah* (Arabic word/ Islamic understanding of the Divine), and thus fill the void, activism was the way. However, this made the abyss even deeper and wider and I kept falling, falling away from self and from what I knew was good. How did I know what was good? Well I knew it was not what I was doing. I wanted relief from a constant sense of

running, of everything depending on me, of never allowing myself to rest because I was afraid of what I would find if I stopped and looked around. I was falling, and if I could stop, I wouldn't have. I don't know if I ever hit the ground for it was non-existent to me. To stop, even though it would hurt, is what I wanted. I looked at the weed in envy of its soil holding it stationary while I blew haphazardly in the wind. Alone in a world where individuality is treasured, I wanted companionship; I wanted someone to tell me what to grab onto, be it a thorn or a rainbow I did not care. Pain and illusions seemed better than the disillusion I seemed to be living. My heart was heavy yet empty.

Reflections of Me

I am a product of many dry years in an Islamic school that reduced Islam to “thou shall nots.” I am a product of a culture of narcissism, in which the

will to power equates reason and justice with power, represses the body of feeling, denies the life of the spirit, reduces the Self to an ego which is socially adaptive but fragmented and self-alienated, and empties the Self and its world of all meaning and all value. (Levin, 1989, p. 11)

I am a product of a culture in which “our politics, religion, news, athletics, education and commerce have been transformed into congenial adjuncts of show business...resulting [in] a people on the verge of amusing ourselves to death” (Postman, 1985, p. 4). Lost in a measure where Man is the absolute, occupying the position of God, I drifted without purpose, homeless and rootless in the loss of the traditional sense of Being (Levin, 1989). In a world where “information is not knowledge and knowledge is not understanding” (Taylor & Saarinen, 1994, p. 12) I rationalized the world, the Word and the domination of my ego. Ahistorical in nature, this world of the current and currency led me to blindness of my self, of the information I was absorbing and the statements I was making. My ritual prayers were empty; my supplications were insincere. I was a walking

firecracker, ready to blow up at anyone, at anytime. I needed to stop and ask questions. I knew something was wrong, yet no one had the answers that would cure the aching of my soul. Then came a questioning of me, of what I was doing for myself, or rather what I was not doing.

The Questioning

“Do you do *dhikr* (remembrance of God).”

“Yes I sit and talk about Allah.”

“No, do you sit and immerse yourself in the remembrance of Allah.”

“What, are you a Sufi or something? That is not within the definition of Islam.”

“Who said?”

“Well, you know it is not moderate Islam.”

“What is moderate Islam and who defined it? Did you know that all the great scholars of Islam were in a *tariqa*, on a path to Allah? Islam here has been influenced by modernism that rejects the unseen realm where you are suffering. Have you ever turned to Allah?”

“What do you mean?”

And so my journey began. I found a teacher and a path to travel.

Talking to fellow travelers, I find I am not alone in my struggling to break free from Modernism’s chains. In exploring our experiences, I ask: What is the experience of feeling empty? What is the experience of naming the emptiness? What are the feelings of finding and joining a spiritual path? What changes in one’s life? What is the experience of doing daily *dhikr*, remembrance of the Divine? How does it feel to be part of a group *dhikr*? What does the *dhikr* do for one’s soul? How does one’s understanding of reality and Reality itself change? In discussions with three fellow travelers, Laila, Firas and Ali (pseudonyms), and research into Islamic history, modern schooling and philosophies that influenced the 20th century, I hope to arrive at an understanding of what in our lives

created such void and how to start thinking about fostering environments and curriculum in education that speak to the soul.

The Assent

Much like Adam who we believe ascended to this Earth after eating the apple, I was allowed to ascend into a knowing in which “reflection become(s) stronger than eyesight” (Shaghuri, in Keller, 1999, p. 14). It was through emersion in nothingness, that I finally was able to critique where I was, how I got there, and what was missing. Like a Hansel and Gretel finally realizing they have been abandon, that they were lost, I found my way out of the dark forest, not by trying to find the lost the pieces of knowledge that I had left behind, but by looking forward to a Light that guided me.

As I slowly loosened activism’s and Modernism’s claws, my heart was opened to a whole new world. This was a world of understanding that put words to a knowing I always felt; a world of answers that spoke to my soul; a world of deep, rich, Islamic heritage that I knew had to existed, but never was allowed to see. My heart wept and the tears of relief made it light. I was safe, like a baby in the arms of her mother, suckling the nourishing milk. I was never lost, never abandoned...He was always there, the Greatest of Friends. So I was never found, just awakened. Deep down, left over in my subconscious from the preconceptual, primordial realm of souls, I found the path to my Creator that was hidden from me. I had to “fall” to find my way out of the darkness. The disclosing light warmed my cold heart and gave sight to my soul in its wanderings through the dark terrains of emptiness. I know there is no end to this traveling, for Allah is Eternal; yet I have direction now, a map home.

My intellect has not been excluded, and my reasoning has not been rejected, just altered in this spiritual awakening. My parents did know of the science of the soul in Islam, but were influenced by the negative stereotypes of those they knew, and never shared it with us. They had never met a true guide. My meeting with Nuh Keller, came about through meeting my husband. One of the first things that attracted me to my husband was his wisdom and knowledge, which I would later come to find out he had gained from his travels. The journey of the *salik*, traveler, is yearning for Allah, and through *fana'*, complete annihilation of the ego, one finds presence with the Divine. This is not extinction of the consciousness, but self-consciousness – “their consciousness of themselves as separate selves, replete with their private personal agendas – that was to be ended” (Houston, 1986, p. 262). If the ending is complete, when you look inside your emptied self, you would find nothing but Allah. *Dhikr*, the remembrance of Allah is also a forgetting of self. This state, a traveling through Allah, requires first a traveling to Allah. This path within a path I had discovered is termed *Tassawuf*, Sufism.

Listening

As I listen to myself I hear noise...I want to hear peace, feel peace. Even in times of prayer and meditation, I cannot remove myself from this incessantly, mind numbing ruckus that we call the modern world. Silencing the voices other than the *dhikr* I chant is the goal I am trying to move towards, but I feel like I moving farther and father away from. The noises arise from things to do running around in my head, music glaring everywhere I go, the non-sensical chatter about things that don't concern me, and ideas that build the ego into believing that I am someone not to be contended with, deafen the silence we must hearken towards. The ego, the spiritual foe of all people on the path to

God, must go through small deaths in order to stop noise and allow the silence to penetrate through the influences of this technocratic world. We can no longer hear the animals, plants and rocks praising their Creator. We only see their commodified value, and at best their aesthetic beauty. Yet their being, their unwavering devotion to God, and their constant remembrance of the Divine Name is lost to our souls. Technically we cannot “hear” a rock, but understanding Reality allows you to hear the voices of remembrance from the rock, and the mountains that tower in the background of this forgetful world. It is appropriate that nature has been left out of the equation; I don’t think the beings we share this world with want any responsibility, affiliation or place in a world so alien from its origin.

Levin (1989) calls for a return to self through hearkening. I argue that hearkening on a path to self will take us to our origin, the Creator of all “selves”. Our ego inflated, the “me, me, me” syndrome, has covered up the *fitra* inherently within us all: the innate inner goodness that only hears the rhythms of the Divine. I do believe there is a common experience for all who “listen,” and that is closeness to the Divine, as they define it. It is the heart that must soften to hear the cries of the weak and the oppressed. The heart, the spiritual listening and seeing organ, should be the focus of our discussions in listening to one’s self. The purification of the heart, the softening, the hearkening towards the Good, are grounded in all spiritual traditions. I wonder how listening changes once one has start to focus on the inner. Is it that listening harkens a call to the soul, or is it the bringing of the soul and its needs for consciousness that bring about “listening?” How does listening change one’s view of the world, friends and family?

How do I listen, or should I ask when do I listen? Or is the question really who do I listen to? I hear well, sounds that is, but do I listen to the meanings of the sounds? Do I let the words resonate within my being, allowing them to move beyond the conceptual realm I try to frame them in? Most of the time I listen critically, analyzing every story, idea, theory, philosophy, and experience, “checking” them against my frame of reference, correcting them as they filter in. I do this to protect my heart. I have found it less painful to restrict what my heart listens to. Ideas that hit too close to home, as many do, since most reject the Divine foundation of my being, hurt me, and stress me. By restricting my listening to simply critical understanding, I protect myself. When I trust, I let my boundaries down and I enjoy the experience of listening wholly. My whole body goes with the rhythms of the speaker, moving in and out of joy and sadness, losing myself in the boundless words. This is how I feel when I hear the words of those on the path to Allah. How does listening to one’s spiritual teacher(s) differ from other experiences? How does this listening change other forms of listening? Does this listening move one to deafen the noise, move beyond the external, and move towards the Divine?

Friends on the Path

There is a unique outlook of those on a spiritual path. By listening to someone speak, the way they approach a subject, the depth to which they discuss it, I can tell they, too, are travelers. Abdul Hakim Murad, his English name T.J. Winters, a convert and professor at Cambridge, was my first encounter with a traveler who intellectualized his understanding in a critique of the “modern” Muslim community. His words in “Islamic Spirituality: The Forgotten Revolution” ran through my body, connecting to my experiences, and enlightening my mind to new possibilities. Ever since I have been on the

path, I have not only gained spiritual knowledge, but also worldly knowledge that has revolutionized my thinking. This all happened at a time when I was ready to listen; I had finally become aware of how much I didn't know. In his article, Murad (2001) states:

The modern type of *Tawba* (turning to Allah), however, born of insecurity, often makes Muslims narrow, intolerant, and exclusivist. Even more noticeably, it produces people whose faith is, despite its apparent intensity, liable to vanish as suddenly as it came. Deprived of real nourishment, the activist's soul can only grow hungry and emaciated, until at last it dies.

He was speaking of me; I wanted to scream, "I am not alone, it is not my fault." I never realized I felt guilt for my state of oppression. He does not end without advice:

How should we respond to this disorder? We must begin by remembering what Islam is for. As we noted earlier, our *din* (way of life) is not, ultimately, a manual of rules which, when meticulously followed, becomes a passport to paradise. Instead, it is a package of social, intellectual and spiritual technology whose purpose is to cleanse the human heart. In the Qur'an, the Lord says that on the Day of Judgment, nothing will be of any use to us, except a sound heart (*qalbun salim*). And in a famous hadith (saying of the Prophet Muhammed), the Prophet, upon whom be blessings and peace, says that 'Verily in the body there is a piece of flesh. If it is sound, the body is all sound. If it is corrupt, the body is all corrupt. Verily, it is the heart'. (Murad, 2001)

In my travels, I have met many youth who were born and raised in the US and come from a similar activist background, who all their lives also felt the desolation in their hearts that I experienced. Some delved much deeper into satisfying the ego, and others were aware all their lives, but rejected their knowing since it was never valued by the authority of science and technology. Thomas Moore (1999) comments on the spiritual state of "modern man" in the introduction of his bestseller "Care of the Soul":

The great malady of the twentieth century implicated in all of our troubles and affecting us individually and socially, is "loss of soul". When soul is neglected, it doesn't just go away; it appears symptomatically in obsessions, addictions, violence and loss of meaning. Our temptation is to isolate these symptoms or to try to eradicate them one by one, but the root problem is that we have lost our wisdom about the soul, even our interest in it. We have today few specialists of

the soul to advise us when we succumb to mood and emotional pain, or when as a nation we find ourselves confronting a host of threatening evils. (p. xi)

In his book, Moore addresses the issues of the soul from a non-religious perspective, using Greek mythology to inform his critique. Although our sources are different, as well as our ontological and epistemological foundations, his understanding of the suffering of the soul speaks to all who experience it:

The emotional complaints of our time, complaints we therapists hear everyday in our practice, include:

- Emptiness
- Meaninglessness
- Vague depression
- Disillusionment about marriage, family and relationship
- A loss of values
- Yearning for personal fulfillment
- A hunger for spirituality

All of these symptoms reflect a loss of soul and let us know what the soul craves. We yearn excessively for entertainment, power, intimacy, sexual fulfillment and material things and we think we can find these things if we discover the right relationship or job, the right church or therapy. But without soul, whatever we find will be unsatisfying, for what we truly long for is the soul in each of these areas. Lacking that soulfulness we attempt to gather these alluring satisfactions to us in great masses thinking apparently that quantity will make up for lack of quality (Moore, p. xii)

Understanding Moore's words, it becomes clear why we were struggling so much against our "self." I am interested in capturing the experiences of those who have recognized these "maladies" for what they are and how they are trying to heal the "loss of soul" from an Islamic perspective. I am curious as to the experiences that led people to this path and their experiences traveling on it. I want to explore what their experience of being humbled was like, that is how did they get over "me and what I think." How did they know that it was time to turn to Allah? How did they come to know that a spiritual path was the answer to their souls' cries? How did they hear the cries of their souls? If

not, what brought them into awareness of something missing? Of needing a guide? What was the experience of emptiness like for them? Has the *tariqa* given them peace? How do they experience the knowledge they have gained in their daily lives? How do they experience the *dhikr*?

Reflections on Self

I feel peace. I am not comfortable with where I am, but I take comfort in knowing my path will lead me to a better me. My prayers come more easily and my supplications are trusting and knowing. I feel as if I have found my place in this world, or rather that I finally placed myself in the Reality of this world. What do others experience on the path? Do they feel peace in their lives? Do they find comfort in traveling to God? Are they scared? If so, of what? Are they happy they found this path, or is it just another added burden? Where do they feel the path is going? I have found my primordial calling home, my soul's desire to once again be in communion with the Divine. And I have accepted that I am a stranger in this world, and I take comfort in it. For to be stuck in a temporal understanding and to wake to Reality upon dying is the worst thought imaginable.

I know this path is not for everyone, and I am not special for being on it. I was stumbling through the dark searching, falling in every ditch along the way, and through His Mercy and nothing of my own doing, was allowed to see and hear the rhythm of Allah that beats in all of our beings. I am nothing if anything, and the more I believe that, the closer I get home. So I pray:

In the Name of Allah, Most Merciful and Compassionate: Oh Allah, O Light, O Truth, O Manifest: Open my heart with Your light, teach me of Your knowledge, give me understanding from You and to hear from You; And make me behold through You and give me steadfastness in seeing You; And teach me the way to You, and make it easy for me through your grace; And clothe me in godfearingness from You; Truly You have power over all things. O Allah

remember me, remind me, relent towards me, and forgive me a forgiveness through which I forget all but You. (Keller, 1998, p. 36)

Through prayer one seeks Truth. Through academic research one seeks understanding. I seek to understand the experience of turning to a spiritual path and healing the emptiness, as experienced by three fellow travelers.

SECTION 2: EXPLORATION

Sufism: Islamic Spirituality

Sufism, the travel to and through Allah, encompasses the spiritual path. It is most often cited as coming from the root word *suf* meaning wool. A century or two after



"Allah Has taught man that which he knew not".
Qur'an, Chapter: 96, Verse: 5

Muhammed's (prophet of Islam) death, those within the Islamic community who bore the inner message of Islam came to be known as *Sufis*. "The coarse, woolen garments they wore in protest of the silks and satins of the *sultans* (leaders) of the Islamic empires, gave rise to the word *Sufi*"

(Houston, 1986, p. 258). A *Sufi* is not one who has reached the end of

his path, because there is no end in traveling to the Divine, but rather one who is consummately aware of Allah, who understands his own being is contingent upon the Absolute Being of Allah. The path is a means to cultivate inner virtues (Nasr, 1994). Sufis sought and seek to purify and spiritualize Islam from worldliness, through recovering its liberty and love, and restoring its deeper, mystical tone. "Externals should yield to internals, matter to meaning, outward symbol to inner reality. 'Love the pitcher less,' they cried, 'and the water more'" (Houston, 1986, p. 258).

Sufis look beyond the explicit meanings of the Qur'an's teachings and do more than just keep up with Divine Law that orders their lives. Life is demanding, and for most Muslims, contemplation of Allah is at equal level with worldly issues. They do what is minimally required and simply put, stay out of trouble. This can, as promised, gain one entrance to the eternal garden. However, there were those who were impatient for their reward and they want to encounter Allah directly in this very lifetime. This called for special methods, and to develop and practice them gathered around spiritual masters, *Sheikhs*, forming circles that, from the 12th century onward, crystallized into *Sufi* orders, *Tariqas* (Houston, 1986).

Muhammed Amin Kurdi, a scholar of Sufism, describes this sacred science:

is a knowledge through which one knows the states of the human soul, praiseworthy or blameworthy, how to purify it from the blameworthy and ennoble it by acquiring the praiseworthy, and to journey and to proceed to Allah Most High, fleeing onto Him. Its fruits are the heart's development, knowledge of God through direct experience and ecstasy, salvation in the next world, triumph through gaining Allah's pleasure, the attainment of eternal happiness, and illuminating and purifying the heart so that noble matters disclose themselves, extraordinary states are revealed, and one perceives what the insight of others is blind to. (in Keller, 1994, p. 861)

Sufism is the science of the soul, but is also is concerned with the *jism* (body), *akl* (mind) and *qalb* (heart), for there is no Sufism except through comprehension of the Sacred Law. Balance is needed as expressed by Imam Malik, "He who practices Sufism without learning Sacred Law corrupts his faith, while he who learns Sacred Law without practicing Sufism corrupts himself. Only he who combines the two proves true" (in Keller, 1994, p. 862).

The intellect is an unfortunate necessity because undisciplined, it can take one away from. Dr. Alan Godlas (2003), professor of Islamic and Arabic Studies at the University of Georgia, describes the intellect relation to spiritual travels:

This intellect is seen as the seat for the power of discernment; it gives people the ability to see things as they are, to distinguish such attributes as truth and falsehood, beauty and ugliness. However in most humans the intellect is unable to function properly because it is veiled by the ego. The original error in judgment comes from identifying the human spirit with its cloak of water and clay (i.e. the body). Following this mistaken identification, the intellect is unable to penetrate the outward form of those objects within its perceptual field. If it could go beyond forms to inward meaning, the intellect would discover God in all things. Or as Rumi puts it, "How many words the world contains! But all have one meaning. When you smash the jugs, the water is one" [p. 8 of *The Sufi Path of Love*]. While veiled, the intellect is known as the partial intellect and it exists in an adversarial relationship with the ego. As an individual's ego "thins out", the intellect becomes better at fulfilling its purpose. In most people, the ego dominates the intellect. However in those individuals who are making spiritual progress, the intellect begins to dominate the ego. When the veil of the ego is altogether eliminated, the human spirit is altogether sanctified. In Rumi's words: The partial intellect is a denier of Love, even if it pretends to know the mysteries. It is clever and knowledgeable, but not naughted -- as long as the angel is not naughted, it is a demon. [p. 223 of *The Sufi Path of Love*] (Godlas, 2003)

The intellect can guide one to a path, but it is love that travels to Allah. Rumi says:

If a man of intellect should enter, tell him the way is blocked, but if a lover should come, extend him a hundred welcomes!

By the time intellect has deliberated and reflected, love has flown to the seventh heaven. (in Murad, 1999).

Traveling to Allah is both knowing and doing: "having godfearingness privately and publicly, living according to the Sunna (practices of the Prophet Muhammed) in word and deed, indifference to whether others accept or reject one, satisfaction with Allah Most High in dearth and plenty and returning to Allah in happiness and affliction" (Keller, 1994, p. 861). Acting upon what you know is rewarded with what is hidden from you: *ma'rifa*, experiential knowledge of Allah. *Ma'rifa* allows for one to free oneself

from lowly traits out of gratitude before the majesty of Allah. Dr. Alan Godlas (2003), who has studied Sufism for over 30 years, describes *Ma'rifa*:

God causes Man to know Him through Himself with a knowledge that is not linked to any faculty, a knowledge in which the existence of Man is merely metaphorical. Hence to the Gnostic, egoism is utter perfidy; his remembrance of God is without forgetfulness, and his gnosis is not empty words but actual feeling.

Ma'rifa comes from *Arafa*, which means “to know, to recognize, to perceive, to be cognizant, to be aware, to be acquainted, to discover, experience, to find out, to acknowledge, to concede, to distinguish, to be known, to know for sure, to announce, to reveal, to uncover, to confess” (Cowan, 1976, p. 605). These all speak to spiritual awakening through and to Allah and have been expounded upon by many in the spiritual path. *Ma'rifa* additionally means realization, gnosis, acquaintance, a friend. *Ma'arifa*, another derivative of *Arafa*, means countenance. *Ta'rif* means communication. *I'tiraf* means gratitude, thankfulness, acknowledgment. *Arifa* means wise man. *Ma'ruf* means universally accepted; that which is good (Cowan, 1976, p. 606).

All these words come from the root word *Arafa*, meaning, “to know.” So one could say, upon knowing and recognition of The Friend through gnosis, and a turning in gratitude and acknowledgement to the His countenance, the wise man is aware of the Universal good and is in communication with the Divine. This *Ma'rifa* allows one to “worship Allah as you see Him, know Him,” one of the 3 tenets of the *deen* (way of life for a Muslim):

Seeing is not with the eye, for the mind cannot transcend its own impressions to reach the Divine. “But rather the *ruh*, or spirit of the human being, the subtle faculty in each of us which is not bounded by the limitations of the created universe is what “sees.” And the food of this *ruh* is *dhikr*, the remembrance of Allah. (Keller, 1999, p. 13)

History Visited

As with the other sciences of Islam, such as *fiqh* (jurisprudence) and *tafseer* (exegesis), *tassawuf*, which Murad (2001) refers to as Islamic psychology, traditionally known as Sufism, has been a respected part of Muslim intellectual and political life throughout our history. Orientalist, and Modernist Islamic doctrine have recently tried to disassociate it from Islam; however, the participation in Sufism by great Muslim scholars such as Nawawi, Ghazzali, al-Hakim al-Nisaburi, Ibn Furak, al-Qushayri, al-Bayhaqi, Al-Sawi, al-Dardir, al-Laqqani, Abd al-Wahhab al-Baghdadi, Abdallah Ansari, Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani, Ibn al-Jawzi, Ibn Rajab, al-Suyuti, Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani, al-Ayni, Ibn Khaldun, al-Subki, Ibn Hajar al-Haytami, Baydawi, al-Sawi, Abu'l-Su'ud, al-Baghawi, and Ibn Kathir is testimony to it as a central and indispensable Islamic science.

The importance of Sufism in Islamic history cannot be exaggerated. The spread of Islam into the majority of the Muslim world, including Turkey, Persia, Pakistan, India, China, Indonesia and Africa, was through the examples of those traveling on the path. The followers of the path, *mureeds* also had an important share in “the intellectual defense of Islam and provided an Islamic response to the presence of different religions because they had access to the highest metaphysical truths of the Islamic tradition” (Nasr, 1994, p. 67). The most well known arts, ranging from calligraphy to poetry to architecture and literature, were created by those associated with Sufism. During the last century when Muslims were subjugated by the colonial powers, in many parts of the Islamic world such as North Africa, the Northwestern provinces of India and Caucasia the resistance against the French, British and Russians came from various Sufi figures (Nasr, 1994).

Sufi's love poetry and their poets are world famous. The most widely read poet in America, Jalal ad-Din Rumi, a Sufi, and dwelt on the pains of separation from Allah to deepen his love of Allah and thereby draw close to Him. He writes:

Listen to the story told by the reed, of being separated.
“Since I was cut from the reedbed, I have made this crying sound.
Anyone separated from someone he loves understands what I say, anyone pulled from a source longs to go back. (in Houston, 1986, p. 260)

And he assures us that human love is returned:

Never does the lover seek without being sought by his beloved.
When the lightening of love has shot into this heart, know that here is a love in that heart...Mark well the text: He Loves them and they love Him [Koran, 5:59]. (in Houston, 1986, p. 260)

Rabi'a, a remarkable 8th century woman and mystic, celebrates the eventual meeting of the two lovers, one finite, the other Infinite, in her night supplication:

My God and my Lord: my eyes are at rest, the stars are setting, hushed are the movements of birds in their nests, of monsters in the deep. And you are the Just who knows no change, the Equity that does not swerve, the Everlasting that never passes away. The doors of kings are locked and guarded by their henchmen, but your door is open to those who call upon you. My Lord, each lover is now alone with his beloved. And I am alone with you. (in Houston, 1986, p. 260)

The Soul and Its Dis-Covering:

In Islamic cosmology, souls were all created at once, and reside in a celestial realm where they know Reality, the Oneness of Allah. Alone with their Lord, they know the Love of the Divine and they love Him solely. Upon being “breathed” into the fetus, they entered the *dunya*, this world we live in. *dunya* comes from the root word meaning lower, and this world is seen as the lowest realm of existence. As the soul is lowered from the heavens, its understanding of Allah moves from the preconceptual realm into the subconscious. It is believed that all are born pure and with an inherent nature, *fitra*, that

loves and recognizes the Unity in the world; it is through parents and society that one's *fitra* is changed. Those who reject the faith are called *Kafir*, which comes from the root word *kafara*, which means to cover up. Neglect of one's responsibilities to God comes from a "covering up" of the knowledge through mis-education that leads to ignorance. The soul in its dis-covering the Truth, is re-membering its relation with Allah. *Qalb* is the word for heart in Arabic and it means to turn over. The heart is continuously turning over, trying to bring to surface this knowing.

This world is understood as a fleeting dream rather than a stationary standard. That is why for the Sufi, the attainment of pleasure of the eternal realm is of most concern. In this life a *mureed* (one who is being guided on the path) marries, works, eats, sleeps, studies, loves, enjoys, etc., yet his/her gaze, desires, and intentions are other worldly. Traveling with one foot in this world and the other stepping into the bliss of eternity, the *mureed* is not concerned with the temporal standards of our day and time, but rather with the timeless and eternal Reality of Allah. The goal for a traveler is then to be in this world, but not of this world, a resident stranger.

Attaining Knowledge

The foundational source of knowledge in Islam is the Qur'an, the literal Word of Allah revealed to Muhammed through the archangel Gabriel; it is considered the culmination of the messages of Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and the many other prophets of Allah. Learning the Qur'an is thus not merely memorizing the words, but also through experiencing the spoken and written words.

The written form of the Qur'an is the visual equivalent of the eternal Qur'an and is humanity's perceptual glimpse of the Divine. The Holiness of the Qur'an lends a special aura to all forms of the written word. Arabic calligraphy is not merely an

art form, but involves divine and moral representations -- from which calligraphy acquires its sublime reputation. (Islamic Arts and Architecture Organization, 2002)

Calligraphy pieces speak to the heart. Islamic calligraphy, art and architecture are expressions of love for the Divine. In “modern” times, the spiritual implications of how calligraphy, art and architecture are “done” has been lost. Muslim youth have been



There is no God but Allah, and Muhammed is His Messenger
Muslim testification of faith, written in Arabic in the form of a boy in prayer.

disconnected from this rich heritage and do not understand how the modern look of the world affects their soul. As the piece to the left shows, the words of Allah need to move from the lips to the heart, having them pulse through your whole being. Then everything we create will be in unity with Divine wisdom.

Muhammed (Peace and Blessings be upon him)

was called the “walking Qur’an.” His speech and actions

expounded upon the guidelines revealed in the Qur’an. This is preserved as through the *Hadith* (meticulous recordings of his sayings and practices) and comprises the second source of knowledge for Muslims. “Seeking knowledge is incumbent on every Muslim” (in Ghazzali, 1995, p. 27). And the successors to the Prophet are those who love his ways and teach them. Islamically, knowledge is passed down from teacher to student and is preserved in a chain that is intellectually and spiritually linked.

Teacher and Student

I am relatively new on the journey, and my understanding is limited by my inexperience. Knowing that I do not know is the first step in journey. I am a *mureed*, a

student. Spiritually, it means one who seeks closeness with the Divine. No one calls themselves a *Sufi* but that they are deluded. My teacher, *Sheikh* Nuh Keller (*Sheikh* refers to his qualification as a scholar of Islam), is a *Sufi*, but he would deny it. He is a seasoned traveler and gives knowledge directly and experientially, through his intellect and spirit.

Why a teacher? Estes, an award winning poet and senior Jungian analyst, answers in

Nourishing the Soul: Discovering the Sacred in Everyday Life (Simpkinson &

Simpkinson, 1995):

[The spiritual path]...requires unforeseen sacrifices and much endurance. So, it is understandable that most of us would feel greatly assisted if we could be blessed with even a small amount of consistent guidance. (p. 35)

Additionally, she answers, who is teacher:

A teacher is supposed to have good ability to differentiate, so that they can teach acute differentiation to those who study with them. The teacher's only and most compassionate work is to suggest, to tell, to teach and to demonstrate by striving to live their own lives in the best way they have found. The teacher is supposed to show the way through, not act as though they themselves are the way through. (Simpkinson & Simpkinson, p. 43)

As I read Estes' work, at every point I was in agreement with her, making connections with the Islamic idea of spirituality and teacher/student relationship. She uses the term "Sacred Science" to describe the spiritual journey of a teacher and student in one of her poems, and this same term is used in Islamic literature. Estes further states that the spiritual path requires knowledge, and the teacher, because of traveling, gains "knowing." "Knowing what not to do is far more important in many cases than knowing what to do" (Simpkinson & Simpkinson, 1995, p. 45). *Sheikh* Nuh teaches with his intellect, actions and being, knowledge of the blameworthy traits of the heart like envy, hatred, lust, miserliness, and despair, and their removal. And subsequently, praiseworthy traits such as trustworthiness, humility, kindness, patience, and being satisfied with what

is provided, are acquired. These “[w]orks of the heart are in the sense the fruits of the works of knowing and doing, and ...they furnish the inward measure of the path, that one *be something*” (Keller, 1999, p. 47).

Knowing and Doing

Ilm is knowledge in Arabic, and *A'ml* is action; the two words are connected physically through the sameness of their letters, and metaphysically through their meaning. “Are they equal, those who know and those who do not know? (Qur’an 39:9) Allah asks. Knowing and doing are interrelated. In What about Me, a Sufi fable, a boy goes to a scholar and asks him to teach him knowledge. The scholar asks for a rug. The boy has no possessions, and asks different people for a rug, but each asks for something in return. Finally, he figures out how to get one thing, and by providing each person with what they asked for, he obtains a rug. When he took it to the scholar and asked for knowledge, the scholar replied, “you already have it” (Young, 2002, p. 18). Additionally, Abu Hanifa, one of the founding scholars of Islamic schools of law said, “Know that action follows knowledge as the limbs follow the eyes. A little action with knowledge is far more beneficial than a lot of action with ignorance” (al-Maliki, 1998, p. 224).

There is a reciprocal relationship between knowledge and action, where one informs the other. Doing has to be informed by knowledge, and in return, your doing leads to enlightenment of your knowing. Doing what you know of the Divine commandment because of your love of The One, brings you closer to Allah and what you do not know is revealed to you. So ritual prayers, fasting, pilgrimage, enjoining what is good and forbidding what is evil, repentance, etc. brings us Divine love:

"Allah (mighty and sublime be He) said: 'Whosoever shows enmity to someone devoted to Me, I shall be at war with him. My servant draws not near to Me with anything more loved by Me than the religious duties I have enjoined upon him, and My servant continues to draw near to Me with supererogatory works so that I shall love him. When I love him I am his hearing with which he hears, his seeing with which he sees, his hand with which he strikes and his foot with which he walks. Were he to ask [something] of Me, I would surely give it to him, and were he to ask Me for refuge, I would surely grant him it. I do not hesitate about anything as much as I hesitate about [seizing] the soul of My faithful servant: he hates death and I hate hurting him.'" (Ibrahim & Johnson-Davies, 2003)

My life was doing without "knowing" and it hurt me. "Doing" in ignorance on its own helped me one way actually: I got down to rock bottom, so when there was no other place to go, I looked up. Unlike the boy whose doing was guided by the knowing of the scholar, I was wandering around asking questions that no one could answer, until, I met my teacher. As Estes says, "When we are severely tested, we can be sure that we have met the teacher" (Simpkinson & Simpkinson, 1995, p. 45). Why was knowledge about the needs of the soul not taught so I could avoid the suffering I went through? Why when I asked for guidance, did no one have the answers that I needed? Why now, when I share this knowledge, is it rejected? I want to ask my fellow travelers, what was the experience of acting without knowing? How did acting change with knowledge? How did knowing change with knowledge? What was the experience of understanding your lack of knowledge? Why do you feel that this knowledge was not taught to you? What is the nature of your teacher/student relationship? What qualities drew you to your teacher? How have your teachers knowledge affected your path? How do you know he knows? How is doing affected by his knowledge?

Dhikr: Divine Remembrance

Dhikr: The word refers both to memory and to speech. Its literal interpretation is "mention." According to Burckhardt (p. 63), "it is by an inner 'mention' that a memory is evoked." Hence when the Qur'an is translated into English, passages that refer to "remembering Allah" could just as well be translated as "invoking Allah". The injunctions to "invoke Allah" are seen by *Sufi* masters as supporting the practice of repeating Allah's names (Godlas, 2003).

Dhikr is essential on ones path. It is the daily re-membering that puts you in contact with the Divine through the words He taught us to say. Allah has said, "Remember me and I will remember you" and "Call on me and I will answer you" (in Keller, 1998, p. 2). It is the goal of every traveler to be in a state of remembrance at all times. These remembrances are from the Qur'an, the Sunna of the Prophet (peace and blessing of Allah be upon him) and from those who are the inheritors of the Prophet, the scholars of the path. *Dhikr* comes in the form of reading the Qur'an, reciting the Names of Allah a specified number of times and in litanies composed by those closest to the Divine, the Gnostics who are called, *Wali-ul Allah*, the friends of Allah. *Dhikr* is the means by which actions become easier, and purity of heart can be attained:

Those who are pure in heart achieve God-consciousness; they are truly and actually aware of God at the center of their being (their heart). These sanctified individuals are said to be "Possessors of the Heart" [p. 36 of The Sufi Path of Love] Sufism's purpose is then to "become" possessor of the heart." (Godlas, 2003)

What is Sufism in an experiential sense? The following are some quotes from Sufis of great standing in Islamic history:

Sufism consists of noble behavior that is made manifest at a noble time on the part of a noble person in the presence of a noble people.

Sufism is that you should be with God--without any attachment.

Sufism consists of abandoning oneself to God in accordance with what God wills.

Sufism is that you should not possess anything nor should anything possess you.
(Godlas, 2003)

As travelers on the same path of these great luminaries, I want to explore the experiential knowledge gained by the participants on their journeys, where they feel they are, and where they want to go. I want to understand the nature of traveling in an environment that contradicts all you strive for, the conflicts one has to face and deal with, and how one resolves them. Always traveling can be tiresome and the goal can seem to get farther and farther away. How does one stay close to the path one chose to follow? Do persons actually feel they will ever reach their goal, or is this something just to get them through life? Where are the participants traveling to?

A Critical Look

Modernism's defining philosophy is Positivism. In Positivism, there are only two sources of knowledge: logical reasoning and empirical experience. Metaphysical statements are thus forbidden (Pratt, 2001). The Tyler Rationale, the methodology informing the public school curriculum, is grounded in Positivism. The Tyler Rationale's two most crippling features are that it does not allow for critical reflection on what is learned and does not take into account learning beyond the cognitive. As a technical framework, its focus is outcomes based, that is, how much a student remembers from what was taught. Without a critical perspective, education expects and prepares students to be vessels, ready to accept whatever is poured in, intellectually and spiritually.

Modern Education

Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1994), professor of Islamic Studies at George Washington University, notes in A Young Muslim's Guide to the Modern World:

Very early in the development of modernism, however, educational institutions were for the most part, although not completely, captured by the forces of modernism and modern education became the most important means for furthering the value system of the modern world, for the spread of secularization and for the criticism of the religious worldview. Through educational institutions, not only the sciences but also ideas concerning the amassing of wealth, furthering economic ends and creating greater social mobility within society were disseminated, this being especially true in America and only more recently in Europe. (p. 210)

The renowned award-winning educator, John Taylor Gatto, and Hamza Yusuf Hanson (2001), a popular Muslim American scholar, provide evidence from history to show how the engineering of modern schools has led to the social, economical and philosophical problems addressed by curriculum scholars (e.g., Apple, 1996; Anyon, 1983; King, 1983; Pinar, 1995). Academia rejects the public school structure and curriculum, and has published hundreds of articles and books that provide critique of, and new approaches for education.

Gatto (2001), in his book, The Underground History of American Education, claims that modern mass education was established by the new American industrialists of the 1900s, to serve the interests of corporations in dumbing down the masses, keeping them in a childish state beyond the years of childhood in elaborate and sophisticated daycares – public schools – which then prepare them for corporate life – a complete dependency on the corporation to sustain a lifestyle of consumerism. Dependency on corporations by the masses secures the lifestyles, power, and wealth of the elites who own the corporations (Gatto, 2001). Gatto and Hanson both claim that this emphasis on the material and monetary “kills” the soul (Gatto & Hanson, 2001; Gatto, Hanson, &

Sayers, 2001). Gatto's (2001) conclusions are supported by many: Thomas Moore, Care of the Soul; Adam Robinson, Co-founder, The Princeton Review, author, What Smart Students Should Know; David Guterson, Snow Falling On Cedars; and Christine Northrup, Women's Bodies, Women's Wisdom.

For thirty years, Gatto was a teacher in the public school system, and in speech he gave on the occasion of being named "New York State Teacher of the Year" he summed up the lessons he gave:

1. The first lesson I teach is confusion. Everything I teach is out of context.
2. The second lesson I teach is class position. I teach that students must stay in the class where they belong.
3. The third lesson I teach is indifference. I teach children not to care too much about anything.
4. The fourth lesson I teach is emotional dependency. By stars and red checks, smiles and frowns, prizes, honors, and disgraces, I teach kids to surrender their will to the predestined chain of command.
5. The fifth lesson I teach is intellectual dependency. Good students wait for a teacher to tell them what to do. It is the most important lesson, that we must wait for other people, better trained than ourselves, to make the meanings of our lives.
6. The sixth lesson I teach is provisional self esteem.... I teach that a kid's self-respect should depend on expert opinion.
7. The seventh lesson I teach is that one can't hide. I teach students they are always watched, that each is under constant surveillance by myself and my colleagues (Gatto, 1991).

The final products of successful schooling are well-adjusted adults who have been taught, as Ivan Illich (1971) puts it:

...to confuse teaching with learning, grade advancement with education, a diploma with competence, and fluency with the ability to say something new. His imagination is "schooled" to accept service in place of value. Medical treatment is mistaken for health care, social work for the improvement of community life, police protection for safety, military poise for national security, the rat race for productive work. Health, learning, dignity, independence, and creative endeavor are defined as little more than the performance of the institutions which claim to

serve these ends, and their improvement is made to depend on allocating more resources to the management of hospitals, schools, and other agencies in question.

Most Muslim youth in America attend public elementary and high schools, and for those who attend Islamic schools, most Islamic schools follow the public school structure and curriculum. Higher education most often occurs in colleges and universities. Very few youth are exposed to or study with traditionally educated scholars. These comments, along with those from academia put forth a very dismal picture of the state of our youth.

The Muslim American Identity

Muslims and Muslim thought have been affected greatly by every intellectual movement in the West. Muslims became reactionary as they became subjects of colonial powers. This is ever-truer today when intellectual imperialism and globalization permeates every aspect of life of a Muslim, both here in America and abroad. The religion and way of life that is called Islam has suffered, becoming a soul numbing doctrine of negatives.

Far from its spiritually and socially revolutionary beginning with Muhammed (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him), Islam as a “modern” interpretation has further compounded the destructive forces associated with Modernism and Postmodernism instead of offering answers. Anas Coburn (2000), Executive Director of Dar Al-Islam, a organization dedicated to cultivating the traditional understanding of Islam as espoused by 1000 years of scholarship, discusses in his essay Muslim Identity in Postmodern America the impact of these philosophies on the American Muslim identity:

Social conditions in postmodern America render the construction of coherent identity more problematic for everyone, not just the Muslims. One of the consequences of information overload is an intensification of desires as advertisers work hard to create needs within us. The process of social saturation extends our capacity to adopt different situational identities even while it makes choosing the most appropriate response to a given situation more difficult. (p. 10)

Language and distance barriers have hampered access to traditional scholars and texts in Islam that convey wholistic and rich understandings of the Islamic sciences. Identity construction lost any relation to the Islamic way of being and thus being left to be defined by Modernism through formal schooling and society's Postmodern realities.

To truly understand an experience, all factors affecting the phenomenon need exploration. Although these issues of education and identity construction seem removed from the spiritual realm, there is acknowledgement of the reciprocal relationship between what informs our being, and the soul. What is the experience of turning to a spiritual path and healing the emptiness? I have chosen the Phenomenological methodology to answer this question.

The Methodology

Spirituality is a primordial reality, and it is only through the experience of the Divine that we truly understand its mysteries. Marcel (1950) says that the "object [of phenomenology] is to bring mystery more fully into our presence" (van Manen, 1990, p. 50). Although "the essences sought are not mystical in the way sciences of the soul can be..." (Husserl, in van Manen, 1990, p. 9), phenomenology provides a methodology through the telling of one's stories that leads to questions to help bring out the phenomenon. In understanding phenomenology we know that our conversations about experiences are transformations, and that they are never identical to the lived experience itself, bringing us to the realization "...that the meanings we bring to the surface from the

depths of life's oceans have already lost the natural quiver of their undisturbed existence" (van Manen, 1990, p. 54).

Experiential knowledge of Allah and the journey to and through, is impossible to describe in numbers, and not subject to theory making; an attempt would further put us at loss of the essences of the experience we wish to discover. To seek another method would lead to shortcomings in the arrived at understandings.

The answer to these shortcomings lies, of course, in the phenomenological method, which requires that the observer let the phenomenon speak for themselves rather than force them into any predetermined ideational framework; let the eidetic vision of essence order the data for the understanding and be corroborated by them. These essentials of the phenomenological method were known to and meticulously observed by the Muslim scholar Abu Al Rayhan Al Birumi (440/1048) in his classical study of the religion and culture of India. The methodological principles he established were continued in a long tradition of comparative learning and writing by Muslims. (Farouqi, 1986, p. xii)

Following in Al-Birumi's example, I am using the phenomenological method in my effort to understand the experience of turning to a spiritual path and healing the emptiness, and how we can bring forth change in how we teach, how our schools are constructed and how we think about curriculum, to address the needs of the soul. Islamic literature on the subject is limited due to modernism's hold on intellectual thought. Additionally, Farouqi (1986) comments that phenomenological research into Islam has unduly not been explored:

For the past generation or more, the discipline of the history of religions has benefited from the breakthrough of phenomenology, except Islam...because of Orientalists inability to get over their "epistemological ethnocentrism," incapable of epoche required by phenomenology. (Farouqi, 1986, p. xiii)

Farouqi considered his work the first phenomenological inquiry into Islam, from a historical and social perspective. Since his work, there have been a few other works published.

Phenomenology gives much importance to etymological sources, which is also extremely important in the Arabic language. The Qur'an, Hadith and the major texts of Islam are recorded in the classical Arabic language, which has been preserved through the Qur'an itself. The Arabic language is based on root words, from which all other words are derived in form and meaning. "Being attentive to the etymological origins of words may sometimes put us in touch with an original form of life where the terms still had living ties to the lived experiences from which they originally sprang (van Manen, 1990, p. 59). This is especially true in Arabic, in which primary exegesis of religious texts starts with looking at root words and meanings. Even the forms of the letters, the way they are connected, and the order they come in the word adds to the meaning. *Balagha* is a very high science in Arabic literature that looks at these significant details to bring about deeper understandings. It was very important for me to be able to draw from this rich source of information in order to open up the experience in different ways.

"Human science research is concerned with meaning--to be human is to be concerned with meaning, to desire meaning" (van Manen, 1990, p. 79). Desire for meaning is what draws one to spirituality. In searching for meaning, we come to understand life, lived and to be lived. The lived experience itself is meaningful in the fact that it reflects Divine attributes. Meaning is personal, and draws from experiences both joyful and hurtful, honorable and embarrassing, and from both strengthening and weakening. In order to respect the lived lives and the dreams to come, as well as to have

meaningful conversations, the participants needed to trust me with their stories. Therefore, I have withheld their names when referring to them in my writing. “I am not just a researcher that observes life” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 90)...I live it. And in sharing my story first, I was able to not only find questions that would help bring about the phenomenon, but also breakthrough concerns of the participants about sharing their stories. I am not looking for the right answers, which some of the participants tried to give, but rather I am looking to uncover the phenomenon naturally so it can tell its own story.

Framework

The phenomenological method for human science research “may be seen as a dynamic interplay among six research activities:

1. turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests us and commits us to the world;
2. investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it;
3. reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon;
4. describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting;
5. maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon;
6. balancing the research context by considering parts and whole. (van Manen, 1990, pp. 30-31)

Participants

There were three participants: Laila a 21-year-old female, Firas a 29-year-old male and Ali a 28-year-old male (pseudonyms used). Each had suffered through emptiness, tried many ways to fill the void and in the end found the spiritual path to be the answer and the beginning of a new life. Both Firas and Ali were in the *tariq* for 5 years at the time of interview, and Laila had recently joined. I knew each participant as

first a friend and then later as a fellow student of Sheikh Nuh Keller. The Laila attended an Islamic elementary and high school; Firas attended Islamic school for only three years; and Ali attend public schools for all of his education. All three participants went onto university to further their studies.

I met with each participant only once. These meetings took place at their homes and lasted approximately one hour. I entered into the conversation with an explanation of phenomenology and the experience I wished to explore. I tried not to direct the conversation with my questions, but rather open doors for the participants to walk through and explore. I had questions I had thought about and written; however, I did not ask them in order; rather, I tried to have a conversation. When I felt the need to explore an idea further, I would ask specific questions. The participants at first were concerned about whether they had said the right thing, and although I tried to explain that there is no right and wrong, only their experience, when they asked, I said yes, that was exactly what I was looking for. This helped them relax and I felt them tell their experiences easier. Quotations throughout this text with only name citations following (no dates) are from transcripts of these conversations.

The stories of the participants and their journey to a spiritual path have pedagogical implications. In understanding their experiences, and the consequences of being informed through Modern and Postmodern philosophies, the causes of the maladies of the soul can be brought to light. This in turn can help us bring about new ways thinking and creating soulful experiences, and teaching for prevention. I now turn to the voices of the participants.

SECTION THREE: THEMES AND IMPLICATIONS

Filled with Emptiness

When religion is a burden, it is suffering from emptiness. It becomes a series of actions and beliefs plastered on that quickly loses its appeal, no matter how hard you try to hold on. You don't know what to hold on to, or if you really even want to. "Praying felt empty and dry" (Firas). And so did fasting and even believing in God. How can you believe what you do not know or understand...yet this is what so many are asked to do, and so many reject whether they are aware of it or not. For those who are aware, and do seek to be "believers," it creates a state of loss: the soul searching for home but the partial and adulterated intellect is getting in the way. The intellect does not know how to respond to the longings of the soul because it has been denied the teachings of the sciences of the heart. The soul becomes thirsty, and like parched, dry land, it cracks, creating sores that desperately need healing. A sandy desert does not crack because it was created to be dry. But fertile soil without water kills all that lives in it and becomes land that nothing can ever grow on again. It takes more than just water to heal these cracks. It takes new soil, new plants and a renewed perseverance.

Lost and Dry

Firas shared, "My faith was dry...I didn't benefit from what I was doing...no change...just going through the motions (referring to ritual worship)." I heard the same voice from Laila:

I was never happy, you know, I was never happy with what I knew, with what I believed. I really did not believe...I believed in God, that He was my creator...but I needed more of a meaning behind it, and more of a hands-on kind of feeling rather than facts.

In talking to the participants, I felt them reverberate, in almost the exact words, the loss I felt, the emptiness, and the apathy, sadness, anger, irritability, and dismay it caused in daily living: “My anger was out of control. I was hurting people” (Firas).

Up until I took the *tariqa* (spiritual path), I went through a lot of ups and downs in my life which were mostly really bad, really low that I thought I would never go through. Felt lost until I went to Jordan. I knew I had to fill myself with something, and I tried everything possible that I knew I could try, and the only thing I didn't try was trying to get closer to God. (Laila)

Desperation leads one to cover up what one feels and wants, but cannot name. Disbelief, *Kufir*, comes from the root word meaning “to cover.” The participants all in some form or another were involved in activities that delude the mind into thinking it could forget or ignore the secret that we wanted to know. The *sirr*, secret, is an individual's center of consciousness, the source of an individual's being. At this mysterious point, the individual comes into contact with that which is Holy (Godlas, 2003). Some lose themselves in activism, some lose themselves in sex, drugs and alcohol, and some just consume material things, and define themselves by it. All of us experienced each of these as a means of filling a void. However, because we did not know the nature of the void, it consumed us greater: “It...took me down or wore me out, or drained me or when I woke up made me feel like crap. [It was a constant] chipping at my shoulder, breaking me down.” And they, like myself, wanted out:

Being in America, especially the past 5 years, I don't know if it is my experiences with American style of living...people doing what they want to do, people going out and partying...it really rubbed me in the wrong way and tore me down and made me into bitter, nasty...I resented everything, I hated everything, everyone. I was social but in reality I did not like the people I was socializing with. And I always felt like something was wrong. (Laila)

The nature of the soul is that it does not get worn down. It is continually trying to focus away from me and turn to self. It is seeking a harmonious remembrance of Home.

The soul in calling away from “me”, even uses our self absorption to bring about self awareness:

Jung explains that when we meet something of the shadow in another, we often feel repulsed, but that is because we are confronting something in ourselves that we find objectionable, something with which we ourselves struggle, an something that contains qualities valuable to the soul. The negative image we have of narcissism may indicate that self-preoccupation contains something we need so badly that it is surrounded with negative connotations. (Moore, 1999, p. 56)

The soul demands attention to its suffering, even if it means increased suffering for self.

It is the soul coping with forgetfulness that brings about a state of emptiness and void.

I don't think I returned to a spiritual path, I feel I was always on a spiritual path but just defined differently...at least as an adult. What led me to seek a tariq specifically? What led to that was experiencing the phenomena of emptiness, a feeling of non-meaning in the religious life I had established for myself. I was trying to establish a life based on the pillars of my religious beliefs, and it didn't seem to have any taste to it, any meaning. It did have a meaning, right path and wrong, but other than intellectually; I could not say how the right path and wrong path felt. I could communicate, that is tell what the right path was, and what the wrong path was, but I could never describe the experience of “Truth,” of “Real” because I had never felt it myself. (Ali)

Ali's experience speaks to the religious, who are trying to do what they know, but still feel unfulfilled in their turning to the Divine. Their turning is partial, and a complete turning is necessary for one cannot sustain holding a boulder only half way up the mountain. You either have to push it over the mountain, reaching the peaks of Divine awareness and falling into His Love. Or you will end up turning, if not falling, back away in despair and isolation. The most dangerous turning is the slow one, where one inches down, losing one advancement at a time. Because you are striving, and the losses are so “small,” you are blinded to how far you have fallen away from your goal. However, Allah is Merciful, and even in falling, we are allowed to turn completely to Him.

Lots of Questions--One Answer

The feeling of “emptiness” and the search for healing is a common human phenomenon and not exclusive to the modern Muslim condition. In typing “emptiness” into a search engine on the web, the first site found was called “The Void and Emptiness Site” which is dedicated to discussing the issues surrounding the topic, from the perspectives of art, science, philosophy and the world’s religions. As an introduction to their links on religion that allows people to “search” for a path in answer to their emptiness, the author says: “In the diverse religions we find expressions of the emptiness. The mystics have resorted often to this symbol to allude to their experience of God or the Absolute” (Ribas, 2000).

The etymology of empty reveals that it originates from the Old English *mettig* meaning at leisure, not occupied, unmarried. In the Buddhist tradition, *sunyata*, emptiness is a means to mystical transcendence (Nordstrom, 1981). When describing emptiness from a Western spiritual understanding, we can understand its meaning as being “at leisure” with caring for the soul. From the Buddhist tradition, emptiness is a means of distancing oneself from an experience, that is, when getting angry, empty one's self of the thoughts and “remove” your self from the situation to see the higher realities.

Emptiness is then a symptom of and a cure for the maladies of the soul. It is a void when referring to the lack of relationship with the Divine, because we know something is missing. Emptiness feels as if it fills us because we feel its symptom of meaninglessness permeate our being. In order to heal, one has to empty one’s self of the “empti-mess” that clutters our understanding of Reality. Emptying one's self comes through educating the mind as well as disciplining the soul:

[Dhikr] helps me cleanse my palate before I taste the wine. Though it is not so much an emptying as much as it is a filling. Because the stuff that gets heaped up on you in life, in reality only hollows you out. *Dhikr* fills the vessel. When you are involved in the *dunya* (material world), it is not “Real” in any sense, so when you fill yourself with it, the vessel remains empty. Basically, when you are engaged in the material world, the material world does not have any “Reality” to it, so when you occupy yourself with it, it is not able to sustain you. (Ali)

The understanding of *sunyata* then comes into play with understanding emptiness in a positive light of being able to transcend the traits/beliefs/ideas that keep us from the Divine. When one reaches *fana*, annihilation of “me” or ego death, it is a complete and ultimate emptying of self through losing oneself in the Divine. You become completely detached from all realities except for the Reality of Allah.

Emptiness as a Void

Persons at the beginning of their path understand emptiness as a void because all they know are the negative feelings that they can only describe as “emptiness.”

Essentially, early in college when I had decided to begin practicing my religion more wholeheartedly than I had previously done, which was nil, I went through a period of several years, two years, where I was praying and doing the things I was supposed to be doing yet still I felt some emptiness and dryness in the faith that I was supposed to be practicing. (Firas)

Firas was uncomfortable with his state and continued searching for answers to his emptiness:

Then in my studies, you know which was Middle Eastern studies and history, I kept coming across a lot of references to *Sufis* and Sufism and *tariqa* and what not. And it sort of interested me so I began reading more and more about it. And I asked people that I knew who I considered to be learned people, asking them questions, you know what is this Sufism, what is this *tariqa* that I keep reading about, hearing about. And most people did not give answers that satisfied me. Most of the stuff was in the negative; you know negative impressions of Sufism. But still, I was very interested and I continued to read because on one hand, one perspective, there was something very attractive about what I was reading, but on the other hand there was something scary about what I was reading.

Laila relates similar experiences with emptiness in being asked to just “do”:

When people said don’t do this and don’t do that, I was like why, I never understood why, and used to think that if I tried this thing, I would feel more fulfilled but I was always empty.

I personally remember asking people why I felt so empty, and no one could tell me how to “fill” myself. In reality, I was filled with emptiness, and what I needed to do was empty myself to make space for the Light of Allah. But it took a lot of searching to be found. I say be found, because I did not find what would help me; it found me through friend. I did not ask the friend for help because I was sick of asking and getting no where. It is disheartening to do what someone tells you will help, but doesn’t. It deepens the hole even further because you start to despair that life is always going to be this way, and some see the only way out is death. It is a craving for death that is enveloped in fear because you don’t know where you are going. You are scared, but too old to cry about it, so it goes inside as well. And you know not to ask any more questions because you know no one has answers, and the cycle compounds the suffering. But there is One who does: “Allah is the Protecting Guardian of those who believe. He brings them out of darkness into light” (Qur’an, 2:257). When one is truly searching, truly seeking, the answers come to you. Or as Estes (in Simpkinson & Simpkinson, 1995) says, “When a student is ready, the teacher appears” (p. 45).

Initially when I started I was interested enough in it that I started attending lectures, went and saw those whirling dervishes, read a lot about Rumi. After college I ended up traveling to Jordan. And still with this interest in mind and hoping in mind that I would find some *Sufis*. Actually I remember the first week I was in Jordan, I made a *dua* (supplication), I remember sitting there making a *dua* asking Allah to show me a *tariqa nadhifa*, a clean path, not distorted...So I went several months in Jordan asking different people I had met did they know any *Sufis*, did they know any dhikr circles like that. And everyone sort of looked at me as if I was crazy. And um...and I forgot about things after three months, I sort of stopped looking. And then one day...friend of mine...said that I lived a few blocks from an American scholar and he asked if I wanted to go and visit

him. Because he told me he was a *faqhi* (scholar of Islamic law), I said no. Two weeks later another family came to visit me they said, “oh you know you live near this American *Sufi*.” So I went back to my friend at school, and said, you know this guy you told me about, is he a *Sufi*. So I was like why don’t we go over there. ...A few days later and I met Sheikh Nuh for the first time. That was probably like November of 1995...Initially I was a little unimpressed because he was a very withdrawn person. There was obviously something very spiritual about him, but very withdrawn. My friend kept asking a lot of *fiqh* (Islamic law) questions; finally at the end of the evening I asked him if he was a *Sufi*. He said no. And he told me that a *Sufi* is one who is at the end of his path and he only hopes and aspires to be one, and so and so forth. I thought, “well at least he is humble.” And I told him a little about myself...and [that] I have always been intrigued by Sufism academically and I would like an opportunity to spend some time with *Sufis*. And he said welcome and...that he would give me a call. And he did a couple of days later and we went to a *dhikr* circle, and that was it for me as far as the beginning of my journey along that path. (Firas)

First and foremost is going to God, taking a step towards him. I didn’t know that Jordan would be the answer; I didn’t know that the *tariq* would be the answer; I didn’t know that Sheikh Nuh would be the answer to my problems. But God sent him to me because I asked God to help me when I was feeling low. Up until I took the *tariqa*, I went through a lot of ups and downs in my life which were mostly really bad, really low that I thought I would never go through. Felt lost until I went to Jordan. I knew I had to fill myself with something, and I tried everything possible that I knew I could try, and the only thing I didn’t try was trying to get closer to God. When I went to Jordan, I heard about for a week what Sheikh Nuh was saying and what the *tariq* could do for my life, and I saw all the people around me, I saw how all of them were very much fulfilled just by being in the *tariqa* and learning about God and learning about spirituality and learning about how to become closer, how to love God. Just the first couple of days made me feel better, just hearing them talk about Allah SWT. I just took it based on a couple of days of being in the whole system, how they lived, you know. (Laila)

The idea of taking on a spiritual mentor was something that was not alien to me, but something new. It was a departure from the religious life I had established from myself. Spending time amongst travelers on the path convinced me that there was something about them that set them apart from everybody, sense of peace emanating from them, a peace with one’s environment as well as peace with one’s self. Being among them I felt myself wanting...I realized that they had secured for themselves, what is at the end of all religious practices and I observed that they radiated it towards others around them. And so, you know, I began to realize what one’s life should entail. In other words, the purpose of religious practice became aware to me, that is to become one who radiates the Real. The imperative for me was to find an appropriate mentor. The decision to take this path was that it was in line with my cultural disposition and linguistic

disposition...and my intellectual sensibilities. [Name excluded] told me about his experiences, and there was a feeling of sort of relief that occurred that there was someone going to the same struggles I was, and arriving at the same conclusions; an excitedness that there was an answer awaiting us. He told me there was a spiritual teacher and he was a representative of classical position of Islamic knowledge and science, and that he was from the west, and you know that he had lived overseas for decades and had become a representative of the path: authorized to take on students. Excitation and curiosity led me to inquire about him further and go and visit him. I sat with the sheikh, I asked him several questions, I really did not want answers, I wanted just to be in his presence. I gave him my hand, and he recited over it, and then gave me congratulations, and it was finished. It was as if I had won something. (Ali)

Jordan, the country, is important here only because that is where the teacher resides. Firas tells of how he stumbled across the path through wandering, guided by his prayer, “Allah to show me a *tariqa nadhifa*, a clean path...not distorted.” In the second story, Laila only upon turning to Allah was guided to knowing what to do and where to find help: “...God sent him to me because I asked God to help me when I was feeling low.” It is perhaps the first lesson in the path...developing one’s trust in Allah and one’s need of Allah, to become of those who, “depend on guidance from their Lord. These are the successful” (Qur’an, 2.5). It is a means to realize that, “My success is only through Allah” (Qur’an, 11.88). And Allah promises:

I am as My servant thinks I am. I am with him when he makes mention of Me. If he makes mention of Me to himself, I make mention of him to Myself; and if he makes mention of Me in an assembly, I make mention of him in an assembly better than it. And if he draws near to Me an arm's length, I draw near to him a fathom's length. And if he comes to Me walking, I go to him at speed. (Ibrahim & Johnson-Davies, 2003)

Ali knew he wanted and needed a path through his experiences with those traveling to Allah. He was searching for the right teacher, with one whom he could connect:

Upon meeting him, the same feeling returned to me when I had first met people like him. The difference this time was that some one who talked to me in my own language [English], and was raised here [United States] like me, and would be able to understand my experiences of growing up here. It is more comfortable to be with a person who is where you want to be, and who probably traveled the same root you will have to travel. In reality I think the ideal sheikh would have been a person who was a minority raised in America. That would help with understanding the struggles I had to face and am facing. In reality though, he probably never did fit in here. He reminded me of my roommate who was always the odd ball out [because of his religious concerns]. He probably felt isolated, and set apart from everyone else because of his spiritual concerns. Although he is not racial apart, but he is still an outsider in this society concerned with the material. I guess he is similar to me in that way, not spiritually necessarily, but because being different for me also included my religion. What confirmed that for me was when Sheikh Nuh said that when he is amongst his biological family he feels like he is amongst strangers. When he is amongst *darawish* [travelers on the path], he feels like he is amongst family. (Ali)

Ali felt like he had won something when he joined the *tariq* and took Sheikh Nuh as his teacher. Did he feel it was a prize for his diligent searching? Or was it that he came in first in the race against emptiness? What Ali, Firas and Laila, did prevail in is discovering the remedy for healing the maladies of their souls.

Healing the Emptiness

It is the promise from Allah: “If he draws near to Me an arm's length, I draw near to him a fathom's length. And if he comes to Me walking, I go to him at speed” that keeps one from despairing. This re-assures the echo of the soul, who knows this from its creation in the presence of *Al-Wali*, the Protecting Friend. Even though one may not know that help is on the way, hope in this promise keeps one trying. It is a deeper knowing of remembering, or re-membering, putting things together, and finally going back to a better place. Healing may be the wrong word to use because it connotes that there are scars. But spiritual healing takes you back to where your remembering is...it does not bring the remembering forward to the where the hurt is. It is as if it never

happened, spiritually. As Laila comments, “It rebuilt my whole soul. It made me feel like a kid again basically.”

Returning to Self

“..[S]elf-ignorance is cosmic ignorance, for the cosmos is the separation of the human creature, and the human creature is the gatheredness of the cosmic multiplicity” (Bewley, 2003). When one turns to the *Al-Khaliq*, The Creator, one re-members who they Really are:

When I went to Jordan, within days of joining the *tariqa*, I felt like I was being myself, how I used to be. When I would laugh...oh my God, I have not heard that laughter in so long, and I ached to laugh, and slowly I became a more content person...I loved myself again basically. (Laila)

It is a re-turning to our Originator that we find our primordial self. This re-membering also re-establishes the relationship with *As-Salaam*, *Al-Muhaymin*, The Source of Peace, The Protector:

He has become something I never thought God could be. When I am lonely and sad, He is the one I go to. There is no one else in the world. He is Everything important in my life. If I didn't have anything, it doesn't matter because I know I have him. I never feel like I am at a loss. I never feel doomed. I always know there is hope. God is eternal, ultimate, God is God. It makes me feel elation...happiness. Safe. (Laila)

Once in the shelter of Allah, the soul it transformed from a source of agitation to a source of tranquility. Travel to the Divine is then possible. And “[t]he journey inward becomes an ongoing process that leads outward to a more complete understanding of the human condition (Krall, 1988, p. 478):

It gave me an understanding about life that I always craved, always needed. About religion, about everything I wanted to be. (Laila)

It is only through the guidance that we find such realities. “By guidance I mean the guidance of Allah as the Prophet Ibrahim said, ‘I am going to my Lord, and He will guide me’ (37:99)” (al-Iskandari, 2003).

Transformation

One way the journey inward is manifested on the outward, is through a more complete understanding of the world. Listening changes moves beyond the physical activity of sound waves bouncing off the eardrum, to a state of being in rhythm with creation. It feels as if you come to know things at a higher level, not just spiritually, but intellectually as well.

Traveling through life is like being on a train. You are in a seat, just sitting there, absorbed in “me.” Then, you get up, start looking around, noticing you are on a train, moving fast, but you don’t know where to. But you want to find out. The train is going fast and there doesn’t seem to be any stops along the way. You start searching for a way out of the train. You walk around, and notice others who are traveling with you. You ask, but most people just sit in their seats, absorb in their thoughts. They are the ones who do answer, don’t satisfy your need to know. No one really seems to care either. They just seem to be happy to be on the train, absorbed in themselves. You see no one is going to help, so you look around to find a way out, but to no avail. Then you look up, and the answer has been there all along: The emergency exit.

You stand on the seat and grab hold of the opening and two hands grab yours and pull you up through the entry to the top of the passenger car. The hands belong to a fellow traveler who had found their way out as well. You stand strong against the wind, and it is liberating. You see others on the cars adjacent to you, and then suddenly, a strong wind comes and lifts you into the air. You travel higher and higher, and you don’t

fear falling; you know you are safe. As you travel higher, you count 10 cars, 20, 50, 1000, till there are so many in sight you have to stop counting. The engine in front moves faster and faster, not to be stopped till it reaches its destination. You look beyond the engine to the horizon and know where you are going; you finally grasp the Reality of it all.

We are all on the train of life, moving along to the end of time. Transcending the physical boundaries of the train, our intellect is informed of higher Realities and moves towards what is called the *aql-i kulli*, Universal Intellect: “The intellect that's entirely pure and free of ego, the ‘Intellect of the intellect.’ It can discern the meaning hidden within every form, and thus it sees things as they truly are”(Godlas, 2003).

I see things on a totally different level that I never thought existed. Before, easy going...and maybe it was because I never really believed in anything, but now since I have my core, my heart is into something, I know what I want, I know what I need, listening has becoming easier and understanding what they are saying. Before, I was lost, I would not care...it is all good. (Laila)

Describing his feelings about living in this world for this world, Ali echoes Laila's experience:

It is basically emptiness, it is missing the flame, it is an illusion, I don't know how to describe it...it is unhappiness. I have not felt unhappiness because...actually I have at times and it usually comes after I have excessively engaged myself with that which is not real.

And he compares it with living to reach Allah:

Blissfulness, I had at times as well. Being at bliss, means free from yearning. Because that is the chronic problem is that we are yearning. In an effort to quench this thirst, we try to hold on the things. If you try to hold on to things that are not real, it will make the yearning worse. When you hold onto things, it helps you forget your yearning, but it leaves you more empty than before. Lose that yearning, you are in bliss, when you lose that you are in the presence of the Real. After prayer, I have experienced this, at times. (Ali)

Knowing the purpose of life, why we are here, what we have to do, and what in the End will become of us is strengthening:

I used to be scared of death. I feared it so much. But each day, each prayer, each *dua* (supplication), I am getting closer to being a better person. I have an aim...to get closer to God. Before it was making money, or finding a rich husband. (Laila)

And with strength from *Al-Qawi*, The Most Strong, comes a sense of control over ones life, because one understands control lies only with *Al-Aziz*, *Al-Hakeem*, The Mighty, The Wise. It is through giving oneself up totally to *Al-Wadud*, *Al-Wakeel*, The Loving, The Trustee, that you find your self free of worries:

What I am today is not what I wanted to be last year. I am a completely different person. My goals have changed upside down. But I am also a much happier person, much more content. (Laila)

The reality of this world never escapes you however, because if it does, then you are lost again. It is through understanding how to be in this world, that you come to know *Al Batin*, *Ad-Dhahir*, The Hidden, The Manifest:

You experience reality day by day. But the reality is that, you like to think that you are existing on some different level of reality. But unfortunately the reality is that you are still stuck in this world, still stuck moving along hoping to pay your bills, provide for your family, your job at work, the difference being now that you know that's not an end, it is just a means to an ultimate reality, that is beginningless eternality. And a lot of times you can just talk about it, but in the end it doesn't matter, none of these things really matter. All that matters that you do the best you can, do it in a *halal* (blessed and allowed) way and hope you know that you will have an opportunity to reach these states so that you can experience something different. But I would be lying to say that I have experienced those things. I would like to think that I have experienced moments of them where you can see there is something really there that is worth giving up everything for. Not caring about anything. Beforehand, if you told me that I would even have in my mind giving up all this *dunya* and going off to Jordan or Syria and just living a simple life of just prayer and *dhikr*, If you told me about 5 years ago, that I would contemplate such a thing, I would say you are crazy. Whereas for me, that is a longing now. (Firas)

Traveling on top of the train is harder than sitting inside in your nice cozy seat. Firas knows this, that life in the path to Allah will be a struggle. Yet Firas, Ali, Laila and

myself, gladly found and accept this gift from Allah. It is the wind you have to stand strong against, but it is also the wind that will take you to flight. Like the diamond, only under pressure is the coal transformed.

Experiencing Dhikr

Dhikr's purpose is to purify one's being and bring it into complete and total awareness of the Divine: to "encounter the Truth in everything with clarity" (Al-Iskandari). What is the experience of doing *dhikr* on a daily basis? Firas shares:

One, how it makes you feel. Because it brings your focus much better, when we do it consistently week after week, on top of your *wird* (daily litany) and everything else, and if you are consistent, you definitely find focus in your life, in your prayers. I found the biggest benefit from it, it enhances your prayers. Without it, your prayers become more empty, but for me, the *dhikr* has been the biggest building block for a more complete prayer, and ever since I have been doing *dhikr*, focus during the *Salat* (ritual prayer performed 5 times a day) has never been a problem. I am able to focus; I am able to be focused on my *Salat* predominately in the sense that most of my *Salat* I am in focus rather than not in focus on Allah SWT. Where before, there was no such thing as focus, it was [in humorous voice] hey I am moving up and down...and that is it. And for me, it got to the point when I first started doing *dhikr*, I almost felt guilty because I looked more forward to the *dhikr* than to the *Salat*. But I realized what was happening there, what was happening there was that I was being prepared for the prayer. (Firas)

The most important aspect of ritual worship are the daily prayers. The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him), in a *Hadith Qudsi* (Words of Allah related by the Prophet) said:

"Allah (mighty and sublime be He) says: 'The first of his actions for which a servant of Allah will be held accountable on the Day of Resurrection will be his prayers.' If they are in order, then he will have prospered and succeeded; and if they are wanting, then he will have failed and lost. If there is something defective in his obligatory prayers, the Lord (glorified and exalted be He) will say: 'See if My servant has any supererogatory prayers with which may be completed that which was defective in his obligatory prayers.' Then the rest of his actions will be judged in like fashion." (Ibrahim & Johnson-Davies, 2003)

Ritual prayers, *Salat*, are offered 5 times a day. Beyond the physical movement, the goal is to “see” Allah as if He is before you, that is, have spiritual awareness of the Divine. Prayer is communication with the Divine, and a means of bring the Divine into our lives, and subsequently removing ourselves from the mundane in our lives through immersing ourselves in Him. However, if you ask most youth, even though they know intellectually the importance of prayer, and they desire to have this awareness they hear so much about, for most prayer is just movement. I personally found it burdensome and tried to get it over with quickly, fitting it into my schedule where I could. For many years I prayed sporadically because it was bothersome. But after doing *dhikr*, things changed. It became easy and I looked forward to prayer. I still desire awareness, and I feel I am moving toward it. I feel it’s essentiality in my life, beyond just knowing that it is a sin not to. It makes prayer what it is supposed to be, a communion with the Divine:

The first time I did a *Latifiyyah*, I had done several *Hadras* (group *dhikr* with movement) at that point, but never *Latiffiyah* (group *dhikr* reciting Allah’s name ‘Ya Latif’, the Subtly Kind). Sheikh Nuh invited us over and we did *Latifiyyah* and we went to *Isha* (last prayer of the day) prayer at the mosque. And I remember saying the *takbir* (first movement in prayer) and then the *salam* (last movement in prayer), it was the only time, up to this day, I was totally, totally unconscious of my prayer, in the sense I was just praying, I was not aware of anything else. Nothing else entered my mind during the prayer, and I was walking away, thinking, oh my gosh, this is how it is supposed to be. I never have had a good prayer as that to this day. I understood this is the purpose of the *dhikr*. So now the prayer is something you look forward to. You find that if you miss a *dhikr*, *wird* (daily litany), making it up, and becoming lax, you immediately see it in your prayers. All of a sudden, your prayers are not as focused as before. (Firas)

The effects of *dhikr* are not only found within acts of worship, such as the *dhikr* itself or the *Salat*. It is a way of re-turning, that is once again turning, to original self and to Allah:

For me, it is a sort of a clearing away of all the baggage that is put on myself day in and day out. It was a retreat from the heavy ugliness of the material reality around us. The baggage wears me out, it wears me down. It causes me to become exasperated. Clearing away: it is a reorientation of mind to the appropriate

concerns that a human person should occupy himself with. Probably one of the best things the dhikr has done is that it has given insight into my limitations and what I can become. I think *dhikr* enhances your prayers, it reorients you. Prayer for me before was, *raison d`etre*, reason for being before. Prayer was my reason for being, and by prayer I mean calling upon and praising the Divine at an intellectual level. But I did not enjoy it as much when I was not making *dhikr*. I was not giving its due. (Ali)

Your soul is nourished by the *dhikr* through the blessings of the One you are praising and calling on, Allah:

As soon as I started doing my *wird* (daily litany) and doing my *dhikr*, I was building myself. When I don't do *dhikr*, I feel a loss. It feeds my soul, it is food for me, it is my medicine. In a sense that I know that if I constantly remember God throughout the day, it puts me in my place, it reminds me about what is important otherwise I would get lost again in the materialistic world or this is what I want....and I know in reality it is not what I need. Each day that goes by, fuels me, energized, keeps me going. (Laila)

Dhikr makes traveling to Allah easy. The journey itself is difficult, but in the end it is always rewarding. Unlike travels of the blind to the bounties Allah has bestowed upon them, those who show their gratitude through remembrance, are remembered and loved by the Beloved.

Challenges on the Journey

The reference to "building" is significant. For traveling on the path is not a one time high that miraculously comes about. It is a constant struggle, referred to as the greatest *jihad*. This understanding of the word *jihad* is derived from the Hadith of the Prophet, in which he said to Muslims returning from a battle, "You have returned from the lesser struggle to the greater struggle." And he was asked, "What is the greater struggle?" He answered, "The struggle against one's *nafs* (ego), which is between the two sides of your body" (Godlas, 2000).

Jihad comes from the root word *jahada* meaning to endeavor, strive, labor, take pains, put out, to overwork, overtax, fatigue. *Ijtihad* means effort, exertion, application and industry as well as independent judgment in a legal or theological question. *Mujtahid* means diligent as well as legalist formulating independent decisions in a legal or theological question. *Mujhid* means strenuous, exacting, trying, grueling, exhausted (Cowan, 1976, pp. 142-3). "It means that one fully exerts himself and struggles with himself to serve his Lord, as well as to perfect his interaction with others. This is the general and comprehensive meaning of *jihad*" (Al-Jifry, 2003).

What are we striving against? Dr. Godlas (2003) comments on the complexities of the ego in "Sufism: Obstacles on the Path":

The difficulties in following the path or obstacles to getting closer to God derive primarily from one's self or ego (*nafs*). In other words, it can be said that if one is not recognizing or experiencing God's "closeness" or presence, the responsibility for this condition lies with one's own self. Some of the gross effects of the dominance of the *nafs* are that one may become overwhelmed by the need to gratify desires such as anger, lust, and the many addictions that afflict us. Other gross effects are that one may become dominated by states of consciousness such as anxiety, boredom, regret, depression, and self-pity-- so that one feels like a powerless victim or prisoner tortured within one's own mind.

In removing blameworthy traits, you try to re-turn to a praiseworthy state: do all that is good in this world; that is "be" someone who is of benefit to themselves and others, and from whom no harm comes. It is not as easy as saying okay, I am going to stop getting angry and hurting people. It takes knowledge from those who have traveled before you, and already did it, and it takes Divine help. And that is where *dhikr* comes in. *Dhikr* is the means of purifying the heart.

Constant struggle means that it is a daily fight, and knowing that it is not going to be over till one physically leaves this earth. The goal is Allah, but it is not an end because

Allah is endlessly eternal. It is hard and you sometimes back track. But you can't give up because you know it is the nature of traveling to sometimes go off course. The etymology of travel means, "to journey," from *travaillen*, but it originally means, "to toil, labor" from *travail*. "The semantic development may have been via the notion of 'go on a difficult journey'" (Harper, 2000). This understanding really speaks to the nature of spiritual traveling.

You learn and move on, trying, just trying to keep going. *Dhikr* helps you get over the hill each time it seems hopeless, and through invoking *Al-Basir*, *Al-Karim*, The All-Seeing, The Generous, one is able to "see" more of the landscape of Reality, helping you traverse safely. Nonetheless, it is always a struggle. As one thing gets easy, you are made aware of more of the ego confront. You build, maintain, build, grow, build, and build. You "see" as you move up, more and more of the ground from which you have come; to keep you grounded and to keep from falling down, you look up, and see how far you still have to go. The mortar and bricks of the building are *dhikr* and *wird* (daily litany). Once you accept life is a struggle, you get over the feeling of being overwhelmed and you know what you have to do. Firas shares his struggles:

...It is a struggle to figure out where I fit in, in terms of being drawn to a life of spirituality or struggling to make that life of spirituality here in this reality, in this world, in the West, which is a lot tougher. I see a lot of people who go off to Jordan and Syria, who benefit immediately and go very far distances in a very short period of time. I wonder about myself. What is preventing me from gaining those insights? You know. So that has been a struggle, in terms of figuring out what my role is. Whether or not that is a view of reality, that's my reality. In terms of how I deal with that. In terms of how I deal with my family who don't necessarily see eye to eye with what my aspirations are, that has been a struggle. On one hand you just want to give up everything and go and be with my Lord. You know. But the struggle is that that is a cop out as well because you can't neglect your responsibilities because that is your reality. That is the lot you have been dealt. Dealing with those things have been an ongoing struggle. I feel...sometimes I make excuses for myself, because you can keep saying it is

because of this, because of that that I am not getting anywhere. But at the end of the day, if it is really worth it to you will do what it takes. And ultimately you can look back...at least for my perspective; I can see it is that way. For some reason or another, my unhappiness with my own progression, at least I am aware of the reasons behind it so I can only blame myself, I can't blame anyone else. I make excuses, But I know that I make... "it's a struggle in the west, you know, the family," this and this and that...[mockingly] but end of the day I know its only me. So if I had *dhouk*, the taste enough for it, then I would do it regardless of my circumstances. Unfortunately there are very few people created like that. (Firas)

Ali shares the same concerns revolving around family, and keeping focus on what one has to do to travel to Allah:

The biggest difficulty is maintaining the energy and enthusiasm necessary to sustain the path. Because even though there is a hollowness in filling yourself with that which is not Real, there is a still an immediate gratification in doing it. On the other hand, the gratification on the spiritual path does not manifest till you come full circle. Maintaining the drive to see the Reality of the end of each course you could take: one is blissfulness, the other is essentially loss. Responsibilities towards family are another concern. It is actually a cop out. Just the desire for your immediate appetite...for example, wanting things and not being able to detach yourself from thing that will probably be harmful in some way. Detaching, meaning to remove concerns except for the One thing worthy of your concerns, and to make all your concerns be subordinate to Him. It is sort of a feeling of liberation; it is an empowering feeling because you recognize you don't need something, when once you were dependent on it. So it gives you hope that if I can get rid of this dependence, then I can perhaps aspire to be dependent on only the One worthy of my dependence. (Ali)

Firas and Ali both know that the path they chose was not meant to be easy. The easy way is to give in to one's the ego and it's desires. It is the end of the paths that they focus on to stay committed. Like Pinocchio, they know the shiny, bright surface the material world veils the hollow, dark, cold core that awaits all those who indulge in its pleasures. The light of Allah does not shine there. Similarly for the spiritless-religious, actions are empty, without *Ihsan*, perfection, that only comes from a relationship with the soul and its Creator. It His warm embrace that they seek in the path they have chosen and nothing less.

In Need of Companions

Any journey is made easier and more pleasant with friends. Traveling to Allah is no different. *Suhba*, a gathering of friends, is a means of connecting with and learning from those who have similar struggles and goals. *Suhba* can mean a formal gathering one attends for the sake of learning from a teacher, or it can be the meeting of friends on the path, for lunch. A weekly *suhba* occurs called the *Latifiyyah* in which *Ya Latif*, Oh Subtly Kind, one of the Names of Allah, is repeated 1000 times. This coming together to remember Allah is unifying at the both the physical and spiritual levels. I look forward to the weekly gatherings as an anchor in life, something to hold me to the path. It is also a remembering of the vow I took to pursue the path to Allah.

On deeper level, the spiritual state of a person affects your closeness to Allah. In the presence of those who are *awliya*, friends of Allah, I become more committed and determined to travel quickly and flawlessly. At the same time, my being is calmed and my heart softened. I feel lighter, as if heavy obstacles had been lifted off my back and out of my way. Their love of Allah radiates from every aspect of their being, and increases my love. At times I feel like crying when they speak. I always seek their presence and feel a void when they are not around. At a *suhba* with them, all you have to do is be in their presence to benefit. The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him), in a *Hadith Qudsi* (Words of Allah related by the Prophet) said:

Allah (glorified and exalted be He) has supernumerary angels who rove about seeking out gatherings in which Allah's name is being invoked: they sit with them and fold their wings round each other, filling in that which is between them and between the lowest heaven. When [the people in the gathering] depart, [the

angels] ascend and rise up to heaven." He (the Prophet - peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: "Then Allah (mighty and sublime be He) asks them - [though] He is most knowing about them: 'From where have you come?' And they say: 'We have come from some servants of Yours on Earth: they were glorifying You (*Subhana llah*), exalting you (*Allahu akbar*), witnessing that there is no god but You (*La ilaha illa llah*), praising You (*Al-Hamdu lillah*), and asking [favours] of You.' He says: 'And what do they ask of Me?' They say: 'They ask of You Your Paradise.' He says: 'And have they seen My Paradise?' They say: 'No, O Lord.' He says: 'And how would it be were they to have seen My Paradise!' They say: 'And they ask protection of You.' He says: 'From what do they ask protection of Me?' They say: 'From Your Hell-fire, O Lord.' He says: 'And have they seen My Hell-fire?' They say: 'No.' He says: 'And how would it be were they to have seen My Hell-fire!' They say: 'And they ask for Your forgiveness.'" He (the Prophet - peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: "Then He says: 'I have forgiven them and I have bestowed upon them what they have asked for, and I have granted them sanctuary from that from which they asked protection.'" He (the Prophet - peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: "They say: 'O Lord, among them is So-and-so, a much sinning servant, who was merely passing by and sat down with them.'" He (the Prophet - peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: "And He says: 'And to him [too] I have given forgiveness: he who sits with such people shall not suffer.'" (Ibrahim & Johnson-Davies, 2003).

The Teacher

He advises me, instructs me, most importantly he shows me with self; he is a living, breathing example. Living in the sense that he has that "Reality," that realness to him that is the end goal. He teaches me just by his presence. He for me is the exact opposite of the apparent reality around us. When I am around him, I am transported to a different dimension where you are removed from your day to day heedlessness and your focus is on the One, the Real. It becomes much less difficult to act according to that principle. (Ali)

The teacher or guide is someone in the physical realm that has had direct contact with the Divine. He is the student's link to the past through the chain of transmission of knowledge that goes through all the great scholars, to the Prophet, and finally to Allah. And it is a link to future travels to Allah. I feel safe in turning to Sheikh Nuh for guidance because I can see, in both a physical and spiritual sense, that Allah has guided him. He understands without you even saying or asking. Firas experienced this when he found himself struggling with his lack of progress on the path:

I remember last year I was in Jordan, and I had a lot of doubts in my head, where my place was spiritually, and where I should be at this point after being in the *tariqa* (spiritual path) for five years and thinking to myself that I have not gone anywhere, I have not done anything, I am not fit to be a Sufi so why am I even pretending I ever will be one. I should just give it up and go back and go do what I gotta do. You know, enrich myself and forget about all of this. I had a lot of these issues in my mind. So I went to Jordan and I was walking with Sheikh Nuh and Sidi Ashruf (a friend). And he started talking to Sidi Ashruf (a friend) who was next to me. He started talking about how the spiritual path takes a lot of work. “The spiritual path is a lot of work. Unfortunately people in the West already have a lot of work.” You know. “For these people the most important thing for them is there *wird*. Being steadfast on the *wird* and never leaving the *wird* and keep moving.” And he is like, and “for these people you have to look at them not in terms of 1 year or 5 years, you have to look at them 25 years down the line. When you see somebody who has said his *wird* for 25 years and show me a Muslim without a *wird* for 25 years, you will see two different people, two very different people.” And so it is a matter of years and years. So I took away from that, so okay for some people they can go to Syria, they can go to Jordan and advance very very quickly because of their circumstances, because of their ability to give up everything and do whatever it takes, and for other people they can still reach those *states* but it will take longer. You know. But that does not mean you give up, it just means you have to have patience. So I took away from that okay I am in it for the long haul. Sheikh Nuh looked at me, and his exact words were, “InshaAllah you will be just like your grandfather...you will be better than your grandfather...you will be an old man with a long *mesbaha* (*dhikr* beads, similar to rosary beads), you will be better than your grandfather.” And so I realized that I have to look at this like how I am going to be in old age and not just how I am now. So that gave me some comfort in light of the impatience on my behalf. Even though I never asked him the question. He just answered my thoughts.

Firas was on the point of despair, and Sheikh Nuh, through his knowing, was able to guide him to see his potential. He has experience with his own travels and the travels of this other students, but it is an intuitive knowing that runs deep in his voice that comforts you. You know he is not just saying it, he knows it to be true, and in turn you believe it.

The participants in this exploration of the experience of turning to a spiritual path and healing the emptiness, had to find answers on their own. In my discussions around the concerns of the soul, themes were uncovered in relation to traveling on a spiritual path. How do these themes about spiritual traveling affect pedagogy? How does

schooling affect the spiritual growth of children? Is home schooling a healthier response for prevention of the maladies of the soul? In a school situation, what needs to change for true spiritual transformation to occur? What does transformation look like? We can't measure spirituality, so how do we as educators know if the students are "spiritual"? Is it the responsibility of educators to make sure that spiritual growth occurs, as it is their responsibility for intellectual growth? What critical reflections are necessary for spiritual growth? The next section will explore the implications of the understandings we have gathered, and answer some of the questions pertaining to the soul, emptiness and prevention.

SECTION 4: THE SOUL, EMPTINESS, AND PREVENTION: IMPLICATIONS FOR PEDAGOGY

Education of Muslim youth is a complex dialectic of spiritual and intellectual efforts in the context of societal, parental and institutional expectations. Islamic education functions for the most part in the public school context, and even for those schools who are based on alternative philosophies, they still exist and function as part of the unexamined Modern and Postmodern construct. What is needed essentially

...is a call to moral, intellectual, and spiritual exertion. A Muslim school outside the context of active practice of the *deen* is an oxymoron. Moral exertion means wresting responsibility away from the system and taking it back into one's own hands. It means taking responsibility for we spend our time and our money. It will necessarily involve disengaging from the larger society to some extent. It means wanting for your brother what you want for yourself, and therefore engaging them in a meaningful way in the process of forging community. (Coburn, 2001, p. 9)

The *deen* (way of life) Coburn necessitates as essential for Islamic education, whether it be at home or in a school setting, encompasses three important themes:

- Wholistic understanding of Islam as a way of life, as a historical reality and as a dominant philosophy;
- Critical perspectives necessary for understanding society in which we live, including the ontological and epistemological foundations that inform our philosophies and understandings;
- Addressing specifically the spiritual needs of the students through instruction as well as through spiritual practice, *dhikr*.

As with everything in a Muslims life, we will first explore the religious foundations to start building an intellectual grounding for Islamic spiritual pedagogy.

Wholistic Understanding of Islam

The Muslim youth in America have been cut off from their rich history and the traditional understandings as discussed by Nasr (1994), Murad (2001), and Coburn (2001). The major unifying organizations and movements in America, including the

establishment of Islamic schools have been based on Modern interpretations of Islam. These interpretations minimize the soul to an entity that will be dealt with in the after life and reduced the term heart simply to a pumping machine. Identity construction revolves around activism in youth groups that focuses on teaching Modern Islam. So for those who are aware of the need for a positive environment and support, the experience for many turns out to be negative as well. For those who rejected the Muslim aspect of their identity, identity construction relies heavily on popular media, so once again Modern as well as Postmodern are influences. Only recently, through the work of Western converts such as Hamza Yusef Hanson, Nuh Keller, Abdul Hakim Murad, and Zaid Shakir, who have studied the sciences of Islam from a traditional perspective, and those such as Dr. Seyyed Hossein Nasr who brought this understanding with him to America, has there been an answer to the problem of the outwardly based “neo-Islam” (Murad, 2001).

Fundamentalism

“The tragedy of fundamentalism in any context is its capacity to freeze life into a solid cube of meaning” (Moore, 1999, p.236). Fundamentalist forces in Islamic history have dismembered Islam and thrown away the soul. It is time for re-membering. Our rich heritage has the answers for us; in turning to the “middle way” defined by sophisticated classical consensus we can fulfill our responsibility of providing education that is intellectually as well as spiritually meaningful. Abdul Hakim Murad (2001) in his article, “Islamic Spirituality: The Forgotten Revolution”:

But it [middle way] can only be retrieved when we improve the state of our hearts, and fill them with the Islamic virtues of affection, respect, tolerance and reconciliation. This inner reform, which is the traditional competence of Sufism, is a precondition for the restoration of unity in the Islamic movement. The alternative is likely to be continued, and agonizing, failure.

Inner Reform

Inner reform and re-membering unifies the self in the One. It leads to an understanding that everything exists through Allah and is a manifestation of the Divine names and attributes. Sheikha Aisha Bewley (Sheikha refers to her scholarship in the Islamic sciences) traveled to Islam through her study of Western philosophy and the Buddhist tradition. She is now a leading scholar of Islam and provides a critical perspective of the Modern construction of knowledge:

Schizophrenia – split identity – was the insanity of the industrial culture. Autism is the insanity of the current culture – that is, the human creature has been reduced to an automaton, to a totally conditioned machine. The autistic child echoes back to the parents their heartless abdication of their own humanity, the numbness of their feelings and the deadness of their own inwardness. The parents, who have become like the automatic process they live by and worship, find that their own offspring, their hidden secret, has from within its deep infantile awareness opted to behave like the machine the parents worship in one last desperate bid for recognition. For without recognition there is no making sense of the cognitive process itself on which life is founded.

As an answer to the “self” crisis, she calls for the unification of all knowledge through the divine knowledge revealed through the Qur'an:

The Qur'anic teaching calls to an enlightened view of cosmic and cognitive realities. A Qur'anic science would create a completely new framework and a new cognitive experience as it already has done in the past. There are much higher social and personal goals possible within the framework of the knowledge patternings of the Qur'an than in the primitive improvisational amoebic jelly of scientific 'laws'. The unified patterning theory of Islamic Science belongs to existence, not to a hastily improvised mathematical oratorio. It was from this direct cosmic material that Ibn Sina and Al-Jabir [renowned Muslim scientists] worked. (Bewley, 2000)

She calls for a study of these scholars and a redirection in the teaching of all knowledge, especially science, which has relegated the Source of all its studies, Allah, to a secondary role. Once we understand the Unity that exists in creation, and turn to the “parameters of knowledge laid down in the Qur'an, man may well embark on a completely new course of

knowledge, action and discovery, for in this Qur'anic method, the discovery and the discoverer are not separate. They cannot be.” (Bewley, 1974).

Cultivating Critical Understandings

Critique is a means to transformation; where and if it moves us depends on our listening and our “grounding.” If we truly are to understand the society in which we live and its affects on the soul, we need to develop a critical perspective within our discussions of education. Michael Apple, a leading curriculum theorist notes:

...one of the fundamental conditions of emancipation is the ability to “see” the actual functioning of institutions in all their positive and negative complexity, to assist others (and to let them assist us) in “remembering” the possibilities of spontaneity, choice and more equal models of control. (in Grundy, 1987, p.124)

Emancipation

The idea of emancipation is important here. The *zeitgeist*, “the spirit of the times” is a compilation of the philosophies and ideologies that encompass the thought of an era. Heidegger’s concept of “thrown-ness” says that all of what is inherently part of the *zeitgeist*, including foundational epistemological and ontological concerns, affects our “grounding” whether we are aware of it or not. And it is not all good. Take for example Nihilism:

Nihilism is the belief that all values are baseless and that nothing can be known or communicated. Nihilism’s impact on the culture and values of the 20th century has been pervasive, its apocalyptic tenor spawning a mood of gloom and a good deal of anxiety, anger, and terror. Friedrich Nietzsche argued that its corrosive effects would eventually destroy all moral, religious, and metaphysical convictions and precipitate the greatest crisis in human history. In the 20th century, nihilistic themes--epistemological failure, value destruction, and cosmic purposelessness--have preoccupied artists, social critics, and philosophers. (Pratt, 2001)

Nihilism has had its effects on Islamic thought in the past century as well. Muslim youth have not even been taught that it exists, let alone the means by which to counter its effects, which is triple fold at this point: society, school and Islamic education. Anas Coburn's (2000) paper, Muslim Identity in Postmodern America, provides an introduction to the philosophies that inform our beings as well as provides examples of their manifestation. Additionally, Dr. Nasr's (1994) book, A Young Muslim's Guide to the Modern World, is an attempt at providing the Islamic perspective to help Muslim youth understand what they are dealing with. He provides an overview of Islamic history, a brief summary of the major philosophers and their work, critiques the impact they have had on society, and provides guidance for youth through the educational terrain:

Today, western education is in a great crisis seeking successfully to achieve the distorted goals of the secularization of knowledge, material domination, cultivation of individualism and all of the other elements which the Islamic worldview rejects. This system is doubly dangerous for Muslims both because it is in a state of crisis within itself and also because even if it were not to be in conflict within itself, it would be in discord with the Islamic perspective and the values which Islam cherishes most dearly. It is therefore, very critical at a time when Muslims must learn various Western disciplines, including not only science and technology, but other disciplines as well, in order to be able to provide their own answers and master their own destinies in a world in which they are faced with vast challenges, that they become fully cognizant of the meaning, role and function of education and educational institutions, including especially the philosophies which underlie them. In this way, they may become able to learn to the extent possible what they wish to learn of Western disciplines without becoming excessively contaminated in an unconscious way by forces which could distort their religious perspective, uproot them spiritually and intellectually, alienate them from their own traditional background and simply add another potent element contributing to disorder and chaos within Islamic society itself. (p. 216)

Commercialism

Another ailment of the Modern era is commercialism. Commercialism surrounds us 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year (Molnar, 2000). It is on the products

we buy, the movies and television we watch, in the malls we frequent, in schools and curriculum created to “educate” us. It is the heart to which commercialism is most detrimental. In the heart, the love for the Divine is nurtured; commercialism moves us to love the material, the ephemeral of this world. Allah warns us, “The mutual rivalry for piling up (the good things of this world) diverts you (from the more serious things)” (Qur’an, 102:1). With Nihilism and its focus on immediate, individual concerns, commercialism very comfortably spreads its message of consumption and materialism. When there is no End, when values such as responsibility are questioned, and the ego celebrated, how can we not indulge?

The Qur’an tells us “Exult not, for Allah loveth not those who exult (in riches)” (28:76) and warns that greed will lead to a path of misery (92:8-10). Further we are encouraged to provide for the needy, to care for the orphan and to purify our wealth through giving. Commercialism with its emphasis on consumption and materialism is a direct attack on the values of Islam, and thus we need to be wary of its presence in our lives. Emancipation, thus, is only possible through educating not only the mind through critical reflection, but the soul as well through Divine remembrance. Abdul Hakim Murad (2001) reminds us:

As we are initiated into the distractions of the world, however, it [heart] is covered over with the 'rust' (*ran*) of which the Qur’an speaks. This rust is made up of two things: sin and distraction. When, through the process of self-discipline, these are banished, so that the worshipper is preserved from sin and is focusing entirely on the immediate presence and reality of God, the rust is dissolved, and the *ruh* once again is free. The heart is sound; and salvation, and closeness to God, are achieved.

The Qur’an reminds us “Know ye (all), that the life of this world is but play and amusement, pomp and mutual boasting and multiplying, (in rivalry) among yourselves,

riches and children (57:20). It also reminds us of materialism, and the narcissism it can lead to: “Thinking that his wealth would make him last for ever” (104:3). To compound the problem further, Postman (1985), professor of Communications at Columbia University and author of Amusing Ourselves to Death, comments on the willingness of society to accept a materialistic, self-indulgent lifestyle. He contrasts the view points of two well known novels, Orwell’s 1984 and Huxley’s Brave New World in the forward to Amusing Ourselves to Death:

What Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one. Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism. Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us. Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance...in short Orwell feared that what we hate will ruin us. Huxley feared that what we love will ruin us...spiritual devastation is more likely to come from an enemy with a smiling face than from one whose countenance exudes suspicion and hate...(Postman, 1985, pp. forward and p.155-6)

Postman’s critique calls us to question the nature of our existence and begs us to search further for understanding of the charges he has laid before us. For most youth, their intellectual grounding is fertile soil for the seeds of materialism, consumerism, nihilism and narcissism, and their souls are defenseless.

Critique as Education

What is needed is education of the forces of materialism, consumerism, Nihilism, narcissism and all the other “isms” contradictory to Islamic values and way of being. This requires a critical perspective within the curriculum and in the teaching-learning relationship. As a short-term solution, schools can provide classes that critically analyze philosophical, social and economic issues of our society. A book to help in this endeavor is Dr. Seyyed Hossein Nasr’s A Young Muslims Guide to the Modern World, available

through Kazi Publications. It provides a brief overview of our rich history as well as a critic of philosophies informing the Modern and Postmodern era, and finally brings to light the plight of Muslim youth confronting these issues. However, one needs to be wary of the Postmodern dilemma of never-ending questions that result in confusion and despair. With Islam as the guide, critical questioning is necessary for the survival of the Muslim American identity.

Classical Understanding of Formal Education in Islam

Education is not only limited to what is taught. It includes how knowledge is taught, why it is taught, by whom it is taught, how it is learned, where it is taught, what is used to teach, both the societal and school culture in which it is taught, and the philosophies that inform all of the above mentioned. Education is a means of fulfilling our true human nature.

This goal is pivotal in the classical understanding of education. Moes, a student of education, studied in his paper, Culture in Islamic Schools, what a classical understanding of education might be:

- Sitting: teacher and students sat together on the floor in a semi-circle; no desks or other barriers between them; the best regarded seats are those closest to the teacher;
- Books and writing utensils: these items were viewed as sacred and distinguished tools of knowledge due to the fact that God swears by them in the Qur'an. Anything that God swears by is regarded in high esteem.
- Relations between teacher and students according to the 16th century Ottoman scholar Tashka Prasadi:
 - The student understands his responsibilities: Self-discipline, Sincerity of intention, reduce worldly distractions, resisting laziness, always be a student, choose a teacher who has knowledge and is pure hearted, know the basics of each Islamic discipline: well-rounded, visit other students to discuss texts and debate ideas, never procrastinate, know the nobility and dignity of knowledge;

- The teacher's duties and manners: pure intention, regard students like one's own children, emulate the prophet, pastoral guide of his students, condemn vices and unseemly behavior in his students, begin teaching with what is most relevant to the individual, must encourage even the youngest children to learn, beginning with memorization, lecturers words should never be in contradiction with his actions, conceal irritation and not mock students, not too much joking, not resentful of students, to test by asking questions, avoid egotistic disputation, elementary students should not be overburdened, but progress should be systematic, advanced students should not be stuck with easy stuff, prepare in advance, attend to whole needs of students, assist all students not just the outstanding ones. (Murad, 2001a; Makdisi, 1981)

All of this subject matter is considered to be unified in the sense that all of creation originates and exists as manifestations of the One Creator. This holistic and spiritual approach to knowledge demonstrates just how foreign the philosophy of secularism is in the Muslim worldview (Al-Zeera, 2001; Moes, 2003; Nasr, 1994).

In Islamic theology, a child's *fitra* (Divine nature) is still pure and unchanged, and a child is not accountable for what they do until the age of 7. It is then that the intellect is nurtured for it is at that time that they need the tools for discernment. The Qur'an is called *Al-Furqan*, the criterion, and should be the basis for understanding all knowledge as discussed earlier by Bewley (2003). In the education of the intellect, the classical understanding once again differs from current practice. The focus in the early years of education is to teach how to learn. Coburn (2001) states:

Our children must be given the tools to learn, and know how to employ with sufficient skill to guide them in the life long learning process that applies first of all to knowledge of our deen and secondarily to the rapidly expanding and changing realm of technical knowledge. Following Dorothy Sayers (and Aristotle before her) these tools begin with grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric.

It is interesting to note that traditional Islamic education emphasizes these tools, which Aristotle called the *trivium*. There are four other subjects: arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy that Aristotle called the *quadrivium* and that also appear in traditional Islamic education. In the Islamic tradition the study of poetry with its patterns of verse and rhythms replaced music. (p. 7)

Coburn goes on to discuss in detail the trivium and how it cultivates intellectual and critical students who can appreciate excellence wherever it is found. After this period, the student has the tools necessary to seek knowledge on his/her own.

This brings us once again to the structure of schooling, not as in building, but the years dedicated to learning, the classroom as the place of learning, the lack of choice in choosing what to learn and who to learn from, and the purpose of learning. Gatto (2001) in his book Underground History of American Education provides an example of a school in Boston in which the students pick the subjects they want to learn and with whom. The student agrees to study with the teacher until s/he has mastered the subject. Taken a step further, home schooling or rather deschooling is the epitome of choice in what to study depending on how it is structured. There are many options available once one starts the journey. What are necessary are the tools for learning and the criterion for discernment. When a student has power over what they learn, no entity can have educating power over them.

Creating Space for Spiritual Development

The solution however does not solely rest on the intellectualization of problems. Michael Apple, a curriculum scholar, states that the solution has to account for the significance of the spiritual dimension in human affairs (in Pinar, 1995). Youth need spiritual awareness and education for the soul. Dr. Al-Zeera (2001) emphasizes this point in Wholeness and Holiness in Education: “Spirituality is one of the most profound ways of intuitive knowing. It is silent but a powerful way of knowing” (p.11). Education’s responsibility is to not only inform about the forces of materialism, Nihilism, narcissism

and all the other “isms” contradictory to Islamic values and way of being. It also has the responsibility of providing spiritual awareness and education for the soul. The science of purifying the heart must be an integral aspect of the curriculum to remove the rust of materialism, Nihilism, narcissism, etc. and help youth travel to the Divine. “Man is by his very nature oriented towards the supernatural world; he was created for knowledge of God” (Bewley, 2000).

Spirituality Informs the Intellect

Adam (peace be upon him), was taught the names of things by Allah. The first word revealed to Prophet Muhammed (peace be upon him) was commandment “*Iqra*” which means to read or recite Education is life long religious obligation for every Muslim. As the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) has been reported to have said, “The quest for knowledge is incumbent upon every Muslim man and Muslim woman”. The duration of this obligation to study is clarified in another report wherein the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said: “Learning is from the cradle to the grave” (in Al-Ghazzali, p. 22). Al-Zarnuji (2001) clarifies that this obligation is also an act of worship that must be accompanied by a pure intention to please God alone. He says, “It is necessary for the student in his quest for knowledge to strive for the pleasure of God, the abode of the Hereafter, the removal of ignorance from himself and from the rest of the ignorant, the revival of religion, and the survival of Islam” (in Moes, 2003, p. 23).

Mother as Spiritual Teacher

One of the greatest gifts in life is life itself. It is also one of the greatest responsibilities and one of the highest of spiritual endeavors. Dr. Al-Zeera (2001) comments on the spiritual nature of woman as mother:

Love is the source of spirituality for all human beings. It is certainly so for woman because from the Creation woman has been known for her soft-heartedness, her compassion, her love, and her caring attitude. God created woman so that she would be more loving, caring, and nurturing, and He assigned her different roles in life. As woman passes through the stages of motherhood, she develops and refines her feminine qualities even more. She is honored and given this privilege of carrying another soul inside her. When God breathes His Spirit into the child, woman's spirituality is intensified as she feels the body and the soul of the child. ...Motherhood allows woman to experience different dimension of her being and higher levels of love. Selfless love is a profound dimension of love, and woman is privileged to go through the experience of selfless love for her child. Experiencing such an intense love develops woman's spirituality one step further to be able to go beyond the love of the relative to the love of the Absolute. (p. 16)

Rumi writes of the special place given to woman because of her relationship with the

Divine as a mother:

The Prophet said that women totally dominate men of intellect and possessors of hearts. But ignorant men dominate women, for they are shackled by an animal ferocity. They have no kindness, gentleness or love, since animality dominates their nature. Love and kindness are human attributes; anger and sensuality belong to the animals. She is the radiance of God, she is not your beloved. She is a creator - you could say that she is not created. (in Murad, 1999).

In Arabic, the womb is called *Rahim*, from which the word *Rahma*, meaning, "loving compassion", is derived. Allah is *Ar-Raheem*, The Most Compassionate, and it is through this Divine name that woman participates in act of creation.

The mother, as the first home in this world, informs the being of the unborn child with her being. Just as everything she ingests nourishes or harms the fetus, so too is this true of her thoughts, her spiritual state and the spiritual implications of her actions. The food she eats is affected by the blessings she gives as she starts and when she ends, the spiritual state of the person who prepared the food, the state of the money with which it was bought (whether it was earned through lawful or unlawful means), which in return, all affect the fetus growing inside her, the infant she breastfeeds and the child in her presence. The spiritual dimensions of life permeate every single aspect of living, and the

mother must be ever aware of her spiritual responsibilities to her child. Her acts of remembrance or heedlessness will affect the spiritual foundations of the child. Imitation is how the child learns for the first seven years of life (Gatto and Hanson, 2001; Pearce, 1992; Steiner, 1995), so it is imperative that the children have the best examples to learn and absorb from.

The mother's high station in Islamic theology also attests to her closeness to the Divine:

The veneration of aged mothers is a recurrent feature of the Prophetic vision, in which kindness and loyalty to the mother, a *rahma* to reciprocate the *rahma* they themselves dispensed, is seen as an almost sacramental act. Ibn Umar narrates that 'a man came to God's Messenger (s.w.s.) and said: "I have committed a great sin. Is there anything I can do to repent?" He asked, "Do you have a mother?" The man said that he did not, and he asked again, "Then do you have a maternal aunt?" The man replied that he did, and the Prophet (s.w.s.) told him: "Then be kind and devoted to her".' (Tirmidhi) Other hadiths are legion: 'Whoever kisses his mother between the eyes receives a protection from the fire' (Bayhaqi); 'Verily God has forbidden disobedience to your mother' (Bukhari and Muslim). (Murad, 1999)

The Prophet Muhammed's (peace and Blessing of Allah be upon him) way of being with children should be emulated. He was only kind, gentle, patient, and respectful of children's ways of being. In a well-known story of the Prophet (may the peace blessings of Allah be upon him), during one of the prayers he was leading, he remained in prostration, causing everyone to do the same, until his two grandchildren, Hasan and Hussain, finished play on his back. Without concern for "appropriateness" he respected the time they needed to do what they wanted. Far too often, children are rushed not only in day-to-day living, but out of childhood as well. It is a magical time that should be preserved and sanctified for the child to "be." Violence or abuse in words or actions was

never a practice of the Prophet, and we need to move to positive, non-punishment relationships void of totalitarian practices.

Van Manen (1990) in Researching Lived Experience discusses the issues of parenting and raising children. He states that a child needs to feel like they are most special person in the world by one person. And it is this person they need to be raised by. He concludes that a teacher or daycare provider cannot be this person because they have to treat every child equally special. Who is this person? Peggy O'Mara (2000), editor and publisher of Mothering Magazine for over 20 years, and the author of Natural Family Living, has no qualms stating that this person is the mother and only the mother. She calls for a complete and continuous connection with the child, discouraging the use of cribs, strollers, swings and the like. Jon and Myla Kabat-Zinn, authors of Everyday Blessings: The Inner Work of Mindful Parenting, a book on how the practice of mindfulness can improve relationships between parents and their children, expound on O'Mara's views in an interview with Gail Harris (2003) on "Body and Soul" on PBS You,

Touch is not simply with the body but also with one's heart, being able to embrace a child in your heart even when the child is doing something that you don't like. Mindfulness of touch means really being present in the touching. Mindfulness of seeing means being present in the seeing, in the feeling. So that's something that one cultivates over time, and it seems very simple, but it turns out it's extremely powerful.

They are referring to a special way of being with the one another. So plopping your kid in front of a television is not the parenting they are speaking of. What some call "spiritual parenting" is a move away from parenting as automatic and mechanical to parenting as heartfelt and mindful. The father and mother are spiritual beings in the child's life and each has a unique relationship with the child. I explored only the mother's role because in the formative years, it is she who the child should spend most of their

time with. However, this does not diminish the spiritual responsibility of the father. His presence in the home as provider goes beyond lawful food and income; he provides a masculine understanding of the Divine. Together, the mother and father are the first steps in education for the soul and preventing the emptiness.

Place and Space

French philosopher Gaston Bachelard's (1994), Poetics of Space, explores our perceptions of houses and other shelters and how they shape our thoughts, memories and dreams. In the book, he says:

Topoanalysis...[is] the systematic psychological study of the sites in our intimate lives...At time we think we know ourselves in time, when all we know are a sequence of fixations in the spaces of the beings stability—a being who does not want to melt away...That is what space is for. (p. 8)

Space and how it is constructed provides a stage for the play of life. It defines the story as much as the character do, and consequently influences the actions and emotions of the beings in the play. Creation of space is an expression of who we are, and subsequently expresses who we will become.

This is especially apparent in Islamic architecture. The Muslim understanding of Unity in created space led to exploration of spiritual aspects of the physical realities of shapes and patterns, numbers, geometric designs, etc.; all reflect a balance and harmony between both quantitative and qualitative knowledge (Al-Attas, 1992). “This is what inspired the beauty and awesome character of the architecture in classical Islam – deemed as an essential expression of human spirituality in everyday surroundings” (Moes, 2003). What do our modern structures reflect spiritually? How do they affect the spiritual growth of students?

The spiritual growth of a child flourishes in a natural space. Toys, utensils used for learning, the material used for the building and how the building is shaped, all should be from nature and in union with nature. In Montessori and Waldorf classrooms, and as well as in the homes of those who base their educational practices on authors such as Joseph Pearce and scholars such as Sheikh Hamza Yusef (Scholar of Islamic Sciences), you will find toys made of wood, undefined dolls made of cotton and wool, beeswax crayons, natural source pigments and paints, and a whole assortment of imaginative play toys made from wood, silk, cotton and wool. Additionally, the focus of the room is child centered, that is, everything is at the level of the child and designed for the child, a non-imposing space where the child has access to what they want, when they want it.

The outdoor space and a relationship with nature need to be integral components of education. In the Qur'an there are numerous references calling for reflection on and remembrance of the created. These are signs of the Divine in our everyday existence. Everything created is in constant *dhikr* of Allah. A natural environment and things derived from natural sources thus speaks to our soul for they are praising the same Creator. David Abram (1997), in The Spell of the Sensuous, "reveals the subtle dependence of human cognition on the natural environment." He describes in beautiful detail his experiences of being in and with nature. He also "ponders the violent disconnection of the body from the natural world and what it means about how we live and die in it" (Abram, 1997, back cover). Through reading his work, a sorrowful yearning is stirred in the heart for nature. In recognition of humanity's neglect and destruction of nature and its effect on the spirit, Dr. Nasr in his book "Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis in Modern Man," reminds us that:

Today, almost everyone living in the urbanized centers of the Western world feels intuitively a lack of something in life. This is due directly to the creation of an artificial environment from which nature has been excluded to the greatest possible extent. Even the religious man in such circumstances has lost the sense of the spiritual significance of nature. The domain of nature has become a 'thing' devoid of meaning, and at the same time the void created by the disappearance of this vital aspect of human existence continues to live with the souls of men and to manifest itself in many ways, sometimes violently and desperately. Furthermore, even his type of secularized and urbanized existence is itself threatened, through the very domination of nature that has made it possible, so that the crisis brought about through the encounter of man and nature and the application of the modern science of nature to technology has become a matter of common concern...Men no longer want to climb spiritual mountains...they now want to conquer all mountain peaks. They wish to deprive the mountain of all its majesty by overcoming it—preferably through the most difficult line of ascent...It is still our hope that as the crisis created by man's forgetfulness of who he really is grows and that as the idols of his own making crumble one by one before his eyes, he will begin a true reform of himself, which always means spiritual rebirth and through his rebirth attain a new harmony with the world of nature around him. (p. 5)

To avoid this disconnection from nature, children must experience nature with their being. Nature is a friend on the path to Allah; it is not an object to be observed, analyzed and categorized. Having choice in belief is a higher state than the complete obedience of nature. However, in traveling to Allah, nature's state is what you desire.

I addressed very briefly this topic of space and place. Montessori and Waldorf place great importance on nature, and the natural in education; their philosophies, curriculum, and materials need to be explored. School structures need to represent the unity found in Islamic architecture. Authors such as Bachelard and Abram, who call for a serious look at space, both as home and as environment, have to be integral components informing educative practice. Every child should enjoy the simple, yet profound, act of gardening. In nature are signs of the Divine, and is a place for re-membering the soul.

Creativity, Imaginative Play and Spiritual Growth

Another important question is, When does formal education start? From the Hadith of the Prophet (peace and blessing of Allah be upon him), up until the age of seven, the child is to be in a state of play, exploring the world without the constrictions of formal lessons (in Hanson, 2001). This idea is shared by both Rudolph Steiner, founder of Anthroposophy and Waldorf schools, and by Joseph Pearce, author of *Magical Child*, a book questioning the current thinking on childbirth practices, parenting and educating our children. He expands on the ideas of Jean Piaget, a child psychologist. “From the very instant of birth, the human child has only one concern: to learn all that there is to learn about the world. The planet is a child’s playground and nothing should interfere with a child’s play” (Pearce, 1992, back cover). Steiner takes the importance of play a step further and states that intellectual development actually stunts spiritual growth because it has an inclination for the material.

Play, specifically creative, imaginative play, fosters a strong spiritual foundation. Creativity through the theater in the older years is also important in exploring self. It allows you to learn from your character what you forgot about your self. When one enters the imagination through playfulness and improvisation, one opens the doors for seeing beyond the tangible. Imagination, residing in the unseen realm, is the source for poetry, calligraphy, architecture and art. These have traditionally been spiritual endeavors in Islamic history (Nasr, 1994). And it is through imagining what we could become that we are compelled to spiritual traveling.

Unity in One

The intellectual must always be weighted with the spiritual. They are not opposing forces, but rather complimentary. Zahra Al-Zeera (2001), a modern female scholar in Islam expounds upon this in her book Wholeness and Holiness in Education. She calls for the recognition of intuitive knowledge along side reason and rationality. The recognition and nurturing of intuition may help to increase the spiritual growth of students in schools in ways that logic, reason, and quantitative efforts cannot. The union of the intellectual and spiritual bring about a unifying understanding of the world and of self. *Tawheed*, unity in the Oneness of Allah, is manifested in all things; one just has to take the time to recognize it. Dr. Al- Zeera (2001) through her studies has put forth an Islamic paradigm for education based on *tawheed*:

- psychology – unity of the self
- epistemology – unity of knowledge
- ontology and metaphysics – unity of the cosmos and natural order
- eschatology – unity of life
- sociology – unity of community
- methodology of *tawheed* – acknowledging the Divine principle of unity.

This paradigm can serve as a model for ways of thinking about education through a wholistic approach.

In answer to the question of spirituality in Islamic education, we have opened up some areas for discussion. The literature on Islamic spirituality, *Sufism*, is vast and wanting exploration. It is the responsibility of Muslim educators to provide learning environments and opportunities for students to experience and understand the beauty of a relationship with the soul. The first step is acknowledging the weight of this matter in youth's lives and in the survival of their *deen*. In the dis-covering process, the known is revealed only to those who seek it.

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