

## The Spiritual Formation of a Chaplain: an Islamic Perspective

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My spiritual formation as a Muslim chaplain has involved deep reflection on various verses in the Quran and the examination of the *Sunnah* in order that such sources will form me as a chaplain who strives to be available and present to Muslim patients and patients of diverse faiths.

As a Muslim, the Lordship of God and the institution of prophethood that supports the concept of *Tawhid* or oneness of God is the theological foundation of my faith. In the divine plan for humanity, God empowered humans to be His vice-regents on Earth. In Quran (2:30), God said: “And [mention, O Muhammad], when your Lord said to the angels, “Indeed, I will make upon the earth a successive authority.” It is my understanding that a small group of people [from various faiths] will be entrusted to establish faith and to guide humanity as revealed in Quran (9:122): “...they could devote themselves to studies in religion, and admonish the people when they return to them—that thus they [may learn] to guard themselves [against evil].”

My growth as a chaplain included the development of communication skills, awareness of my acceptance and respect for people, and empowerment through engagement and consultation for this ministry. My understanding of Quran 41:33 is that it teaches that better speech (*da'wa*) is a call to all humanity to follow the path of God and that better action (*A'mal Salih*) aims at mending relations. “And who is better in speech than one who invites to God and does righteousness and says, ‘Indeed, I am of the Muslims [those who submit to God].’” That verse forms me as a Muslim chaplain and sets the path for me to serve Muslims and non-Muslims alike through better speech and action.

In addition, the Quran provides examples of skills that were taught to prophet Mohammad (pbuh) including the intentional balance between body, mind and heart. For example, the Quran describes the practice of soft-spoken speech and kindness to capture the hearts of people. Quran 3:159, states: “So by mercy from God, [O Muhammad], you were lenient with them. And if you had been rude [in speech] and harsh in heart, they would have disbanded you.”

My growth in understanding the process of spiritual assessment included an awareness of my willingness and ability to accept and respect people through conscious engagement and consultation. In Quran 49:13, God said, “O mankind, indeed We [God] have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you [in the sight of God] is the one most [of God]”

This verse increases my desire to conduct a spiritual assessment through intimate engagements with people in order to uncover interpersonal and intrapersonal dimensions of the self and the relationship with the divine. In the *Maqased Al-Sharia*, or the goals of jurisprudence, several themes are addressed that highlight what is important for humanity. Among them are areas such as dealing with essentials (*ad-daruriyat*), necessities (*al-hajiyat*), or enhancement (*at-tahsiniyat*). The response in such cases is not a goal by itself but a tool, when preserved and/or cared for, that will bring benefits and/or alleviate harm or pain, enhance the quality of life, and strengthen faith. As a Muslim chaplain, I respond by providing services according to each individual's needs as long as the services or its delivery are not contrary to my faith or belief.

The Quran provides other themes that draw me closer to God and enhance my faith as I am being formed as a Muslim chaplain.

The Closeness of God

From an Islamic perspective, to ‘be with’ is illustrated in numerous verses of

the Quran and prophetic narratives and addresses the availability of God to 'be with' the individual. For example, Quran (9:40) teaches that the presence of God with the believers at times of difficulty brings comfort. For example, it was reported that the people of Mecca attempted to kill prophet Mohammad (pbuh) and ultimately drove him out of Mecca. He and his companion Abu-Bakr hid for three nights in a cave (*Ghaar Thawr*). The people of Mecca pursued them to the entrance of the cave, closed in onto them, and Abu-Bakr showed signs of fear and sadness. The verse (9:40) was revealed and the prophet said, "Grieve not: verily, God is with us." It is a reminder to the believer and to me, as a Muslim chaplain, not to be sad because God is available and near. The closeness of God in such circumstances brings comfort and a reminder of the availability of the mercy and love of God. Such closeness is mentioned in Quran (50:16) in a striking way: "We [God] are nearer to him [the human] than his jugular vein." As a chaplain, the verse helps me articulate a theology that promotes the closeness of God, physically and spiritually, and comforts the patient by invoking the closeness of God to answer their prayers. In addition, the knowledge of God's presence might empower some patients to be closer to God.

#### The Availability of God

The relationship between God and humanity is based on love. Love, according to God, means He is approachable and loves to be approached. Quran (2:186) states, "And when My servants ask you, [O Muhammad], concerning Me—indeed I am near. I respond to the invocation of the supplicant when he calls upon Me." God is close, listens to the prayer of every suppliant, and will respond to their calls. In Hadith Qudsi number 15, "On the authority of Abu Hurayrah [may Allah be pleased with him], who said that the prophet [peace and blessings of Allah be upon him] said: "Allah the Almighty said: '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 a better assembly. And if he draws near to Me at 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.'" In addition, some Muslims have interpreted the availability and closeness of God to mean there is no need for human intercession when it comes to the relationship between God and His servants.

What then is the role of Imams when it comes to a patient's spiritual care? As a chaplain, I explore what God's love means for the patient and how such love is manifested. A patient might mention certain rituals that will bring satisfaction when performed or increase the love of God, while others might ask for companionship as the patient tells his/her own story. I reflect on the availability of the divine by being available myself to be with the patient, which by itself is enough and sufficient demonstration of love.

#### peacefulness and Contentment

My relationship with God instills peacefulness, calm, and happiness in my heart, body, and mind. Quran (13:28) encourages the remembrance of God as a path to bring about satisfaction as such remembrance enhances the quality of life and faith.

The term *Sakina* is used to describe the state of peacefulness, satisfaction, and stillness. In Arabic, the term *Sakana* means 'to dwell' and *Maskan* is 'home'. The home to the believer brings comfort after a long day at work and a stress-less environment where a husband and his wife take care of each other and their children. The relationship with God enhances spiritual contentment and brings joy to their hearts. Tranquility of the heart is achieved through *dhikr*, the constant remembrance of God. As a chaplain, I might reflect with patients about what brings peacefulness, contentment, and tranquility in their lives in the midst of sickness and pain; and what a

patient can draw upon to achieve such peacefulness.

#### Mending Relations

The example of good action is linked to the state of faith in the Quran. The phrase, *A'mal Salih*, is often interpreted as “good deed”—that is a demonstration of faith. As a chaplain, I ask patients what the demonstration of faith or good action means to them. Many patients, both in their lives and in their struggle with illness, face various interpersonal or intrapersonal challenges. The spiritual mending of relations might become an area that a patient reflects on as she/he seeks to become at peace with God, at peace with humanity, and at peace with himself/herself. Change is an intentional act that starts with the individual. Quran 13:11 teaches that God will enable change, however such change will not happen unless the individual change their own inner self first. As a chaplain, I seek to empower patients by encouraging each to begin the process of deep reflection to address what is important to him or her. I assess their strengths, weaknesses, and what resources are available to each to make such change possible whenever the patient is ready for the process.

A chaplain is a professional who is present and available to be with the patient. The Quran gives the best example of God’s presence in our lives, and how such presence brings peace and tranquility. Whenever a Muslim is inflicted with a hardship, she/he is encouraged to show patience, reflect, and strengthen the soul with prayers. Patience has great benefits: worldly and Heavenly. In order to show patience, a Muslim will need to empower the soul with a strong foundation of faith and the personal will and intention to exert patience. By being present and available, a Muslim chaplain reassures the patient that God is present and hears the supplications of the penitent, loves to be called on, and will fulfill His promises.

#### NOTES

1. Sunnah includes all what the prophet Mohammad [peace be upon him] said, did or approved of and was compiled, after the death of the prophet, and the canonization process of Hadith included the classification of each on a scale of its authenticity for its (*Matn*) text and (*Sanad*) the chain of its narrators. There are four books of Hadith: Sahih Al-Bukhari, Sahih Muslim, Sunan Abu-dawud, and the Muwatta of Imam Malik.
2. Hadith Qudsi is a form of divine inspiration to prophet Mohammad narrated on behalf of God where the thoughts belong to God and the words are the prophet’s words. Unlike Hadith, Quran is God’s actual words.

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