

# 1 The Beginning For Me

*In the name of God, most Gracious, most Merciful*

Ever since I can remember I believed in God. Though my parents had spiritual natures, religion had no real place in my nuclear family. This gave me the freedom to explore the vast world of religious thought my own way. Explore I did. As a child, I read quantities of mythology from all over the world. The Native American mythologies touched me the most deeply.

Perhaps my family's short trips to watch the Easter ceremonies of the Yaqui Indian tribe, or the Yoeme in their own language, provided the reason for that choice. A marvelous blend of Catholicism and the native belief system from before European contact, these ceremonies opened a door for me to a new culture and a new worldview. Their dance/drama depicts the struggle between evil and goodness, all staged within the story of the Easter passion. Organized around the year-round preparation for these ceremonies, traditional Yoeme religious life culminates in their final performance during Easter week.

Back then, most traditional men became members of one of the dance societies. These societies performed this impressive and deeply spiritual ceremony for its own sake. What we saw was an expression of their strong faith rather than a staged production. The privilege of watching those ceremonies remains one of my most treasured childhood memories.

When I saw such deep reverence and total dedication to a religious path it moved me and awakened my own need for a spiritual path.

In my early teens, I began reading the scriptures. I read the Bible and bits and pieces from other traditions. I read stories of the saints and wept for them and their suffering. I remember thinking to myself, "I could never be that good but I am so glad that someone was".

I also read stories of the European "settlers" of various nationalities. The slaughter and brutal enslavement of the Native American peoples by these Europeans horrified me. The greatest horror was that so much of this terrible activity ended up carried out in the name of religion. (Having grown older I know this occurs in all situations where people are conquered, no matter what the cultures and religions involved.)

My longing for God and a spiritual path on one hand, and my horror of organized religion and its activities on the other, staged a constant drama in my young life. As a young adult, I found a spiritual home for a while in a Quaker meeting and later with the Sufi Order in the West. Traditionally Islamic mystics, most Sufis follow one of the sects of Islam. However a spiritual student from India whose teacher had given him the task of introducing Islam to the West in a way that was easy for Westerners started the Sufi Order in the West. The group I became a member of had New Age traits and very few of

its members converted to traditional Islam. In the Introduction, I mention it was a friend who gave me my first Quran. Saida followed this Sufism.

The story of how this Quran eventually brought me to Islam appears below, reprinted from *The Hoopoe*, an Islamic literary magazine no longer in existence.

### **Into The Light**

By Lisa Spray

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#### *IN THE NAME OF GOD, MOST GRACIOUS, MOST MERCIFUL.*

*Well, she really didn't have any choice. She had made up her mind that incredible night, the like of which she hoped she would never see again!*

*The seas had been wild and the winds even wilder. The schooner, with sails reduced to the bare minimum that would act as stabilizers, bobbed around like a toy between the too playful paws of a kitten.*

*In the troughs, looking up at mountains of water as high as the masts (or so it seemed in the long-prayed-for dawn grey) she realized how the Children of Israel must have felt scuttling through the Red Sea, with cliffs of water poised to topple down on them at any minute. It was just as miraculous that she had come through that night. She, a desert rat who didn't even like to swim (except to snorkel), had survived the most excruciating night of water torture that she could imagine. They had all survived, no one had washed overboard, and nothing had punctured the ferro-cement hull...and only God could have brought them through. She knew that more surely than she knew that the blood flowing through her was red.*

*It was only hours, though it seemed like years, earlier that she had decided. For a long time she had been reading the Koran [Quran] a friend had given her. It was so obviously truthful, in spite of the King James English of the Urdu speaker who had translated it. She almost chuckled remembering when Saida gave it to her: "I haven't been reading this, and when my dog wanted to chew on it I figured I'd better give it to someone who might." Some of her best friends had been dogs. Saida's sure was!*

*Anyway, it was clear. She could no longer procrastinate. She had to become a Muslim, in spite of what she knew about them. The book was true. Maybe the rest would make sense later.*

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*She talked to an old Sufi friend. He was the only practicing Muslim she knew. What did she have to do? Well, it was very simple. All she had to do was go through this ceremony and say these words in Arabic, and learn these prayers, and wear these clothes, read these books, and clean herself this way, and deal with men in this way, and...and...and by the way she might want to start doing these prayers for the prophet.*

*Laden down with books, and even more burdened with instructions, she trundled home to the little travel trailer she shared with her now land-locked sailor husband.*

*“What if I can’t do all this stuff?”*

*“You’ll never know unless you try.”*

*Patiently he stood by watching as she transformed herself into a fourteenth century woman. He even helped drill her as she struggled through the strange little Pakistani book on the prayers.*

*“Gay reel mag dooby...”*

*“Wait, I think it’s more like ‘Guy real,’ but this ink blot makes it kind’a unclear.”*

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*Now she was an “official” Muslim. People looked at her as they passed her on the street, wondering what kind of nun she was. Old friends didn’t recognize her. And she couldn’t pronounce the names of her new friends.*

*Her family was scared. They had lauded her involvement with the [Vietnam] war resistance. The Sufis were harder for them, but they were nice and New Age and seemed harmless enough. Sailing was dangerous, but only to life and limb. But Muslims... Muslims were terrorists, and treated women like cattle, and rejected the basis for modern life!*

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*Her Sufi Muslim friend was staying where someone was starting a new mosque. The painting was almost done and carpets were in. He asked her if she would like to come by and help a bit. She wasn’t very excited.*

*The last mosque she had been in had been quite a scary experience. The only other woman there didn’t speak English, and all of the men treated them as if they were contagious. Actually, that probably was a good thing, because the room they were in must have once been a walk-in closet. Any more people, male or female, would have made it a sardine can!*

*She had fled as soon as the juma prayer [the Friday congregational prayer] was over.*

*No, another mosque experience was not her idea of a great way to spend the afternoon.*

*But after a while she worked up enough courage to get her to the front door. But she stood on the front porch of the renovated house for quite a while before bringing herself to go in.*

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*Right now she is sitting in front of a computer terminal, wondering how long she could have lasted as a “muslim” if she hadn’t walked through that door, hadn’t met that gently smiling man working just inside the sunny room which felt more like home than even the house she grew up in...if she hadn’t heard about his discovery of the mathematical code in the Qur’an...the intricate code which is God’s own tamper proof*

*seal on His message to each one of us. How long could she have lasted in the cloth chains of hijab [garments worn by many Muslim women in public] before she would have dumped them—and everything connected with them?*

*Of course it hadn't ended there. There was a lot of growth, a lot of stumbling, a lot of tying one's shoelaces together, a lot of repenting.*

*But by God's great mercy she was there, and she was able. And only by His great mercy will she continue to be, Inshallah [God willing]!*

*And of course there is still a lot of growing. But that's OK, 'cause as Elliot Paul put it, "Whatever isn't growing, wears out!"*

(From *The Hoopoe*, Summer/Fall issue, 1988, page 20.)

Though I had to force myself to ring the doorbell as I stood there on the front porch, walking through the door into the mosque was like grabbing a lifeline. God had guided me to a group of people who followed the Quran alone—exactly what I needed. I don't think I would have lasted very much longer trying to follow all the rules and regulations that the various forms of traditional Islam impose on their women. Nor would I have survived the issues with which I struggled of inequality for women in Islam.

In fact, I had already begun to drown in all the rules.

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### **Notes On Personal Names**

In some situations, I have changed names and sometimes identifying details of people.

### **Notes On Verse References**

Before we go any further let me say just a few words about the Quran translations I use in the rest of the book. I very occasionally use A. Yusuf Ali's 1968 edition (the edition I first received from Saida). Still one of the most widely used translations, when I became Muslim most people I knew thought it the best. He arranged his verses like poetry, dividing up each into many lines. He printed them side by side with the Arabic of the same verse. I use the frequent convention of leaving more than four quoted poetic lines in that format, while combining shorter quotes into a prose format, using slashes to indicate line divisions.

You can tell when I used Yusuf Ali's translation because the reference at the end of the verse lists *The Holy Quran*. I then give the verse reference, first with the Roman numerals he used followed by the reference translated to Arabic numerals in brackets. Where I combined lines, I left his capitalization.

Most of my verse quotes and linked references come from the fine translation done by Rashad Khalifa, PhD.—the 2010 printing. Though not as well known as Yusuf

Ali's translation, I find it the clearest and easiest for native English readers. I use this translation for my personal reading. Rashad Khalifa chose *Quran: The Final Testament* as his title. Please note that because he did not use the poetic conventions of Yusuf Ali, the quotes from his translation may seem less substantial. Please do not let that fool you. As you will see later in Chapter 21 on studying the Quran, his translation has some very extraordinary qualities. If you do not have a Quran handy and wish to look at one of the references given, you can find it in Appendix 1. This has all the Quran verses referenced taken from Rashad Khalifa's translation.

Most Western readers know more about the Bible verses. References for these include the editions with their dates for the first usage and just the title thereafter. I use the same poetic conventions for the Biblical verses.

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Every journey begins with one step. Once we take that step then God helps us along on the path we have chosen—or perhaps I should say, at least for me, the path He has chosen for me. If no one had given me a Quran I am not certain that I would have ever read it. But having read it I embarked on a wonderful journey of exploration and personal growth, as you will see in future chapters.

The amazing positive change in my way of thinking and feeling as a result of my journey rather overwhelms me at times. No longer am I the fearful, woeful, and constantly self-deprecating being that began the journey all those years ago. As I come to trust God more and more that positive growth seems to accelerate until I hardly remember how it felt to live in my former state. The resulting joy and appreciation for it all just continue to grow, all praise and thanks to God!