

**Creative Becoming(s): The Spiritual Development of Young Muslims in the West Through
Literature**

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Abstract

Young Muslims growing up in the West face dichotomous narratives that fragment their being, creating internal divisiveness. Islamic spirituality, especially the notion of *tawheed*, promotes oneness and unity of being. In this thesis, I explore the spiritual development of young Muslims in the West through literature amidst these dichotomous narratives. Using sociocultural theory and narrative inquiry, I first explore the threads of dichotomous narratives throughout history that create a binary of Muslims and the West, proving them insubstantial. Then, I explore the lives of two young Muslims, a male, and a female, growing up in Toronto. I story their lives, rooting their spiritual development in the literature they read, which is socioculturally embedded. Finally, I reflect on the harmonies, and tensions that exist within the stories. Tensions signify third spaces of productive growth, in which young Muslims can contest meaning and open pathways for creative becoming(s).

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Preface

Where do you turn, in a foreign land, in a Western land, in what becomes your homeland – where do you go to make sense of your "Other" self, to let loose the orient without judgement or fear, to engage in critical conversations without worrying that you are speaking against your homeland, the Eastern land, a foreign land to you now. Where do you go?

I want to begin by painting a poetic narrative of space - a particular realm called *kharabat*. This Persian word originally signified a tavern of ill repute but became used by mystics and poets to signify a space where “all hypocritical pretense to piety” is suspended (Dabashi, 2016, p. 21). *Kharabat* is a combination of two opposite words: *kharab*, meaning ruinous, and *abad*, meaning prosperous. It thus signifies a third space that will simultaneously dismantle beliefs and restore faith. Muslim poets and mystics use this paradoxical space as a metaphor for this world, where we are ruined and impure, yet only through this space can we prosper and attain purity.

In this thesis, I blend theory with praxis to create a holistic expression of my inquiry. My questions, which started off seemingly simple, took me on a multi/inter-disciplinary journey which generated the following work. I indulged in my reading and took my time, especially with the covid pandemic, to deeply explore/research/live my way into these questions and the many answers and more questions they yielded. A lot of tension and anxiety became built up, only signifying the ease and release would come out of it. It was not an easy thing to interrogate my own past, nor that of another's. To relive my own and attempt to internally experience all the stages and phases of our developments. Each section led to more theory research and deeper internal exploration – along with lots of disassociation and procrastination, an unavoidable part of this journey.

In attempting to trace the threads of my thoughts in academia, I found myself exhaustedly facing the unnecessary jargon and lack of clarity in academic language and I tried hard to understand past the barriers to meaning. In this thesis, I attempted to write my way into knowing through clear and conscious language (Lyle, 2018). With Pat Palulis as my supervisor, I was given a rare opportunity in academia – to answer questions that tugged at my heart, in a way aligned with my soul. She motivated me and kept me grounded, while always reminding me of the in-betweens and the third spaces, as her teacher, Ted Aoki, did for her. Like Palulis (2017), I do not “write alone on a blank page” – I am entangled in the texts with which I have an affinity, and I “ride the wave of energy” that their expressions provide (p. 228). Even this work is an act of dialogue: of finding my thoughts and feelings in others’ words, and by weaving them together, creating my own (w)rite of passage.

This work is a deeply personal narrative and question, and at the same time it is a social and communal reflection – for the self is never outside the community and culture. Politics is not my topic of discussion, but to be blind to politics and not mention it when it is visible is to be apolitical, which is the most dangerous political stance. My journey of being an Iranian Shia Muslim in Toronto led to many years of questioning and seeking answers, living in-between geographical borders, material and immaterial realms, and experiencing being wholly situated in my identities amidst tensions; experiencing contractions and expansions. My questions took an academic route in this thesis which was accompanied by a personal spiritual drought, but through persistence and consistent hard work, I both inched closer to my answers through my work, and closer to my God through my soul. All gratitude to the One who showed Himself to me in every phase of my life to form an inexplicable conviction - the true Witnessing of the One who is always Present, even when I am not.

Chapter 1: Introduction

“Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves... do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.” – Rilke

Growing up as an Iranian Muslim in Toronto, I went through different stages in my spiritual development, impacted by my multiple cultural worlds. These stages were filled with harmonies and tensions; while I experienced and found the unity of being in the multiplicity of my experiences, I also faced dichotomous narratives and binary categorizations that were difficult to navigate. I struggled to create a coherent sense of self while feeling fragmented and divided between the school and the mosque, my Iranian and Canadian identity, and my Muslimness in a Western context.

The questions explored in my thesis have been ones that I have been living in for most of my life. I took Rilke’s advice seriously from a young age – to love the questions themselves, to live them out so I may one day, without noticing it, live my way into the answers. Doing so led me here, to explore the problems I was situated in and uncover where they stemmed from. Further than understanding the problems I face, I wanted to also learn about others who traversed down a similar path and how they developed spiritually within this context. By doing so, I attempt to clarify the harmonies and tensions young Muslims in the West are situated in, which can benefit others who are navigating these contexts. This internal exploration amidst external pressures which dichotomize our being allows us to emerge with a more coherent sense of self, and a strong identity rooted in faith.

Situating the Self – Context and Rationale

All is the Beloved, there is none but He,

Unity manifested into multiplicity. – Hassanzadeh Amoli

I started viewing the world through the lens of Islam at the age of fourteen. At a time when I was desperately seeking meaning, direction, and peace, the religion of submission presented itself to me. I submitted wholeheartedly and unquestioningly—at first. The more I tried to drown myself in Islam, the more it pointed me to my own inner world, and the outer phenomenal world. Initially, I focused on applying Islamic rulings and regulations to my life (as is the focus in most Muslim communities), but as time went by, I recognized the need to develop my inner spiritual landscape, with the goal of contributing to and transforming my external world. I began by participating regularly at my local Iranian mosque in Toronto—co-founding the library there, organizing programs for the youth, and contributing to the advancement of our community. I grew as much as I could there, until I recognized that further growth is possible by going beyond the mosque.

At the University of Toronto, I worked at the Multi-Faith Center, and was an executive member of both the MSA and the TMA—the Sunni majority student group, and the Shia student group. Through my involvements, I aimed to create dialogue, open-ness, and unity—to expand the lens through which I saw, and consequently the lens through which my communities saw the world. I immersed myself in literature and poetry, seeking to understand the inner landscape of my being, with the aim of understanding other people and our role in the world. For two summers, I worked and lived in Turkey and Spain, respectively. Both experiences uniquely enhanced the lens through which I saw, consequently expanding my identity, means of expression, and spiritual development. The more I immersed myself in the different cultural

worlds, the wider and clearer my lens got, viewing all multiplicities as a reflection of divine unity, a kaleidoscope of colours and meanings. As the words about God echo within my heart—“He is the First and the Last, and the Outward and the Inward; and He is Knower of all things” (Quran, 57:3)—I yearn to know, to see, and to break out of the limited mold that people create for themselves and of God.

This human-made mold today limits the search for meaning and frowns upon the different manifestations of religion, aiming to enforce an uncritical, universal, and ahistorical Muslim identity. Kazmi (2005) identifies that Muslims have abandoned the *process* of being a Muslim in their socio-cultural context and have instead opted for the product—a universal and ahistorical definition of a Muslim. Islam, however, always encourages the pursuit of higher truths, hence its universality and the reason it may take different shapes and forms outwardly (Abd-Allah, 2006; Hermansen, 2009). The difference of expression should not be a dividing point among Muslims since it is a result of the myriad of cultural and ethnic upbringings that Muslims have throughout the entire world. Thus, the unifying point for Muslims should be the process of *becoming*—the higher struggle and strive for the Divine, and the understanding and enactment of it in our daily lives.

My rationale for doing this research is to bring to light the process of “creative becoming”(s) of young Muslims in the West (Iqbal, 2009). I aspire to inspire young Muslims to create a healthy and robust identity and culture which encompasses the best parts of their upbringings. This research is meant to serve as a familiar tale or a comforting guide for young Muslims growing up in the West who experience these struggles with meaning and identity. It is my hope that the personal stories and the spiritual literature presented in this research will serve as a companion to young Muslims who are struggling and striving to clarify the complexities of

their upbringing and identity. Simultaneously, they can serve as guides for parents, teachers, and communities to understand the struggles faced by the youth and how they navigate them.

Contextualizing the Problem – Purpose and Objectives

And to God belongs the East and the West. So wherever you turn, there is the Face of God. Indeed, God is All-Embracing, All-Knowing. – Quran, 2:115

Young Muslims in the West experience unique challenges throughout their identity formation, as clashing dichotomous narratives essentialize their Muslim and Western identities, pitting them against one another. Dichotomous narratives of East vs. West, religion vs. secularism, and tradition vs. modernity have been highly propagated by both Western and Muslim scholars and politicians. These narratives play out politically and socioculturally, in the media and in mosques, in schools and in homes, and they have a negative impact on many people, especially Muslim youth growing up in the West.

Prominent Muslim scholars in both the East and West have developed an anti-Western attitude since the mid-twentieth century, seeing Islam as irreconcilable with Western secularism (Halstead, 2004; Hermansen, 2009). The West also has an anti-Muslim narrative, portraying a limited and stereotypical narrative of a Muslim within popular media and deeming Islam as incompatible with their society (Khan, 2009; Watt, 2012a). This has created a dichotomy for young Muslims in the West, who either cut themselves off from their Western context, attempting to practice the ‘pure’ Islam, or abandon their religion as it is seen to be incompatible with their context (Ahmed, 2009).

The projection of opposing binary identities on Muslims can create psychological fragmentation and internal divisiveness, especially on youth who are creating a sense of self amidst these clashing narratives (Abd-Allah, 2006). To deal with this problem, I argue for the

reawakening of the culture of learning in Islam; a culture deeply situated locally, yet open to the world globally, where learners witness the unity in multiplicity and actively participate in meaning-making and co-create their future with God by imagining it today. This culture cannot be static or monolithic, but rather it is dynamic and multiple, using differences as strengths since God does not reveal Himself in a monolithic way.

Dabashi (2016) highlights this culture of learning, since “Islam has always been the dialogical outcome of Muslim collective consciousness engaging in conversation with the dominant moral and intellectual forces in the world” (p. 10). For many years, Islam approached this dialogue from a position of power, but since Western imperialism dominated the world, Muslims have reduced their faith “into a singular site of ideological resistance to those empires” (p. 10). The dialogical relationship between Muslims and the world needs to be revived, this time not from a position of power “but from a position of care” (p. 10).

Muslim youth in the West go through these difficult challenges, but they are not victims. Within their third spaces, they experience creative becomings - the spiritual struggle of creating a coherent sense of self within a clash of worldly narratives. Thus, my thesis question explores how the spiritual development of young Muslims in the West occurs amidst dichotomous narratives within their multiple cultural worlds. I will attempt to experience and express this development by using the literature which shaped my participants’ vision of the world and themselves: the texts entangled in their con(text)s.

My purpose doing this research is twofold. Firstly, I aim to find how young Muslims deal with dichotomous narratives and develop spiritually within their “multiple cultural worlds” (Hermansen, 2009, p. 190). Secondly, by storying my participants’ spiritual development through their literary exploration, my goal is to provide young Muslims in the West with stories

which reflect the reality of their spiritual development in their sociocultural context, along with literary resources which can guide this development.

I chose to pursue my question in this way because spiritual development – knowledge of the soul, battle against lower desires, purification and elevation of the soul, refinement of character, and seeking nearness to the divine – is a fundamental part of Islam; it is the core and essence, the message and purpose of the faith. Muslim tradition has a history of spiritual masters recording their spiritual development, leaving them as a guide for their disciples. Though not at that level, this work is an attempt at a similar purpose - to provide young Muslims in the West a record of self-development and growth in the face of their struggles, so that we may further expand our language and grow within our various contexts fearlessly and without shame. I chose to tell stories, and to use the books that inspired the characters, because the holy Quran teaches us through stories, and it is the sharing of narrative which gives language and power to a people: the power of being seen, heard, and recognized.

Aitchison et al. (2008) explore the geographies of Muslim identities and assert the importance of space/place on Muslim identity construction. They argue that like class and race, religion should be contextualised in time and space to be understood, as the context impacts “their intersections with gender, diaspora and belongings” (p. 7). As identity and development are place based and impacted by the sociocultural environment, the development of Muslim identity is deeply tied to the political and social developments of their respective geographies (Bectovic, 2011). However, very little work has been done on theorizing the processes of identity formation on Western Muslims, especially among second generation immigrants (Delic, 2018; Nagra, 2011).

To explore these questions, I delve into the lives of two Muslim youth in Toronto, a city of third spaces. Both Iranian who grew up within the same communities, for the sake of consistency and my personal familiarity. In the following text, I story their development using their memories and the books they read to map out their creative becomings. From the word, we learn; those read, spoken, and written – all acts which are relational, toward the other, a communication, a continuing conversation. Placing our stories together, I attempt to see the harmonies and tensions between our experiences to gain a closer understanding of our spiritual developments.

I hold questions whose answers are out of my grasp, but I reach out into the dark unknown, hoping that my presence (the starting of a conversation in the void) will shed light on possible answers, or new ways of imagining and creating our spaces.

In this thesis, I use the term spirituality to signify “the search for the sacred”, which refers to anything that takes on “divine character and significance” (King et. al, 2014, p. 188). Other words that can signify this process are gnosticism and mysticism, which are used interchangeably. In Islam, this realm is called Sufism, which has become an overloaded term, “in part due to its long and complex history and its geographical dispersion” (Aslandogan, 2007, p. 634). This term, too, is used when necessary. I chose to use spirituality over the other terms because it is all-encompassing, not contested, and most familiar to a Western audience. Spiritual wayfaring can happen within any religion, and even outside of a religious context. I will be exploring spirituality as practiced by young Muslims in Toronto.

Thesis Overview

In this thesis, I explore the identity and spiritual development of Muslim youth in the West through their exploration of literature in their multiple cultural worlds. This thesis grew out

of my own experiences, questions, and struggles. Beginning with a simple question, this thesis forced me to contextualize mine and others' experiences to better understand how our development within this time and place occurs. My aim is to transcend the negative dichotomous narratives about being a Muslim in the West and promote a holistic, healthy, and expansive vision of spiritual becoming.

The second chapter of this thesis establishes the theories and methods behind this work. Sociocultural theory, narrative inquiry, and Islamic spirituality are the frameworks through which I navigate these questions. Sociocultural theory situates learning and development within a wholly sociocultural context - that who, how, why, and in what ways we become is directly linked to our current space and time. It situates people as simultaneous products and creators of their environment. Narrative inquiry allows me to inquire into my participants' personal experiences of spiritual becomings and to relay it in a story format. It allows me to uncover the metaphors, narratives, and tales that we live in and by within our context. Islamic spirituality allows me to position my participants' spiritual development within an Islamic framework. Specifically, the foundational notion of *tawheed*, the oneness and unity of God, allows me to situate my participants' holistic pursuit of self towards the One.

Chapter three contextualizes the problem of dichotomous narratives by uncovering them throughout history. Starting from the early Islamic period to the present day, I unpack the narratives that shaped our past and create our present so we may be better equipped to navigate our current predicament with clarity and imagine new ways of being beyond historically entrenched problems. Two main periods that I examine are the 11th-12th century in the Muslim world, when education became institutionalized through the clergy-state alliance, and the 17-18th century Enlightenment, which birthed the dichotomous narratives that dominate our world today.

Exposing the threads of dichotomous narratives throughout history, I arrive at the present day and their impact on Muslim youth in the West.

The fourth chapter delves into literature on identity development, spirituality, education, language, and meaning making. I explore the links between identity development, spirituality, and meaning making, and identify the limitations of our current education system, which discards spirituality and meaning making in favour of learning through acquisition. In this model, dominant since the Enlightenment, learning is commercialized, and students acquire knowledge to reproduce it in the market for monetary gain. Educational researchers have problematized this system as it can produce fragmented beings who have been denied meaning and spirit in the realm of learning, and rather argue for the importance of spirituality and meaning making in education.

After establishing the importance of spirituality and meaning making in learning and identity development, and uncovering the historical roots of dichotomous narratives, I turn to the stories of my two participants. The stories serve as a window into the identity and spiritual development of these two young Muslims within their multiple cultural worlds. They provide an intimate glance of their struggles with dichotomous narratives and their experience of spiritual development through literature.

Finally, I will assess the tensions and harmonies that arose in both stories. Doing so will provide a firm ground to rest on, which are the harmonies within our stories, and a third space to hold our tensions.

Chapter 2: Theories and Methods – Sociocultural Theory, Narrative Inquiry, and Islamic Spirituality

The methods, theories, and subject of this thesis are deeply interrelated, sharing themes like contextuality, relationality, holistic becoming, continuity, ethics of care, unity, multiplicity and more. In this chapter, I discuss the main theories and methods that ground this thesis, which consist of sociocultural theory, narrative inquiry, and Islamic spirituality.

Sociocultural Theory

The theoretical framework permeating my research is sociocultural theory. Sociocultural theory, as developed by Vygotsky, establishes human learning as an active and ongoing process occurring within a historical, social, and cultural context (Meyer & Meiklejohn, 2020). This constant and fluid development occurs alongside the learner's environment through their use of socio-cultural tools and norms such as language (Pellegrino, 2020). Language is both used to make meaning of social relationships and cultural interactions, as well as creating the movement, flow, expansion, exchange, and transmission of culture (Chan, 2017; Meyer & Meiklejohn, 2020).

This simultaneously internal and external use of language is mutually dialogical; to make meaning internally about external experiences, and to share meaning externally from internal experiences. This simultaneously internal and external use of language highlights Vygotsky's dialectical approach to learning, which emphasizes the unity of these processes rather than their distinctness (Meyer & Meiklejohn, 2020). Shared social activities using language become internal thoughts and memories which are not distinct or separate – the internal and external are in mutual exchange and flow, constantly impacting and feeding off one another. Their unity comes from seeking meaning, which is “the heart of speech and thought processes” (p. 39). It is

through these processes that we experience, absorb, analyze, share, and carry out meaning into our world. Human development is thus a process of being formed by the ongoing transformation of the self and society, through the self in society. Sociocultural context forms selfhood, which internalizes and makes meaning, which becomes externalized in society thereby transforming it (Rogoff, 2003).

Sociocultural theory uncovers the inextricable link between cognitive development and social identity, which “are jointly constituted through participation in multiple social worlds of family, community, and school” (Pellegrino, 2020, p. 50). This theory allows me to explore the development of young Muslims in Toronto through sociocultural contextualization, the experience and use of language, and the relational and dialogical nature of development within their multiple cultural worlds. This concept of development allows me to approach Muslim identity, which has been stationed monolithic by dichotomous narratives, with more nuance and openness. This contextualization allows me to move “beyond overgeneralizations that assume that human development everywhere functions in the same ways” (Rogoff, 2003, p. 7). Diversity of human cultures and development is actually “a resource for the creativity and future of humanity”, since a “uniform human culture would limit the possibilities for effectively addressing future needs” (p. 18). We have and will always be continuously learning from one another, and it is this mutual co-creation that I will be exploring in this thesis.

Through its holistic conception of development, sociocultural theory acknowledges that lived experiences create embodied knowledge, which becomes lived out into the world. It looks at the tangled connectedness of cognitive learning and social development, which signify a person’s being and becoming (Pellegrino, 2020). This view, by highlighting the importance of meaning making through active participation, also warns us of the harm done in “unsupportive

learning environments” (p. 50), which is why it is crucial to witness and reject these learning environments in favour of supportive learning environments.

On Narratives, Stories, and Books

Within sociocultural theory, we are both products of culture, as well as producers of it. A result of our society, as well as transformers of it. Absorbers of knowledge, and expanders of it. With this understanding of development, ordinary lived experiences become educative because they embody lived knowledge. This knowledge is not limited to the personal or individual, as the self exists within the fabric of the social, cultural, familial, political, linguistic, and institutional tales which share and shape one’s personal narrative (Clandinin, 2016). Thus, I deemed it fitting to use the qualitative method of narrative inquiry for my research.

Narrative Inquiry and Relational Ethics

Narrative inquiry is the study of “experience as story” (Clandinin, 2016, p. 13). Inspired by Dewey’s elucidation of educational experience as continuous –that experiences grow out of and lead into other experiences– knowledge is seen as contained within and encountered through one’s continuous experiences. Dewey viewed an individual’s experience as “central for understanding a person” (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002, p. 331). Narrative inquiry thus honors “lived experience as a source of important knowledge and understanding” (p. 17).

Narrative inquiry is expressed through storied form because we live by and in stories (Okri, 1997). The narratives of who we are and who we are becoming is complexly linked to our “knowledge, contexts, and identities” (Clandinin, 2016, p. 21). Through the lens of narrative inquiry, we gaze relationally at these phenomena. Stories live in us and constitute our identities; they are contained within our bodies and move with us around the world. Alongside the stories that live in us, we also live in stories; our bodies navigate through different cultural narratives,

political plotlines, and institutional tales. Narrative inquiry is thus relational inquiry, where we see the multiplicity of interrelated stories we live in/by more clearly.

The relational inquiry at the heart of narrative research makes this work deeply ethical, because of its ability to change lives. It is difficult work, necessitating attentiveness to the “unfolding” and “enfolding” of the storied lives of ourselves in relation to others (Clandinin, 2016). This inquiry is founded in the ethics of care, which opens our eyes to how we live relationally and how the stories we live in/by effect everyone (Noddings, 1984). Understanding that we live collaboratively, narrative inquiry allows us to “re-compose and negotiate” the stories we live by (Clandinin, 2016, p. 30); because “if we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives” (Okri, 1997).

Why Stories?

Narrative inquiry in the form of stories can initiate and facilitate “pedagogical movement from difficulty to insight” (Ingersoll, 2018, p. 195). Stories have historically and culturally been used as teaching tools, generating internal and external transformations. They have been used to overcome fear, articulate realities, mobilize change and reveal our possibilities (Lyle, 2018). Overcoming fear is the first step to articulating, mobilizing, and revealing possibilities, because one must be open to the vulnerabilities within themselves and within others through an ethics of care. Othering, binaries, and dichotomous narratives create divisiveness and disconnection through fear, which has become prevalent in modern Western culture and epistemology (Campbell, 2019; Lyle, 2018). To move away from dichotomous narratives is to move away from fear and disconnection and move towards love and connectedness. Narratives and stories “can be used instructionally to counter us/them dichotomies, and the process of ‘othering’ that often results from perceived cultural differences and assumed hierarchies” (Werner, 2002, p. 41).

They allow us to “open binaries to other possibilities” in favour of our continuous becoming (Watt, 2016b).

Stories make traversing through different worlds possible, giving us a deep experience of “what it is to be other and what it is to be our-selves in other’s eyes” (Clandinin, 2016, p. 23). Because of the power of stories to evoke familiarity and inspire empathy, stories allow for the making of deep connections, the sheer experience of which can transform people in inconceivable ways. This open space makes human connection, belonging, and growth possible; sharing the “self is a prerequisite condition of meaningful connection to others” (Lyle, 2018, p. 266), and no matter how difficult it is, stories allow us to take on the task of weaving this connectedness (Lyle, 2018).

Stories are the “portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful” (Clandinin et al., 2017, p. 90). As the “truths of our experiences” in narrative form (Creswell & Guetterman, 2021, p. 512), stories are “fragments of/in life, fragments that never stop interacting while being complete in themselves” (Trinh, 2009, p. 143). Stories speak to the past, present, and future – to who we were, are, and are becoming. Functioning as third spaces in which time and space, reality and possibility, and self and other blend into each other, stories evoke our deepest emotions and inspire our farthest imaginations (Trinh, 2009).

Stories are “a message from man to man, a message inspired by the divine aspect of his thought and soul” (Shakry, 2020, p. 164). Through contextualizing us, they allow us to “re/contextualize our understandings” of who we were, are, and could be – they allow us to “move forward in a good way” (Campbell, 2019, p. 1). Complexities and tensions are natural in these stories which have the power to “consolidate, compel, and challenge what is believed to be

true about the world” (Sumara & Iftody, 2006, p. iii). For this reason, stories are a powerful tool of knowledge construction (Romylos, 2016); since knowledge is constructed by those in power, stories can give voice to alternative narratives and realities which are intimate and personal.

Within My Study

Our identities may seem unstable, constantly shifting, and at times opaque. What gives our temporary, conflicting, and disparate experiences coherence and a “meaningful unity” are the acts of interpretation and narration (Bruckmayr, 2020, p. 240). Coherence and unification of self are the result of active interpretation and narration of our on-going and shifting experiences. Through the interpretation and unification of the narratives we adopt from the world, we construct our identities. Through the identities that we adopt, we live out our narratives and construct our world. When we understand the narratives that guide peoples’ identities and worldviews, we better understand their actions and reactions. Narrative inquiry thus is “an indispensable methodology in the study of human being and becoming” (Zimmerman & Kim, 2021, p. 1402).

Narrative inquiry and the storied form allow me to experiences, interpret, and convey the creative becomings of young Iranian Muslims growing up in Toronto. The narrative form allows me to delve intimately into the personal lives and experiences of my participants, which is important as “understanding development from a sociocultural-historical perspective requires examination of the cultural nature of everyday life” (Rogoff, 2003, p. 10). Since spirituality cannot be expressed quantitatively or objectively, the storied form allows the optimal and intimate experience of the participants’ inner realities and creative becomings.

The two participants in my study include a 25-year-old Iranian Muslim male, and myself, a 24-year-old Iranian Muslim female. Initially, I had another younger female participant, to

show three different becoming(s), each following a certain trajectory. After our first interview, however, the third participant chose to withdraw from the study due to the sensitivity of the subject. I chose to maintain the two participants I had and focus on more deeply situating their stories in their context, looking for the harmonies and tensions that exist between their stories, especially with the notion of gender.

I used a homogenous purposive sampling, choosing characters with similar traits: Iranian Muslims who grew up in Toronto with a spiritual identity and personal relationship with literature, especially within their spiritual development. The chosen age group can reflect on their upbringing and point out themes in the trajectory of their lives. Having grown up in the Iranian Muslim community in Toronto, I had a strong grasp of who would be ideal for this study. I approached the characters independently, maintained ethical guidelines, and explained the nature of the study, reminding them throughout that they could stop participating if it became too much, especially considering the collaborative nature of narrative inquiry.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with the participants, asking them to supplement their narrative with the appropriate literature that were conducive to their spiritual development and identity-formation. I situated the content provided within their personal, cultural, and historical con(text)s (Creswell & Guetterman, 2021). During my restorying process, I collaborated with my participants, discussed my findings, asked for clarification, and made sure the story I was telling was consistent with their experience.

In the restorying process, I use the three-dimensional space approach which is based on Dewey's philosophy of experience, "which is conceptualized as both personal and social" (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002, p. 339). This relates back to the relational quality of narrative inquiry; that to understand people and the continuity of their experiences, one must situate them

within their sociocultural contexts. The three-dimensional approach focuses on these three themes: interactions, which includes both the personal/internal and the social/external; continuity, which links past, present, and future through the continuity of experiences; and situation/place, which contextualizes and situates the character and their interactions and continuity of experiences (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). This approach allows for a holistic portrayal of the characters and stories.

By restorying this way, I attempt to give “structure to individual experiences by bringing cognitive, affective, and motivational connections to the told story” (Nasheeda et al., 2019, p. 2). This structuring requires highlighting the “actions, choices, and beliefs that transformed the participant’s experiences” (Nasheeda et al., 2019, p. 2), the process through which identity is constructed, positioned socially and culturally. I identified “themes, tensions, and patterns”, attempting to understand what they mean in their contexts; this exploration was shared with my characters as we collaborated and renegotiated the themes and meanings to reflect my characters’ lived experiences (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002).

Why Books

Linguists and cognitive scientists use framing theory to suggest that “much of our decision-making relies upon deeply held beliefs that are typically revealed through narratives and metaphors” (Whitmore & Meyer, 2020, p. 2). These layers of complexity form identity, and Whitmore and Meyer (2020) argue that “we cannot separate the deep meanings that compose and reflect our identities from the meanings we bring to and make of texts” (p. 6). Thus, the meanings we derive from texts are deeply associated with our identities. This transactional relationship demonstrates the “unique identities (subjectivities) of learners in their relationships with texts, contexts, and each other” (Whitmore & Meyer, 2020, p. 7). Thus, it is important to

move beyond understanding literature as “a mere taxonomy of texts” and come to know it “as a nexus of embodied practices, habits, and sensibilities” (Shakry, 2020, p. 19). The words we read undeniably shape our identities and create our world.

Since spiritual development is an intimately internal process and cannot be wholly known or relayed, it can best be situated and expressed through the texts that participants read. Thus, I use meaningful books read throughout my participants’ spiritual development to map out and convey their thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Furthermore, the fundamental core message of Islam was revealed through the holy Quran, which places books, literature, reading and learning as central to spiritual development. The Quran will thus be quoted throughout my entire thesis as the guideline for the spiritual development of Muslims.

Islamic Spirituality

I approach this thesis through the lens and framework of Islamic spirituality as expressed through the Quran. The Quran is the holy book for Muslims, divinely revealed to Prophet Muhammad by God. It is filled with a myriad of verses that emphasize reflection, contemplation, and deep thinking. The whole message of the Quran calls people to *tawheed*, the oneness and unity of God. This unity is manifested in all of God’s creations, including humans, who in striving to know God, must attest to the unity and wholeness inherent in all things, including themselves.

The main goal of the Quran is to awaken in people “the higher consciousness of their manifold relations with God and the universe” (Iqbal, 2009, p. 7). The first words revealed to Prophet Muhammad were “read” (Quran, 96:1). God could have called out saying, “listen”, “worship”, or “obey”, but instead, He says, “Read, in the name of thy Lord who created, created humans from a blood clot. Read! Thy Lord is most noble, who taught by the pen, taught humans

what they knew not." (Quran, 96:1-5). This encounter demonstrates that God is not asking people to only read His name, but to read the entire universe in His name to learn what they knew not (Kazmi, 2005). Therefore, people are supposed to read—which is to say, understand and explore the world—in the name of God and through the lens of knowing Him.

The object of reflection in the Quran usually takes three forms: reflecting on nature and the cosmos, which is God manifested through His creation; reflecting on the self, which is God manifested within us, and reflecting on history, which demonstrates where we came from, and where we are headed. Iqbal (2009) states the spirit of Islam can best be understood through these sources of knowledge. Hence belief and faith in God “does not limit knowledge” (Kazmi, 2005, p. 21), it only gives it direction by telling people to reflect on the creation, their own self, and their history (Kazmi, 2005). By doing so, the Quran demonstrates its openness to the world, as it continuously makes references to things outside of itself, aware of its own textuality and the constant changing nature of the world (Kazmi, 2005; Shakry, 2020). There is a dialogical relationship between the Quran and the world which teaches people to situate themselves in the Quran, then examine the world in its light, and return to the Quran with a new understanding, the process of which is infinitely repeated.

This dialogical relationship between the self and the world signifies that within Islam knowledge through personal experience of the self and the world is essentially “consistent with the revealed knowledge” (Baba & Zayed, 2015, p. 56). While the Quran is the verbal book of God, the cosmos is “His existential book”, and since “these two books are entirely consistent” (Amoli, 2014, p. 36), awareness of one naturally leads to the awareness of the other. Furthermore, “the profundity of one’s immediate experience of the objective world is proportionate to one’s awareness of oneself, of the Origin, the End” (Amoli, 2014, p. 17), and

what exists in between, which is why it is reflection on the self, history, and the cosmos that heightens and expands people's experience of reality.

This is the dialogical relationship between the self, the world, and the Quran, which constantly demands a new reading and reflection of what is. Learning in Islam, in fact, "can be defined as meditation on what is" (Diagne, 2018, p. 60). It is listening "to the eternally creative word, the one expressed in the human as well as in a dog or a bird, which continually causes it to be" (Diagne, 2018, p. 101). We not only observe what is, but we also experience our becoming. Becoming does not occur alone, in isolation, but rather it "constructs itself in the action of transforming the world, in order to lead it to its completeness" (Diagne, 2018, p. 93). We exist to the extent that we are in dialogue with the world and ourselves, seeking to transform both through our experience of and reflection on reality.

God, in a powerful narration, states "I was a hidden treasure and I wished to be known, I created human so I may be known". Prophet Muhammad, in another tradition states, "One who knows themselves, knows their Lord". The core message of Islam, as revealed and put forth in the Quran, is the experience and knowledge of the divine through the experience and knowledge of the self by reflecting on our surroundings, context, and history. Other Prophetic traditions, which emphasize the importance of knowledge include: "seek knowledge even in China", "the ink of the scholar is more precious than the blood of the martyr", and "a little knowledge is better than a lot of worship" (Rayshahri, 2009, pp. 775, 772, 774). These traditions highlight how learning and knowing are the most important tenants of Islam.

Now that I have established the theories and methods which ground this research, I will go on to tell the story of our current problem by taking a dive into our past...

Chapter 3: The Hi(stories) of Dichotomous Narratives and Resistance Through Third Spaces

Islam began as a religion open to the world, but slowly, the dialogical relationship between Islam and the world diminished, leading us to our current problem. Simultaneously, Western Enlightenment cemented dichotomous thinking, which is the predicament of our modern world. All history is a different story depending on who is telling it, at what time, and for what reason; in this chapter, I explore these hi(stories) to better understand our present issues. Finally, I reflect on the impact of dichotomous narratives on young Muslims in the West, and how they resist and renegotiate the limited categories imposed on them.

Hi(stories) of Dichotomous Narratives

Early Culture of Learning in Islam

With the first resounding “Read, in the name of your Lord”, the teachings of the Quran created a culture of learning for many years. At a time of ignorance, the Quranic message instructed humans to read in their Lord’s name: to read the universe and their own souls, the horizons and their own homes, the earth and all that rises from it and dies unto it, as humans will too one day, returning to their Lord. This culture of learning contextualized the Muslim as the open recipient of knowledge through the reflection and contemplation of the signs of God, which cover all that the eyes can see, the heart can feel, and the mind can imagine. This culture which pursued knowledge and learning as the means for God awareness—for all signs point to Him—paved way for the golden age in Islamic history, as polymaths read the entire world through God’s name, in the pursuit of expanding their conception of the world and the self (Kazmi, 2005). In the early Islamic era, there were many schools of thought within Islam as everyone attempted to grapple with and understand what it meant to be a Muslim in their time. This

diversity in numbers and schools of thoughts signifies “an attitude of great liberality in early Islam regarding Muslim identity”, since an essential part of a culture of learning is “an open and a flexible mind” (Kazmi, 2005, p. 29).

Institutionalization of Education and the Clergy-State Alliance

However, as time went by, the culture of learning changed; Kazmi (2005), Nasr (2012), and Noaparast (2016) attribute this to the institutionalization of education and the separation of religious and secular knowledge, of which only religious knowledge was deemed worthy of pursuing. With this, the “dialectical relationship between the Qur'an and the world was broken” (Kazmi, 2005, p. 41). The institutionalization and separation of knowledge automatically limited the scope of knowledge, which meant that Muslims’ “contribution to fields outside that narrow field of law fell, registering steep decline with the passage of time” (Kazmi, 2005, p. 44). This is how the openness and differences amongst Muslims narrowed down; whereas initially there were many different schools of thought attempting to deeply understand what it meant to be a Muslim in their sociocultural context, later Muslims created a unified identity of simply following religious laws to fit the mold of an ahistorical Muslim.

Kuru (2019), in his in-depth research *Islam, Authoritarianism, and Underdevelopment*, positions the institutionalization of knowledge as a product of the clergy-state alliance. Looking at the issue from a sociopolitical and economic standpoint, Kuru notes how in the early Islamic history, most Muslim scholars were merchants and not funded by the state, which was politically decentralized creating a balance of powers and contributing to the intellectual and economic flourishing of the time. The early scholars in fact made a point to remain financially independent from political influence and governmental pressure. They were a vaguely defined body with little internal structure and multiple roles and occupations, becoming polymaths in their various fields.

Kuru (2019) contextualizes the establishment of the alliance between the clergy and the rulers as a reactionary movement against the rising Shi'a empires of the area. The Sunni Abbasid and Seljuk empires established a Sunni orthodoxy by consolidating Sunni scholars against Shia thought to maintain their power against the rising Fatimid and Buyid Shia empires. Abbasid caliphs gathered scholars to issue a broad decree “which intended to put an end to theological debates by establishing a Sunni orthodoxy and threatening those who rejected it” (Kuru, 2019, p. 96). This decree created a limited categorization of who was and was not a Muslim, labelling philosophers, Shi'as, and those who place reason above revelation as heretics.

The establishment of Nizamiyya schools by the Seljuk vizier Nizam al-Mulk further deepened the clergy-state alliance. Established and funded by public officials, these politically owned education centers were used to “systematically affect the formation of the clergy” by controlling what they taught and learned (Kuru, 2019, p. 102). The role of the scholar became formalized within these institutions, which were limited to religious sciences, such as *hadith* (verbal traditions), *kalam* (theology), and *fiqh* (jurisprudence). By leaving out natural sciences and philosophy and viewing them as non-religious, these institutions limited the scope of knowledge and learning within the Muslim world, and further created a gatekeeping of knowledge. Muslim scholars were only trained in specific subjects within these institutions, and anything outside the realm of these subjects, or anyone outside of these institutions had no power or authority to speak.

One of the main figures in this story was Al-Ghazali, Muslim scholar and mystic. He spent several years in Nizam al-Mulk's court before being appointed to teach in the Nizamiyya school in Baghdad, where he was asked to criticize the Shi'a notion of infallible Imams. Becoming a proponent of the state, he legitimized exclusionary thinking by outlawing the

outliers: cementing Sunni orthodoxy over Shi'a theology, and revelation over reason. These categorizations, legitimized through the Nizamiyya institutions, were used to maintain the authority and power of the state by delegitimizing all oppositions.

Facing an internal spiritual crisis after several years of teaching, Al-Ghazali left his position in the Nizamiyya to delve deeply into Sufi ethics and worship. Moving away from argumentation that proved one right over another, Al-Ghazali defined the main goal of education as moral development, achieved through “habituation” (Attaran, 2015). Since he placed revelation over reason, moral education for Al-Ghazali consisted of creating good habits without question or doubt. This conception of moral development through habituation contributed to a rise of “anti-philosophy” in Islamic learning which has remained prevalent until today (Noaparast, 2016).

Al-Ghazali was a multi-dimensional figure who had a fluctuating relationship with the state and teaching, as he returned to the state and his teaching position prior to his death. He embodied different positions and views throughout his life allowing for many interpretations of his thought, which is why he remains one of the most prominent Muslim scholars to date. However, the most dominant interpretation of Al-Ghazali is the most orthodox one, due to the immensity of its impact on the Muslim world: his deep contribution to and legitimization of the clergy-state alliance through the Nizamiyya institutions (Kuru, 2019). Though he was not the first to create limited categorizations of Muslims, his position as a leading scholar in his time, his theoretical formation of Sunni orthodoxy and the legal declaration of Shias, rationalists, and philosophers as heretics deeply legitimized the clergy-state alliance. This shift in the heart of the Muslim civilization and culture of learning can be seen with the public burning of Ibn Sina's

books in Baghdad in the 12th century, which demonstrates burning the culture of learning to ashes (Kuru, 2019).

The intellectual success of early Islamic scholars was a result of the high status ascribed to independent scholars and merchants at a time when “Europe was mostly under the hegemony of the clergy and the military elite” (Kuru, 2019, p. 69). This position was reversed, however, as clergy and military elite became dominant in Muslim lands, and independent scholars and merchants became valued in the European world. A prime example demonstrating this shift is the use of paper and the printing press. Muslims imported paper production technologies from China in the 8th century and used paper to record knowledge, filling vast libraries contributing to intellectual flourishing. Europeans, on the other hand, accessed paper from the 11th to 15th century in their various parts but progressed quickly through the establishment of the printing press in the 15th century. The printing press allowed for rising literacy rates and the spread of information on a mass scale, leading to the flourishing of the European intellectual scene during the Renaissance and the Enlightenment.

Within the Muslim world, however, “not a single book was printed by Muslims from 1455 (when the first European book was printed) to 1729 (when the first Ottoman book was printed)” (Kuru, 2019, p. 207). The clergy derived their legitimacy from their monopoly over Islamic knowledge and interpretation within the educational institutions, which both legitimized the state and was legitimized by the state. Thus, they resisted the establishment of the printing press which would make knowledge available and accessible to everyone. For almost three hundred years within this region, there was no access to mass produced knowledge for the lay public, which led to rising illiteracy rates persisting to this day.

Enlightenment and the Cementing of Dichotomous Narratives

While the Muslim world was in its golden ages, the Western civilization was in its dark ages, seeking to break free from the chains, limitations, and superstitions of the Church and state which held back their progress. The printing press provided this release, as the mass sharing of knowledge and information ushered in the Renaissance, the Protestant Reformation, and the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment especially provided a movement during which European philosophers buried Christianity under the trope of reason and secularism (Ahmad, 2017). This led to the flourishing of Western philosophy and politics and set the foundation for the modern world.

Immanuel Kant, a central Enlightenment philosopher, in his essay *What is Enlightenment?* begins by saying: "enlightenment is man's emergence from his self incurred immaturity". He defines immaturity as having to be guided by another and not having the courage to follow one's own understanding. Maturity, reached through the Enlightenment, is defined as having the courage to reason, critique, and use one's own understanding. Enlightenment is a response to the imposed immaturity and blind following of religion by the rulers and clergy. It upholds full freedom of thought and expression and promotes popular sovereignty to limit the power of rulers and clergy abusing religion to maintain authority.

Enlightenment's progressive values interestingly created a sense of supremacy for the Western world, the belief that they were rational, progressive, civilized, and modern, while others were irrational, backwards, savage, and traditional. Having thrown off their own chains and shackles, they subjected others who they viewed as savage and irrational to critique, Islam being the main target. Ahmad (2017) argues that these categorizations were "an equally political-ethnic act" (p. 45), as Western philosophy's use of reason helped secure the West's ethnic

identity and power. Security in and of thought is deeply related to the security of selfhood and land: political security. One of the methods of achieving this political-philosophical security is “through calls to expel and terminate that which is classified as the foreign, strange, and outlandish” (Ahmad, 2017, p. 37). Kant’s attempt to bring validity and objectivity into philosophy was thus “a project of security with boundaries” (Ahmad, 2017, p. 37); a secure ground to philosophize from and subject others to critique. This secure ground is far from objective, as demonstrated by Kant who openly wrote about his belief in White supremacy and his understanding of Islam as an inherently irrational religion.

The false dichotomies of these categories were narrated by Oriental storytellers to validate the Enlightenment project and its ideals of reason and progress by subjecting the “Other” to critique and exercising power over them. This “White man’s burden of civilizing the world” was valid against the traditional, religious, and Islamic East, which justified “a process of delivering them from that predicament” (Dabashi, 2016, p. 22), through secularization, modernization, and Westernization. To achieve this, Orientalism, “colonialism’s ideological arm”, essentializes an ahistorical Islam stripped of time, space, and culture, “to facilitate its colonial inscription” (Dabashi, 2016, p. 29). By dividing, breaking down, and essentializing the beliefs and experiences of the other, colonization and imperialism become rationally justified as the natural and noble aiding of the superior West to the inferior other.

These dichotomous narratives, the overarching one socio-politically being East versus West, have been fanned in recent decades by scholars and politicians of both the East and the West. On the Western side, this narrative has been fueled by academics like Samuel Huntington, Bernard Lewis, and Francis Fukuyama. These scholars paint the “other” as alien and non-Western, giving rise to arguments such as the “Clash of Civilizations” and “Islam and the West”,

which paints Islam and the West as irreconcilable binary opposites (Dabashi, 2016; Khan, 2002). These narratives are further spread by mainstream media and politicians who benefit from these categorizations.

Muslim Scholars' Upholding of Dichotomous Narratives

Rather than resisting these narratives, Muslim scholars directly position themselves on its opposing end. From the mid-twentieth century, Muslim scholars began condemning “what they perceived as a new ignorant age, defined by the West or by modernity in secular terms that were challenging and changing the face and tastes of Muslim societies” (Hermansen, 2009, p. 187). Having experienced colonization, the war on terror, and the current Islamophobic narrative, Muslim scholars operate within a defensive paradigm in which they stand in opposition to the West; its ideals of modernity and secularism are seen as a threat to the Muslim identity, and Islamic values are seen as irreconcilable with Western values (Baba & Zayed, 2015; Halstead, 2004; Hermansen, 2009). Playing into the binary thinking produced by essentializing orientalist, Muslims are forced into a “self-alienating dialogue” by the West, a dialogue with a “defeated consciousness, formed under duress, resulting in Muslims being unable to recognize themselves in the mirror of those other empires” (Dabashi 2016, p. 9).

Beyond East versus West, dichotomous narratives present themselves in different terms such as secular vs. religious and tradition vs. modernity. Naquib Al-Attas, contemporary Malaysian philosopher, argues that “modern Western knowledge is infused with western secular values and is inappropriate for Muslims because of its secular associations”, and along with other scholars, he calls for “purging Muslim institutions of insidious western influences” (Halstead, 2004, p. 521). Iranian American scholar Seyyed Hossein Nasr sees modernity and secularism as “the main foe of all traditional religions” (Hermansen, 2009, p. 191). He also states that there is a

“huge gulf that exists between Islamic and western liberal conceptions of education” which is “ultimately unbridgeable” (Halstead, 2004, p. 526). Hamza Yusuf Hanson, co-founder of the first Muslim university in America, believes that “modern, secular-humanistic education will destroy Muslim children’s faith and confidence in their religion” (Hermansen, 2009, p. 191). His British counterpart, Abdal Hakim Murad, founder of Cambridge Muslim College in the UK, identifies modernity “not only with the End Times but also as “the absence of the sacred” in a “bland consumer void” (Sedgwick, 2020, p. 138). Yusuf and Hakim, both white Western converts, identify angst and anxiety in today’s age; “for Hamza Yusuf “angst-ridden youth living in a nature-deprived world of mediated reality” and for Abdal Hakim the “sovereign human subject [...] in a state of increasing crisis and anxiety” (p. 139). Not surprisingly, all these scholars are deeply rooted in a Ghazalian framework of moral education through habituation.

The argument against modernity, made most fervently in the Traditionalist school of thought, is an interesting one because it deals with the concept of time; while East vs. West or religious vs. secular are geographical and ideological binaries, Traditionalism creates a dichotomy of time. Traditionalism upholds the perennial philosophy that there is a singular divine truth and origin to the world’s religious traditions. Going further than perennialism, Traditionalists contrast a romanticized past (tradition) against a demonized present (modernity); anything “deeply ingrained in society prior to modernization” was traditional and thus had “an aura of holiness” (Legenhausen, 2002, pp. 6, 12). While the Traditionalists’ arguments against modernity have valid roots, this is another essentializing argument not in line with reality. Seen as having an inherent divine origin, traditional societies are over-glorified by Traditionalists, and modern societies are deemed inherently deviant from the traditional past and away from the sacred. As if the divine only manifests itself in a single way, at a specific time. Tradition has its

positives – as well as its negatives. As does every time, including modernity. The past should not be glorified simply because it held tradition – there are many traditions that are put aside with every new age, because they are “not worth preserving” (Legenhausen, 2002, p. 15). Modernity’s benefits can also not be cast aside simply because of its detriments.

Within the Western Muslim world, Seyyed Hossein Nasr remains the most influential Traditionalist. He was deeply affected by Traditionalism in his youth after being exposed to the works of Rene Guenon and Frithjof Schuon. He then “embarked on a career devoted to Islamic science and Islamic philosophy, understood in an essentially but not explicitly Traditionalist framework” (Sedgwick, 2011, p. 9). While not putting the Traditionalist school at the forefront, Nasr’s reading of Islam is made through a wholly Traditionalist lens, which lends itself to critique, as “Traditionalism exalts Tradition in a manner not sanctioned by Islamic teachings” (Legenhausen, 2002, p. 14). Identifying neo-traditionalism as a broader category that includes Hamza Yusuf and Abdal Hakim Murad who do not identify as Traditionalist but espouse similar teachings, Sedgwick (2020) uncovers how this brand of Islam is “associated with regime-sponsored official Islam in the Arab world, and with government-sponsored “moderate” Islam in the Western world” (p. 130). This brand of Islam “has been oversimplified, removing diversity and multiple perspectives” (Sedgwick, 2020, p. 135), limiting the scope of who is a Muslim, and who has authority as a Muslim. By espousing an ahistorical narrative of Islam for the agendas of Arab and Western governments, dichotomous narratives have been “aided and abetted by nativist Muslim intellectuals” who have taken up a reactionary response within a defensive paradigm (Dabashi, 2016, p. 23).

The False Nature of Dichotomous Narratives

Within Islam, something is not given inherent value because it is a tradition of the past – in fact, Muslims are told to reframe and understand things in a new way at every new era, for each time comes with its own problems and requires its own solutions. Being a Muslim requires being in the world – not building “a sense of self-worth on the ruins of an idealized past”, but rather seeking “whatever truth becomes available to us in our changing circumstances” (Legenhausen, 2002, p. 20). Modernization is a fact of the world, and Muslims must remain open to this by realistically examining and understanding the conditions of their modern society, so that they can provide stable foundations and innovative solutions for the current and future generations, rather than seeking to return to the ways of the old.

The false problem here, Diagne (2018) argues, lies in “setting our sights on modern times and Islam”, and seeing time as “a trial that religion must overcome” (p. 85). Time, however, “is not exterior to religion, but is its texture” (Diagne, 2018, p. 85). A Prophetic tradition utilized greatly by modern Islamic philosophers, is “Time is God”, which leads them to argue that time is “a creative becoming” of the human, a cosmology of “continual emergence” (Diagne, 2018, p. 86). Religion does not “sit above the historical flow of things” (Legenhausen, 2002, p. 22) – it participates willingly in each era and grows to the extent that it allows itself to converse with the times, replacing old paradigms of understanding that lose their power over time by striding towards new ones with sincere intentions and right actions. What is needed most today is not “to retrieve the sacred and posit it against the secular”, which Dabashi (2016) calls reactionary, but rather “to reimagine the sacred in the immediate vicinity of its current worldliness” (p. 41).

God responds to the geographical argument of East vs. West and the ideological argument of religious vs. secular in the Quran by saying: "Unto God belongs the East and the

West. Wherever you turn, there is the face of God, indeed God is all-encompassing and knowing" (2:115). Therefore, there is no distinction or opposition between the East and West in how they contain God since He encompasses all things, and there is no separation between sacred and secular because God permeates all things. While Islam condemns these oppositions and distinctions, vocal Muslim scholars in both the East and the West see the secularism and modernity of Western nations as cause for anxiety and the reason for the loss of the sacred, something that must be opposed or purged to survive as Muslims.

Through this exposition, I aimed to demonstrate the lack of basis and validity of these dichotomous narratives, which are fictitious tools used for political agendas. I also uncovered how the systematic reduction of Islam was carried “above all by its own leading ideologues and public intellectuals to a monolithic site of ideological resistance to foreign domination” (Dabashi, 2016, p. 16). This monolithic portrayal of Islam has affected the lives of Muslims in both the East and the West. Not only do these narratives close off Islam’s dialogue with the world, but their essentialization strips Muslims of their culture, strength, and identity.

Impact of Dichotomous Narratives on Muslim Youth in the West

Muslim youth growing up in the West struggle to create a holistic and unified sense of self while resisting binary identities projected onto them because of dichotomous narratives which essentialize and reduce both their Muslim and Western identities (Abo-Zena et al., 2009). These narratives play out politically and socioculturally, in the media and in mosques, in schools and in homes. Belonging, community, and acceptance play a crucial part in adolescent identity formation, but these clashing narratives create a distorted sense of belonging, community, and acceptance—if any at all. These narratives compel young Muslims to choose between abandoning Islam since it is at odds with their current context or withdrawing from their current

context because it is at odds with Islam (Ahmed, 2009; Hermansen, 2009; Saatchian, 2015).

Thus, Muslim youth face psychological distress, identity fragmentation, and a sense of alienation within their Western context and their Muslim communities.

Muslim youth struggle with their intersecting and dissecting notions of self, situated within their religion, ethnicity, culture, community, and environment (Sensoy & Stonebanks, 2009). Unfortunately, their identities are often reduced to limiting categories. Since 9/11, Islam has been seen as “inherently incompatible with Western cultures” (Khan, 2009, p. 27). The markers and signifiers of Muslim identity represent the “other”, leading to discrimination and harassment (Aitchison et al., 2008). This creates a “psychological dimension and fear of being an outcast” which is felt on all fronts, as their identity is put under scrutiny and question (Abo-Zena et al., 2009, p. 5). As such, Muslim youth might identify more deeply with their Muslim identity to stand against rejection, or dis-identifying to be accepted (Ahmed, 2009; Saatchian, 2015).

Within the Canadian context, many Muslim youth feel “defensive and under attack or scrutiny because of their religion”, remaining “misunderstood and unacknowledged in Canadian school curriculum” (Watt, 2016a, p. 22). Within the school system and popular media, the Muslim identity is seen as homogenous and myopic, which has caused many Muslim students to experience “alienation, marginalization, and a sense of “othering”” (Khan, 2009, p. 28). Muslim students are often put on the spot to educate their peers and teachers about Islam and other cultures associated with it, even if they had no knowledge of them (Khan, 2009). Thus, the identity formation of Muslim youth often occurs as their identity is under question, often being projected onto them by others.

Within their Muslim communities, youth are also frustrated due to the “lack of culturally relevant, age-appropriate, religious and social programs” (Ahmed, 2009, p. 106). At home, their

parents' lack of understanding of Western culture causes social restrictions to be placed on them to ensure they do not lose their religious identity through participation. Thus, Muslim youth might feel the need to reject Western culture in the place of the 'pure' Islam, which is monolithic and ahistorical. Or they might renounce this monolithic and ahistorical Islam due to its seeming incompatibility with their Western context (Hermansen, 2009).

Gendered Struggles

These conflicts and struggles of identity especially affect Muslim females, particularly those who veil. Veiled Muslims have “unique challenges negotiating their identities within a complex, shifting discursive terrain between family expectations, absence in the school curriculum, and mass media representations” (Watt, 2016a, p. 22). Both essentializing narratives of West and East view Muslim females through a fixed, homogenous entity (Watt, 2012b). For Westerners, information about Muslim females is limited to stereotypical colonial depictions in popular media (Rezai-Rashti, 2005; Watt, 2012a, 2012b, 2016a). In school, young hijabi youth in Ottawa feel “they are leaving high school with a less fulfilling experience than their peers”, as the social events are not catered to them (Alvi, 2008, p. 107). As visible Muslims, veiled females often feel obligated to answer their peers' questions about Islam, and they feel the need to promote a positive image of themselves to assert a positive image of Islam (Khan, 2009; Zine, 2006). In Muslim communities, Muslim women are also essentialized and idealized, often judged by how much they cover (Khan, 2002).

Resisting Dichotomous Narratives Within Third Spaces

Muslim youth in general, and visible Muslim females in particular, have the challenging task of resisting the weight of these dichotomous narratives, while at the same time having to defend or explain both sides, or choosing one over the other to be relieved of the psychological

burden. Many Muslim youth, however, are not passive victims of a “cultural clash and/or trapped in an identity crisis” (Sunier, 2016, p. 129). Despite popular dichotomous narratives, Muslim youth positively construct their identity as “active agents of their own cultural environment” (p. 129). As they navigate through their challenges, they are engaged in “a constant (re)construction, (re)interpretation, and expression of their identities” (Khan, 2009, p. 32). By destabilizing dichotomous ways of thinking, they open a “third space” which is the fluid space of cultural hybridity (Bhabha, 1988). This third space of cultural hybridity can give rise “to something different... a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation” (Bhabha, 1990, p. 211). This in-between space is marked by “shifting psychic, cultural, and territorial boundaries” (Khan, 2002, p. 2). Within this third space, Muslim youth gain newfound historical agency, where their multiple identities can be negotiated rather than negated (Khan, 2002). Muslim identity can come out of its confines, not being controlled by traditionalist Muslims, or vilified by Western orientalist, and the hybridized Muslim identity can become “a productive tension filled with possibility” (p. xvi). Although this pressure and tension can create diamonds, it can also crush souls in its process, making this a critical issue to examine and deal with.

Muslim youth develop hybrid identities through which they actively transform their marginalized environment by constructing a “Muslim space” for themselves (Khan, 2009). Despite their challenges, Muslim youth “resist, encounter, or overcome their obstacles” (Khan, 2009, p. 28). Veiled Muslim females in schools proudly wear the hijab and use their visibility to teach others about Islam. Many also create their own communities at schools and universities. The Muslim Students Association (MSA) is a powerful student club in schools and universities that allows Muslim youth to operate within this third space. It allows them to have a community and a place they belong, where they can feel safe and grow. Through their events, they can

“transform potentially marginalizing factors within their schools while working to create a positive image for Muslims” (Khan, 2009, p. 35).

Within this sociocultural third space, dichotomous narratives are contested and resisted, allowing for the emergence of a holistic identity: the witnessing of unity in multiplicity. The creation of a holistic identity is an inherently spiritual endeavor that resists fragmentation and dualism through aligning with wholeness and oneness. This is in line with the Islamic foundation of *tawheed*, and God’s directions for learning in the Quran, which first requires contextualization, and then deep reflection and contemplation on one’s context. As the spirit and culture of learning in Islam have been stifled under dichotomous narratives and the gatekeeping of knowledge, it is up to individual Muslim youth to imagine, practice, and create a holistic Muslim identity that is not at odds with any geographical location or time. This identity, directed towards Oneness, is always fresh and ever-renewing, open to reading the entirety of the world in the light of Oneness. Thus, it needs a reawakening of the spirit of Islam, which is united in its multiplicity, not fragmented in its duality.

In this chapter, I uncovered the historical roots of our current problem which negatively impact young Muslims growing up in the West. I have also demonstrated that young Muslims, amidst these polarizing narratives, open third spaces for creative and fearless becomings. In the next chapter, I will take a deeper look at the links between identity development, spirituality, and learning, to get a better grasp of how to move beyond our predicament.

Chapter 4: Identity Development, Con(text)s, Meaning Making, and Spirituality in Education

Identity is actively grappled with during adolescence, and the ability to come out with a well-developed sense of self creates a positive impact on both the individual and society. During this process, community recognition and acceptance is a big indicator of healthy identity formation. Since “the self is situated in culture” and the culture in the self, one’s identity is formed within the cultural communities one is situated in (Watt, 2011, p. 65). The lack of approval and appreciation from one’s cultural communities distorts an individual’s self-image, creates a fragmented psyche, and denies the chance to function meaningfully in one’s society (Abd-Allah, 2006; Omar, 2012).

Identity is a life story that we tell ourselves; at the core of this story, we are trying to answer an essential question: who am I? Through telling one’s life story, individuals form their identity narratives and contextualize themselves socioculturally (Nasheeda et al., 2019). Story allows the interpretation and narration of one’s various life experiences into a meaningful and coherent unity (Bruckmayr, 2020). These narratives help create a sense of purpose and meaning in one’s life. This life story begins to form in adolescence because of physiological and psychological maturity, which demand the establishment of “oneself in the world through work, school, and family” (McLean, 2005, p. 683). This establishment of the self in the world requires making meaning of oneself in one’s context.

Meaning making is done through language, which is also socioculturally situated. We learn the world through the word, and we understand the word through the world. Language plays a fundamental role in development, as it is the main tool and symbol of communication; not only do we learn through our interaction with language, but we also use language to

transform socially shared activities “into internal processes” (Whitmore & Meyer, 2020, p. 39). Whitmore and Meyer (2020) acknowledge the layers of complexities in our lives that influence meaning making, especially within the texts that we encounter. They state, “our making meaning of any text is inseparable from our identities as human beings” (Whitmore & Meyer, p. 6). They follow in the footsteps of Rosenblatt who viewed literature as exploration, highlighting the transactional nature between reader and text, which produce unique identities in relation to texts and con(text)s. As we are transformed in the world and by the word, the meanings that compose our identities are inextricably linked to the meanings “we bring to and make of texts” (Whitmore & Meyer, p. 6).

Language learning deeply influences one’s identity development, as it is situated within sociocultural networks and con(text)s that contain notions of identity and power (Hadzantonis, 2017). How language is taught and used therefore, affects what one comes to believe about themselves and the world, which is why Freire (1970) says, “to speak a true word is to transform the world” (p. 75), and “changing language is part of the process of changing the world” (Freire, 1994, p. 67).

Having established the links between identity development, meaning making, and language within our con(text)s, I now turn to a deeper discussion of these topics. I explore the modern reflexive project of identity formation, highlighting its relational nature. I identify the connection between spirituality, learning, and identity formation. I problematize our current education system which hinders the formation of a holistic identity, as it is concerned with acquiring information for market value, and not with spirituality and meaning making. I go on to propose meaning making as the inherent spiritual nature of learning and education, which can help create a holistic conception of the self in the world.

Identity Development

Identity development is an active, ongoing, creative, and relational process (Meyer & Meiklejohn, 2020). It is a process of becoming that is continuously renewed (Delic, 2018). This development is socioculturally constructed and dependent on the meanings individuals assign to their experiences and relationships within their con(text)s. Before the modern age, identity was defined by fixed social positions, but with modernity the individual herself became “the center of sense making and subjectivity construction” (Jung, 2020, p. 22). No longer subject to a “dominant natural order”, the individual “is responsible for creating coherence and meaning herself” (Sinclair, 2020, p. 150). This opens the reflexive potential of individuals who must become self-aware and self-conscious, which is why modern identity construction has been defined as a “reflexive project” (Jung, 2020, p. 23).

Identity as Reflexive and Relational

For modern identity to be reflexively positioned, it must develop through “hybridity, intermediacy, contingency, and multiple engagements” (Hadzantonis, 2017, p. 3), rather than monolithic and binary categorizations. This third space of negotiation promotes a creative becoming that is fluid, evolving, and encompassing, rather than static, bound, and exclusionary. Sociocultural theory presents the emergence of identity through discourse and discursive action; identity does not emerge from inside a person, but rather externally through “intersubjective relations” (Hadzantonis, 2017, p. 52). Human identity is contingent on the dialogical relationship between the self in the world, mediated through sociocultural institutions and tools. Thus, one’s identity is deeply situated, contingent on a locality which is often imagined (Hadzantonis, 2017).

Identity construction takes place internally and externally; personally and culturally; individually and socially (Omar, 2012). Inwardly, we strive to maintain a unified sense of self,

while outwardly, we seek to relate to others through mutual sharing of recognition and respect (Delic, 2018). Identity implies “both sameness and difference” as it is the “self-definition of one individual or group in relation to other individuals and groups” (Delic, 2018, p. 25). It is deeply relational and cannot be experienced in isolation. Only through interpersonal and intergroup relations can a meaningful sense of self arise. As relational beings, we are always co-constructing ourselves and our world alongside each other in the world.

Spirituality, Learning, and Identity Formation

Psychologists, educators, and spiritual teachers alike highlight the central role that spirituality plays in learning and development. Spirituality involves notions of transcendence, oneness, and beyond-ness, and has always been an integral part of human nature and culture. It also positively affects wellbeing, as it nurtures “an individual’s sense of belonging, meaning, and purpose” (Geary, 2013, p. 79). Educator and author Parker Palmer spent his life uncovering the spiritual dimension of teaching and learning, and the sense of wholeness it can provide for students and teachers alike. He defines this dimension as “the ancient and abiding quest for connectedness with something larger than our egos” (Palmer, 2003, p. 380). Palmer highlights the central role that relationships play in spirituality, emphasizing the personal and relational aspects of this connectedness (Bradley, 2011; Palmer, 2003). Spirituality is inherently relational, and thus permeates all relational notions like identity formation, education, and the ethics of care, as it emphasizes the connection of self with the internal, external, and transcendent other (Bradley, 2011; Geary, 2013). As such, “spirituality plays a key role in identity formation and in the pedagogical process itself” (Bradley, 2011, p. 2), and neglecting the spiritual realm is akin to denying a fundamental part of the self and the world.

Despite all this, spirituality has no space in today's educational institutions. The current education model measures external variables and produces objective solutions, ignoring and even discrediting "the powers of the human heart" (Palmer, 2003, p. 385). In Canada, the absence of spirituality in public school curriculums has been critiqued, with critics contending that "neglecting the spiritual dimension of learning leaves a void and fails to address essential questions of the heart and soul" (Geary, 2013, p. 37). As spirituality is "central to the making of meaning in terms of ontological inquiries", omitting the spiritual realm in education divorces students from the central, foundational, and inherently meaningful aspect of learning: of understanding themselves and their place in this world (Geary, 2013, p. 29). To explore this problem, I examine the dominant education model of learning through acquisition, which is our current system, before providing its spiritual alternative through meaning making.

Learning through Acquisition

The discourse of acquisition has been the prominent mode of learning since the Enlightenment, setting the foundation and structure of today's education system. In this discourse, coined by Paulo Freire as the banking model, knowledge is a commodity deposited by teachers into students, to be later withdrawn for assessments and evaluations (Whitmore & Meyer, 2020). Adopting the Enlightenment's emphasis on reason over emotion, this discourse has made schools complicit in inhibiting creativity, meaning making, and spirituality. Despite the evident contextualized, relational, and deeply meaningful nature of learning, this system continues to "prioritize empirical knowledge while marginalizing the uniquely human aspects of the educative experience" (Lyle, 2018, p. 257). By excluding the "affective, intuitive, creative, perceptive, and critical aspects of learning" (Lyle, 2018, p. 257), this discourse denies an essential part of the self and places a limitation on learning, disconnecting us from our deepest

parts (Lyle, 2018). This disconnectedness deeply diminishes students' capacity for spiritual development and makes students disengaged and detached from their learning (Geary, 2013; Lyle, 2018).

In learning by acquisition, students are taught to “categorize and disassemble” (Geary, 2013, p. 9), the world into parts to understand it. Categorized and disassembled knowledge is limited, allowing it to be used to dominate, control, and attain mastery over property. Lacking spirit and meaning, this model creates a disintegrated learning environment and a fragmented knowing/being. Freire viewed this model as “mythologizing reality, inhibiting creativity, resisting dialogue, and failing to acknowledge humans as historical beings” (Asgharzadeh, 2007, p. 349; Freire, 1970). This fragmentation and disintegration have negative physical and physiological impacts on learners, leading to chronic stress and a wounded creativity that creates a crisis of being traumatic for many youths (Meyer & Meiklejohn, 2020).

Living in abstraction, students are disconnected and lack meaning, ignoring intuition and experience due to their absence in education. The subtle world of the soul and the powers of the heart are amiss, as they cannot be evaluated, measured, or quantified (Bradley, 2011; Geary, 2013). But reason stripped of meaning is a divergence – a misdirection in thought, since “cognition cannot be separated from affect” (Geary, 2013, p. 32). Our thoughts and reasoning emerge naturally from a world of meanings already deeply embedded within us. By denying the spiritual realm, learning through acquisition ultimately closes the door on the deepest, most intimate level of knowledge: ontological inquiry, the study of being itself. This can result in deep disconnect from a sense of self, community, belonging, and meaning in one's existence. In essence, learners are stripped of their core quintessential spirit – their beingness, and thus, their becoming.

This model is built on gaining power and maintaining a capitalist economic structure. Marketized learning institutions commercialize higher education, creating “a state of soulless competition where market mentality and capitalist logic dominate everything else” (Asgharzadeh, 2007, p. 336). In this system emphasis is placed on external achievement over internal qualities that produce “moral and caring” humans (Geary, 2013, p. 79). Students view education “in the context of upward occupational and social mobility rather than as a means of developing the mind, enriching the intellect, and training conscientious, responsible, and socio-politically committed citizens” (Asgharzadeh, 2007, p. 336). Learning occurs in a linear fashion, without conflict, dialogue, or challenge, leaving no possibility for growth, transformation, critical thinking, or dialogue. Students are domesticated and do not have the right to name their world – to speak, or to critique. As such, language is just another commodity deposited to be withdrawn for market value, not a sociocultural tool used to create meaning, evoke spirit, and transform the world.

Meaning Making: The Inherent Spiritual Nature of Learning

In our fast-paced and evolving world, we need innovative, creative, adaptive, subjective, and open understandings of education. Seeking to disrupt the limited lens of learning through acquisition, researchers and educators in this field are increasingly reframing learning as an end-product of meaning-making, thus “equating meaning construction with learning and knowledge” (Cambourne & Kilarr, 2020, p. 116). This perspective portrays something deeply intuitive and subjective: that we learn most deeply when what we learn is *meaningful to us*.

Meaning is made through an affective learning experience – one that is deeply personal, emotional, creative, and intuitive, complexly situated in the social, political, and linguistic realities of one’s experiences. The discourse of meaning making situates the learner at the center

of meaning making, a process that is “active, intense, multimodal, social, and quite complex, but also very natural and easy” (Whitmore and Meyer, 2020, p. xxvi). This method honours the complexities of the situated self and promotes learning as experiential and embodied.

Meaning is produced through language and literacy learning: becoming literate of the world, through the word. Meaning making processes include reading, writing, artistic expression, playing, thought processes and more, which lead to written, visual, and embodied products and manifestations of meaning (Whitmore & Meyer, 2020). These processes and products are affective and inseparable from each other, as they are “situated in social, cultural, linguistic, and political realities” (Whitmore & Meyer, 2020, p. xxv). Meaning making requires the composition of narratives and metaphors that relate to personal experiences. Framing theory, developed in the field of linguistics and cognitive science, “suggests that much of our decision-making relies upon deeply held beliefs that are typically revealed through narratives and metaphors” (Whitmore & Meyer, 2020, p. 2). Thus, the metaphors and narratives that we use to rule our lives are crucial to examine and can be detrimental if they are controlled or manipulated by external forces.

Learning through meaning making promotes a holistic vision of education which is culturally and linguistically contextualized, attesting to the socioculturally situated nature of learning and literacies. This discourse aims to cultivate democratic, thoughtful, and caring citizens. Meaning making is personal, social, and political, “especially when it is realized as a threat to those with power and wealth” (Whitmore & Meyer, 2020, p. 7). As we have witnessed, the “political pressures and corporate tentacles” (Whitmore & Meyer, 2020, p. xxv), imposed on learning in the acquisition model, educators and researchers must resist these dominant sociopolitical narratives and turn instead to cultivating meaningful and holistic learning experiences.

Wholeness of Being

To know the world and ourselves fully, our learning must be deeply and intimately experienced. It must be felt in the heart, soul, and body to become fully integrated, as we live wholly contextualized as our spiritual and material selves. Freire (1994) poignantly expressed “I am a totality, not a dichotomy” (p. 30). As living organisms contextualized in time and space, our spiritual journey is “an embodied quest that requires openness to learning in the world, in a historical context”, and to cocreating our present and future world alongside others (Geary, 2013, p. 9). Embarking on a spiritual journey requires making meaning of the self and others, material and immaterial realms, the unknown and the unknowable and our place in this space and time. While learning through acquisition disassembles the world to categorize it, meaning making through contemplation “aims at relatedness” (Geary, 2013, p. 25) – at making the world transparent through its wholeness. While breaking down the world into parts gives mastery and control over the material realms, contemplating on the world as a whole allows opening up to the immaterial realm, blending the knower and the known (Geary, 2013).

Concreteness vs. Abstractness

In the previous chapter, I discussed how Islamic education institutions limited knowledge to a set of concrete subjects by the ruling class which has remained prevalent in the Muslim conception of knowledge and learning. Ghazali’s framework of moral habituation strongly influences the conception of what it means to be a Muslim by highlighting habitual actions over active learning, questioning, reflection, and contemplation. On the other hand, since the Enlightenment, rationality has reigned supreme in the Western world, putting the emphasis on abstract conceptions. This difference in learning has been the ground and driving force of

dichotomous narratives. With both sides limited to their own conception of knowing and seeing the world, there is little room for dialogue, discussion, or negotiation.

Young Muslims attending schools in the West are faced with abstractions devoid of soul, and within their Muslim communities they face concrete rulings devoid of meaning. Both sides function to create a mold – an ideal, concrete, and ahistorical Muslim identity which resists Western influence, or a Western educated secular worker who further the market economy. The difficulty of being a Muslim in the West is equal to the privilege of this position. While pulled from opposing sides, young Muslims who actively question, reflect, and engage their spirit against these limiting conceptions can emerge with a powerful sense of self, and vision of what it means to be a Muslim in their context. Ultimately, it is the realm of the soul, the ineffable, inexpressible presence and unity of being that guides young Muslims through these polarizing narratives.

In this chapter, I examined the importance of spirituality in identity development, learning, and as the path to resisting binary thinking and fragmentary being. Finally, it is time to turn to our stories, those of two young Iranian Muslims growing up in Toronto, and how their spiritual development and creative becomings aided their identity throughout the struggles they faced in their contexts. These stories are told through the texts entangled within their con(text)s, highlighting the importance of language, learning, and literature on this path.

Story One

1.

On a sunny Canadian summer's day, I chase a ball around a field in Richmond Hill. The sun scorches my head as I dash and dart, dribbling my way through the passing faces, and with a solid and powerful kick, I shoot the ball into the net.

“Goaaal!”

Panting and breathless, we take a break to cool off. The boys told me they were glad to have me back; I had just returned home after a year abroad in Switzerland for my dad's sabbatical. The experience I had there was transformative to say the least; the immersion in the natural environment helped me clarify and purify my soul in a way that felt so wholesome – so intuitive. I was becoming aware of myself, who I was and who I wanted to be. I read the entire Quran in English for the first time. The verses would tell me, reflect on the mountains, nature, on the universe, and I would look up and see the mountains, the trees, the sky. I felt like every moment was speaking to me, like I was uncovering my soul. I wipe the sweat off my face, yearning for a drop of water to quench my thirst, but it is Ramadan, and I am fasting.

At the end of our game, I walk home with one of my friends, telling him about my spiritual experience abroad. As we parted ways, my friend called out to me – “you should be a soulful soccer pro, how about that? With each goal, his soul soars higher!”

Walking alone, his words echo in my head; “soulful soccer pro”. From a young age, being a professional soccer player was all I wanted– I was in love with the sport, both its beauty and power. The game pushed me to understand and refine myself and my skills. Soccer was my metaphor for life – with its goals, obstacles, opponents, and teammates, it was my first spiritual playground. To get better, I had to train, and this training prepared me for my spiritual training. I

replayed all my games several times in my head, re-living my every move, trying to figure out exactly what mistakes I made and how to improve. This practice seeped into my everyday life, especially while I was in Switzerland; becoming more self-aware, I began taking account of my days, evaluating my thoughts, actions, emotions, and inclinations. I wanted to learn from myself, and to face my shortcomings honestly and work on mending them.

I later learned the word for this practice in the spiritual tradition of Islam was *muhasaba*. Literally meaning accounting, *muhasaba* is the act pondering retrospectively on your day, and calling your soul into account of what it has and has not done. *Muhasaba* created vigilance on my path of spiritual refinement, grounding me in the present moment, and I had learned it first in soccer. These practices opened a whole new reality for me and made me wonder about who I wanted to become; in my process of self-awareness and inner purification, I faced something that became more beautiful and powerful than soccer for me: the pursuit of higher truths, of learning more and becoming more. I knew I wanted to do something that would advance my intellect and spirit, something inherently meaningful – I wanted to drown myself in this spiritual tradition to gain newfound life that stemmed from my knowing. But I did not know how to pursue this path, or where it would take me.

At home, I decided to seek solace from the Tao Te Ching, which I had read in Switzerland. It had deeply impacted me; its description of the flow and grace of nature was an open book before my eyes with the abundant mountains and trees around me. I strove to connect to and function with that same flow and grace of nature – this idea is consistent with Islam's declaration that all of the natural world is in submission to God, and that peace is found in the submission to God – letting myself swim with the natural flow of things allowed me to draw a lot

of inspiration from my surroundings, creating a spiritually intuitive experience. Seeking this wisdom, I grabbed my copy from my bookshelf, opened to a random page, and read:

Allow your life to unfold naturally

Know that it too is a vessel of perfection

Just as you breathe in and out

Sometimes you're ahead and other times behind

Sometimes you're strong and other times weak

Sometimes you're with people and other times alone

To the Sage all of life is a movement toward perfection

So what need has he for the excessive, the extravagant, or the extreme? (Tzu, 2008, p. 37)

The words both strike me and calm me. Sitting down, I quieten my mind so I can listen more clearly to my soul. Breathing slowly, delving within myself, bringing awareness into my space, I reduce my thoughts and ramblings – the future will come, for now I have this breath. And being aware of this, this is my success. This is my knowing. To redirect my mind and focus on gaining knowledge in the here and now. I will flow with the grace of nature, allowing my life to unfold naturally, guiding me where it may...

My mom's voice calls me from downstairs, "start getting ready so we can get to the mosque in time!" I jolt up to take a quick shower to wash off the soccer sweat, excited to be back in my mosque for the first time in a year.

The sound of the Quran echoes through the mosque, along with the murmur of Persian conversations and laughter of children as they chase each other between the aisles of men and women. I exhale and smile to myself – there is nothing like the sense of community during

Ramadan. It's always a special time: *iftars* with family and friends, visiting different communities, late night prayers and reflections, the constant state of worship – I was ready to continue riding my spiritual wave.

The guest lecturer for the month was from Iran, Dr. Ansari who studied Quranic exegesis, and was tonight focusing on Surah Isra. Settling down on the ground in front of the chairs where the men sat, straining my ears to listen above the murmur of conversations, I heard the Dr. Ansari recite a verse, “Indeed, this Qur'an guides to that which is most suitable and gives good tidings to the believers who do righteous deeds that they will have a great reward” (17:9). I had been trying to absorb the Quran deeply; this was the word of God, my maker, and reading it felt as if God is speaking to me personally and intimately, trying to guide me, teach me, move me towards righteousness. The speaker's voice caught my attention, his gentle tone as he talked about the day of Resurrection when we will face our maker and it will be said to us, “read your record. Today your own soul is enough to calculate your account” (17:14); I shiver as I think about my soul, and how it will be taken into account – how have I used my time, my health, my abilities? Have I used them towards goodness, towards God, or for my own vain desires?

After the lecture we congregated for prayer and broke our fasts afterwards with dates, warm conversations, and laughter. I sat with my friends, catching up on what I had missed and telling them about my time away, but those verses stayed at the back of my mind...

We got home late into the night, after exhausting our socialization at the mosque. I went to my room and sat before my Quran, opening it to Surah Isra: “And We send down of the Qur'an that which is healing and mercy for the believers” (17:82). I turn to the Arabic side and sound the words out loud – my Persian tongue can't follow the flow and I stumble over the words. I search online for a recording of the Surah and let its melodious rhythm take over my

soul; I struggle to recite along, wanting to reproduce the same harmonious sounds, but to no avail. I surrender myself to the mercy and healing of the Quranic recitation. Turning to the English version, I follow along:

Say, "Believe in it or do not believe. Indeed, those who were given knowledge before it - when it is recited to them, they fall upon their faces in prostration, and they say, "Exalted is our Lord! Indeed, the promise of our Lord has been fulfilled." And they fall upon their faces weeping, and the Qur'an increases them in humble submission. Say, "Call upon Allah or call upon the Most Merciful. Whichever [name] you call - to Him belong the best names." And do not recite loudly in your prayer or quietly but seek between that an [intermediate] way. (107:110)

The words touch my heart; I go into prostration and absorb this moment before my Lord – the Merciful who has the best of names, who teaches the middle path of moderation, and who fulfills His promises – intimately, I speak to Him: please... let me gain nearness to the Quran so that I may be increased in humble submission. Let me taste the joy of reciting your words, the most beautiful of words, in the Arabic language. I yearn deeply to connect to the Quran, to rise through its wisdom, to know it intimately... I shall work to memorize it – yes! I will start memorizing the Quran so that its recitation will become natural to me, and its secrets may be unveiled for me; so it may guide and heal me. With that intention, I decided to memorize the 30th section of the Quran, and spent the rest of Ramadan grappling with the first few *surahs*.

The rest of ramadan flew by – sleepy *suhoors*, *iftars* with family and friends, mosque hopping, reading and listening to lectures, trying to keep up with Quran recitation, and playing as much soccer as I could while fasting. Reflections of Switzerland would pass through my mind; it was a utopian time, a time I had for myself to delve deeply into myself and my faith. There is

something about travelling, about becoming uprooted that strangely grounds you in a different way; it broadens your conception of yourself and the world. All the daily clutter and false identities fall away as you enter a new space that you'd never been in, and you begin to find yourself anew there. Of course, I'd been uprooted many times by now – from Iran to Manitoba where there were very little Iranians and felt isolated, and from there to Toronto where we felt a huge sense of community with the mosques, Persian community, and *halal* food that surrounded us. But in my trip to Switzerland, for the first time I was aware of myself and was ready to delve deeper into what I believed was the Truth.

I started my relationship with the Quran there, reading it completely for the first time and reflecting on the signs it declares, the mountains and trees and water and wind, which was the environment that I was surrounded with. Everywhere I looked, I saw God's signs and reflected on them. I also delved deeper into the sign of myself by meditating, breathing deeply, observing my ego, trying to tap into the pure consciousness that is beyond my identity. It was a period of fertilization and preparation of the soil of my being, planting the seeds of reflection, Quranic contemplation, and self-examination. During this time, I would approach the Quran with a question or a thought in mind, and as I opened and read it, a verse would appear that directly addressed my thoughts, which helped me build a living relationship with the Quran.

Along with the Quran, I also read *God and His Attributes* which I picked up from the library in the mosque we would go to – it was the first time I read a book completely, and connected with deeply; it convinced me of the proof of God, and it also convinced me of my intellectual independence – the fact that I could pick up and absorb this knowledge and information created a thirst in me that drove me to continue learning and growing intellectually.

I also quickly absorbed *A New Earth* by Eckhart Tolle, which talks about the functions of the ego, and how to go beyond it – I began to recognize that many religious people were governed by their egos, their lower selves, and it taught me tools to tap into my real self, which was awakening for me. I began to recognize my ego's lowly tricks to keep me forgetful and unaware of the present moment, which is the meeting with the Divine. I focused on my breathing, tapping into the unity of the moment by quietening my chattering mind which creates separation and duality. It was a great introduction into the spiritual realm for me, and I continued to seek those realities within the Islamic tradition.

After that Ramadan ended, I went to Camp Taha, an overnight Islamic camp in Michigan that I had attended every summer since I was 12. My first year at camp, I had become conscious of my spirit and had started consciously thinking about God. Being in a Muslim community where we talked about the notion of God led to my spiritual questionings, and consequently my spiritual awakening. Brother Hassanain, the camp founder and spiritual leader would lecture daily for us, making me think about the reality of God, our existence, where we go when we die – my existential questions were adequately answered during that time for my 12-year-old self. It brought tranquility to my heart and made me understand Islam as the right religion. The answers to my intellectual questions were fulfilling and taught me how to live my life, which opened my heart and made me fall in love with the religion. The camp environment itself provided me with a sense of living in a Muslim community, and a holistic Muslim life. It really changed the direction of how I viewed and practiced my religion, propelling me towards my spiritual journey. Although I had already fallen in love with Islam, it was not until my time in Switzerland that I truly gave my soul to God. I had to go away to truly come alive, and that paradisaal high gave me

a clear vision; it was a golden period between the innocence of youth and the awareness of old age.

Summer ended quickly and school began again. I continued to ride my Switzerland high, but I felt trapped by school, like I did not have the tools and the time to learn what I wanted to. I continued to go to mosque every week and attended any Islamic conference I could find to deepen my knowledge. I immersed myself in videos of scholars like Hamza Yusuf and Tariq Ramadan who spoke to my mind and heart, inspiring me with their knowledge. But around me, I felt a deep loneliness at times, which could only be quenched by God. I felt this vividly one day on the school bus. Everyone was on their phones or chatting, laughing or with blank expressions looking out; I wished I could turn to one of them, any of them, and talk about what I felt –about God, life, our purpose, our existence... but it seemed like no one was interested, no one cared. I took a deep breath to calm myself and sought refuge in what soothed and calmed me most: the Quran.

I pulled up my Quran app and turned to Surah Israa, letting myself become dissolved in its words, looking for answers and guidance. My eyes read the words and my heart experienced them – “The seven heavens and the earth and everyone in them glorify Him. There is not a single thing that does not celebrate His praise, though you do not understand their praise: He is most forbearing, most forgiving.” (17:45); I look around me at the people and trees passing by my window, gazing at the world through the lens of glorification, wondering about the praise of the leaves and the trees’ growth, the sky’s grandeur and the sun’s glory, and the people walking around unaware and heedless, yet still glorifying...

“And when you recite the Qur'an, We put between you and those who do not believe in the Hereafter an invisible barrier.” (17:45). My heart was struck – I could sense the veil vividly, I

could see it when I looked around me – I could not communicate what I felt and experienced with others, nor did I fully comprehend what they felt and experienced. I yearned deeply to share my thoughts and feelings, but I felt isolated in my search, overtaken by states I could not express to people who would not understand. But I sought refuge in the Quran, and it spoke to me and guided me: this is the way it is, and all I can and must do is stay constant and firm in my path, despite the loneliness. I had my God, and there was none grander.

Breathing deeply and looking outside, I experienced a waking realization; I felt my soul leaving my body – a painful experience, because of my attachment to my body. I knew that the experience would be less painful if I was less attached. I remembered Tolle's words, "spiritual realization is to see clearly that what I perceive, experience, think, or feel is ultimately not who I am, that I cannot find myself in all those things that continuously pass away" (Tolle, 2018, p. 78). I looked all around me and recognized that all will pass – all the people, every tangible thing I hold dear, my own physical body and its desires. The nature of this transient world is its fleetingness, and the tighter I hold on to these momentary pleasures, the more painful their loss will be – everything physical shall pass, but it is the soul that lives on. How have I cultivated my soul? What seeds have I sown in it? Have I sown the seeds of pleasure and attachment to the world and all it contains? Attachments that will be the death of my soul as I know it, for they cling only to the physical realm. Or will I be aware of this transience, soaring above finite desires, liberated and peaceful? This is my life, my one and only chance to live right and purely, to be able to have something of substance left when all else fades away, to be in harmony with my soul and the universe, rather than wholly attached to my body and its physical needs. I wanted to do right by my soul, by recognizing that "when I no longer confuse who I am with a temporary form of "me", then the dimension of the limitless and the eternal God can express

itself through "me" and guide "me"" (Tolle, 2018, p. 251). I could only surrender and pray to be guided beyond my attachments.

I did have friends who I could discuss religious topics with. I was always curious about other peoples' faith and beliefs, so when I encountered other people of faith, I always wanted to learn more about their convictions. One day at lunch, I was debating with my Christian friend about the idea of salvation through Jesus Christ:

"I just don't get how it can be that easy," I argued, "First, you guys say everyone is born with original sin, and then you say the only way to be saved is to believe in Jesus and that's it, I don't need to do anything else?"

"Yes but think about it this way – you guys say you have to do things to go to heaven: specific acts in specific ways that will save you. But in reality, everyone is a sinner, and no matter how much good you try to do, that won't change man's nature – unless we open our heart to Jesus, and through believing and loving him, we attain salvation. When we love his Godliness and surrender to it, we are bestowed with righteousness and forgiveness through him. I put my trust and faith in Jesus, not in my own hands, for my salvation. It is the belief itself that gives us salvation."

"I get what you're saying, but it's difficult for me to fully comprehend... I'm gonna need to think about it for a while."

That Thursday evening, I sat before my laptop playing *Dua Kumayl*. In the Shia tradition, *duas* are prayers passed down by the *Ahlul Bayt*, the family of the Prophet. They are intimate conversations with God, which not only articulate what's in my heart in the best way possible, but also give me the correct way of viewing God and thinking about Him. Along with my heart

and soul being moved by the words, my mind also tries to understand what these prayers are teaching me about the nature of God and reality.

Immersing myself in this prayer, I feel God's "mercy which encompasses all things", and I place my sins, confessions, and requests before Him; I pray, "O God, be kind to me in all states, and be gracious to me in all affairs! My God and my Lord! Have I any but You from whom to ask removal of my affliction and regard for my affairs!" The words suddenly start speaking to me differently, and I begin to experience them from a lens I hadn't seen before.

"O God, verily I seek nearness to You through remembrance of You, and I seek intercession from You with Yourself, and I ask You by Your generosity to bring me closer to you, and to provide me with ability to thank You, and to inspire me with Your remembrance ... I have wronged myself, and I have been audacious in my ignorance, and I have depended upon Your eternal remembrance of me and Your continuous grace toward me."

The idea of salvation struck me, as I recognized myself placing my lowliness before God and requesting Him to take over and guide me, inspire me, treat me with kindness and grace despite my ignorance and sins.

"Can You punish me with Your fire after my belief in Your Unity, after my heart recognized You, and my tongue speaks continuously of your remembrance, and my mind believes in your love, and after the sincerity of my confession and my humble supplication before Your lordship? Far be it from You! You are too generous to abandon one whom you have nurtured."

I recognized the thing that was saving me was not my acts, but my belief, my open heart, my confession and humility before His grandeur and grace – He nurtured me, guided me, and continues to guide me, if I turn to Him and seek His salvation. It was amazing to me how this

idea had existed before me and I had never seen it – it was my Christian brother who explained it to me, gave it a language and opened my eyes to its reality in my own faith.

Reading continued to give me solace throughout high school. I picked up Malcolm X's Autobiography, who had been an inspiring figure to me, and I was excited to know him more intimately. Reading his life story proved to be an emotional ride. I could not put down the book after starting it, and I lived his journey out with him, a journey filled with immense sincerity and devotion.

I reached the last page of the book one afternoon in the school library and read his final words:

I know that societies often have killed the people who have helped to change those societies. And if I can die having brought any light, having exposed any meaningful truth that will help to destroy the racist cancer that is malignant in the body of America-then, all of the credit is due to Allah. Only the mistakes have been mine. (X & Haley, 1999, p. 389)

I put down the book and shed a single tear. Knowing that he had become martyred for fearlessly standing up for truth deeply moved my heart. His commitment to truth touched my soul. I knew this is what I wanted to be able to say at the end of my life, to have lived a life of meaningful contribution, and know that it was all from God, and only the mistakes were mine. I decided to go for my afternoon prayers and carried Malcom's sense of justice with me. I thought of my uncle, also martyred in Iran for fighting for his country, and I knew my life had to be one of justice, devotion, sincerity, and truth. My role models had guided me to this, and I could accept nothing less.

Throughout this time, I downloaded an Islamic library app which contained hundreds of Shi'a books which solidified my certainty in Shi'ism, especially the book *Then I Was Guided*, which tells the journey of a Sunni scholar who came to uncover the truth in Shi'ism. But it wasn't until I picked up Seyyed Hossein Nasr's *Garden of Truth* that I was propelled into the world of Sufism, which would guide me through the next chapter of my life. *The Garden of Truth* opened Islam's spiritual dimension for me, which was not concerned with the sectarian or legal aspects, but wholly on spiritual perfection. I learned that true knowledge was remembrance, recollection, knowing my origin and source and not letting myself forget it in this worldly realm. While Islam does not contain the notion of original sin, "it does emphasize our fall from our primordial state" (Nasr, 2008, p. 54), which still exists deep within us, separated by veils of forgetfulness and imperfection.

Sufism was "for those who want to wake up, who accept dying to the ego here and now in order to discover the Self of all selves and to be consumed in the process in the fire of Divine Love" (Nasr, 2008, p. 22). Most importantly, I learned what I had already sensed, that knowledge is being, and "the more one knows in a principal manner, and not only discursively, the more one is", and "on the highest level the knower, knowledge, and the known are one" (Nasr, 2008, p. 32). Knowledge "transforms our whole being and transmutes our soul", and it involved the whole of our senses, being, and heart. By removing the veils of forgetfulness, we enter the garden of truth, where we transcend our limitations and fetters. Thus "to know the Truth with one's whole being is ultimately to "become the Truth," to realize that the root of our "I" is the Divine Self Itself" (Nasr, 2008, p. 32). This is possible not through philosophical speculation, but through the spiritual practices of the Sufis. The oneness of Being is present

everywhere and could be experienced spiritually once “the veil of the ego is removed from within the human being” (p. 38), and our divine essence witnesses the Divine reality everywhere.

My spirit felt alive and certain after reading that book; as the rest of high school dragged on, I knew I had to choose what academic path to pursue. Passionate and curious about human nature and societies, I started university majoring in Political Science and Psychology.

2.

I entered university unprepared for what I was about to face. My deep faith felt strong, and my innocent conviction felt real, but my certainty in revelation and in the fundamentals of faith were soon questioned, reduced, and belittled by the heavy gaze of academia which stifled what did not fit in with its intellectual authority. It was the first time the foundations of my belief were intellectually insufficient before my professors. Instead of feeling guided, I felt lost. Instead of being heard and understood at my level, I was forced to abandon my standing ground and accept what academic knowledge deemed to be real: a solely materialist conception of the world.

York university is ideologically a leftist university, but I had no idea what that meant until I entered it. Most my classes were dominated by Marxist and Freudian conceptions of the world, of man, and of society – a materialism which strips any meaning and validity from the immaterial, which for me was my whole conception of man and the world: as being beyond the material. I tried to resist and argue my beliefs, trying to enter the conversation from my understanding, but my efforts to explain my conceptions were reduced by the materialist gaze to nothingness; religion was traced back to the material conditions of a specific time and space, humans were explained through the evolutionary model, and our search for meaning beyond the material was reduced to the explanation that we made these ideas up to deal with the uncertainty of life and the fear of suffering and death. I could not have imagined that all my beliefs could be

reduced so easily and without a second thought, or that an academic institution could be so one-sided and closed off.

The essays I wrote had to reproduce the materialist assumption and nothing else. In one class, I wrote a book review on the conception of the Islamic Government by Imam Khomeini, which my Marxist TA did not appreciate at all and showed his disapproval through the grade he gave me. I went to the philosophy club on campus for one meeting just to be met with a room full of atheists regurgitating what I was trying to seek solace against. Wherever I turned in university, I could not find a space for myself where my beliefs were not completely dismissed and dismantled. It was enough for anyone to develop an inferiority complex for not being able to stand against these arguments, enough for anyone to start doubting everything – and doubt I did.

The deeper I got into first year, the more these doubts accumulated; I became restless and uneasy – I had to find the answers to these questions to restore peace to my mind and faith to my heart. I was not ready to deal with those questions, but I was faced with them and had to untangle them for myself. I attended any Muslim gatherings I could find in and around Toronto – Shi’a, Sunni, Sufi, whatever. On one hand, it was to gain as much knowledge as I could wherever it was offered – to hear all the different interpretations and understandings of faith and try to find any answers to my questions. On the other hand, it was also a place of solace and security – despite my intellectual doubts, the times I spent at mosques and gatherings of Muslims were the times when my heart was most at peace and my mind was calm and quiet – just to find that space to breathe was what allowed me to survive the suffocating environment of academia and to continue pursuing answers that would appease my doubts.

My biggest doubt revolved around revelation and prophethood, especially challenged by the complete rejection of revelation in the materialist school of thought. I had to understand for

myself – why is it necessary for God to talk to us? What is the reason for revelation? Why does a messenger need to come and guide us? I never doubted God – but I had to uncover the importance of revelation through messengers, especially when humans were given their intellectual faculties that should be able to understand Truth without the use of revelation.

This led to further doubts and questions about human beings in general – is the human limited to the psyche, to the id, ego, and superego propagated by the Freudian psychological model? What is the reality of the human being – is it just reduced to its primitive inclinations and material conditions?

The deeper I delved into these questions, the more my restlessness evolved to deep anxiety that shook both my heart and mind. The doubts overwhelmed me, emotionally and physically; I began noticing my hands shaking throughout the day – a physical manifestation of my mental anguish. My body was breaking down under the weight of my doubts, which furthered my stress – I was wholly overtaken and shaken to the core.

That *Muharram*, I broke down, praying to be built anew. A time of mourning for Shi'as, *Muharram* marked the massacre of the Prophet's grandson and innocent family by the usurpers of government. For many believers around the world, *Muharram* marks a deeply emotional time, promoting the values of justice, truth, and persistence in the face of falsehood. Every night I went to mosque, releasing my anxious thoughts through my lamentations for the upholders of truth. I prayed, begged, pleaded to be saved, to be guided, to be taught and reassured in my doubts. The transformative nature of mourning affected me that year more than others due to my pure destituteness, giving me a sense of renewal and purification.

Throughout this time, I found myself repeating two of God's names as a prayer: *al-Hakim*, the wise, and *al-Wadud*, the Loving. Make me wise, make me loving. Allow wisdom and

love to flow through me, to take over me. I also immersed myself in *dua Jawshan Kabeer*, a prayer that called out to God through His various names, and the one that spoke to my heart was “*ya anis al-gholoob*”—oh, the intimate of the heart. The One who is nearest to me, most intimate to my heart – save me, guide me.

One night, I had a dream I was at Imam Ali’s shrine in Najaf, crying my soul out. Being in that vicinity, sensing the Imam’s nearness, I poured my heart out and wept incessantly. I unburdened all my fears and anxieties at his door, and when I woke up I felt heavy and light at the same time. “*Ya Ali*,” I whispered, and got up. I had never been to Iraq before, but I had finally tasted a glimpse of being before my spiritual guide and master.

I continued looking for the answers everywhere, and it was only when I returned to Nasr’s writings that I felt more secure. His *Young Muslim’s Guide to the Western World* broke down Western philosophy for me and introduced Islamic philosophy to me, which I had little access to before then. Finally, I began feeling confident in our intellectual tradition which has deeply engaged with the questions that I was facing and contextualized the reason for the modern doubts and rejection of religion. I began to see that Islam provides “not only a Divine Law according to which man should live, but also a vast intellectual tradition which guides man in his thinking” (Nasr, 2003, p. 84). I especially saw how in the Western world, “knowledge has become separated from both spirituality and morality” (Nasr, 2003, p. 213). In modern Western education institutions, truth only exists in the natural and mathematical sciences, “whereas in the humanities, the social sciences and the like one rarely hears a teacher speak about the truth and most subjects are presented in a completely relativistic manner as if there were no such thing as the truth” (Nasr, 2003, p. 213). The implications of these facts created a lifestyle in the West which challenges Muslims who are pursuing the path of truth and Divine reality, creating a

“powerful current”, which I had to learn to swim against to seek “authentic Islamic answers” (Nasr, 2003, p. 235). I also became exposed to the works of Frithjof Schuon, Nasr’s contemporary, who also critiqued the modern West and provided meaningful symbols of religion.

Another book which deeply guided me through that time was Mutahhari’s *Man and Universe*, which not only provided an all encompassing, holistic vision of an Islamic framework of life, but also refuted and rejected Western materialist frameworks such as Marxism and Existentialism. It provided a complete picture of man’s experience in the world and society, providing answers to my questions on the necessity of Prophethood and revelation, while also philosophically arguing against the worldviews propagated at my school. I continued listening to lectures which helped me, and I also began attending traditional theology classes which systematically and intellectually proved the fundamentals of Islam for me, setting a solid intellectual foundation.

My doubts led me to seeking answers in the Islamic tradition, and I was not let down. My questions were all met and answered through Islamic philosophy, making me feel intellectually empowered. Slowly, the doubts and anxieties which had become overwhelming and distressing were washed away and I experienced the greatest sense of calm and relief. I had sought God’s help throughout, certain that He would not abandon me, and I was proven right when He delivered me to truth, putting me more in tune with the state of my heart.

I resisted and rejected what the academic institution taught me, holding on more deeply to my faith. I changed my major from psychology to religious studies, so I could pursue Islamic studies – I felt like this learning and knowing would yield to something inherently meaningful. Going deeper into Islamic sources of knowledge, I was able to hold onto my beliefs and

worldview. I saw so many around me without a solid foundation of their intellectual tradition who, when entering humanities in higher education, become enamoured and in awe of Western traditions and adopt Marxism. I was grateful that I did not go down that route.

After I started feeling settled, I decided to read Chittick's *Heir to the Prophets*, an introductory text to Ibn Arabi. This was my first introduction to the mystical writings in Islam regarding spiritual knowledge, gnosticism. This knowledge is not rational but revelatory, spiritual inspiration experienced through presence. My soul was attracted to this sort of knowing, and it provided me with a spiritual dimension to the theological questions I had dealt with.

Ibn Arabi says that "the most important and fundamental dimension of perfection is knowledge, which entails discernment and putting things in their proper places" (Chittick, 2005, p. 13). By gaining knowledge about God and His attributes and embodying them, a believer gains discernment and sees reality as revealed by God. Made in God's divine form, all I had to do was embody and witness the attributes that were within me and around me, if only I opened my eyes to them. This embodiment of God's names and attributes was what Sufism was all about. The importance of prophethood and revelation were made even more clear to me, as they were reminders of God's nature and true reality. While we know this reality within us, we are forgetful and heedless, so we are given reminders that we cannot turn a blind eye to.

My period of intellectual doubt led me to Sufism, which fascinated me. Having resolved my intellectual questions, I wanted to focus on perfecting my soul and developing spiritually. The fact that all Sufi orders were connected to Imam Ali made me feel secure in my practices and beliefs. This *irfan*, gnosis, spiritual awareness of God was part and parcel of the Shi'a tradition, so Sufism felt like a natural part of my religion. I was always interested in spirituality and self development, and Sufism provided a practical path that guides you through this spiritual

journeying. However, though I frequented Sufi gatherings, I never felt inclined to officially join an order with a designated teacher as most Sufis do, since I felt I had the perfect guides – the Imams – within my own Shia tradition.

Throughout this time, I took an online *tajweed* course to improve my Quranic recitation, which greatly improved, giving me the confidence to teach *tajweed* to younger students at the JCC Sunday school. It felt fulfilling to be able to transmit something of the religion, which I had never done before. Although I frequented Iranian mosques, the Jaffari Community Center felt like more of a home mosque for me. The mosque belonged to the Khoja community in Toronto, but they held English programs and I liked their leadership and practice of religion. The crowds were also more multicultural than other ethnically segregated centers, providing more of an Islamic feeling than an ethnic association. Though the community was predominantly Indian and Pakistani, you could find all races there, especially converts. Since learning to drive, I would frequent every mosque I could, but the main one I would return to which became my home mosque was the JCC, which I tried to give back to through teaching *tajweed* classes.

3.

I finally felt settled after my period of doubt, soaring through the spiritual practices and meditation in Sufi gatherings. I was headed for another big shift, however, when I went back to Iran as an adult. It was one thing to be surrounded by family in my homeland, and another thing entirely to understand the rich tradition and wisdom that flowed from this history and culture. I connected more with my Iranian identity, especially inspired by Nasr's critique of the modern West. I began feeling that the West might not be the place for me – though Canada still felt like my home, I was free in Iran in a way that I was not in Canada. The culture felt more familiar, while in Canada I struggled with aspects of the society and culture which felt alien to me.

It was here too, that I started becoming disillusioned by Sufism, or rather some of its teachings. Prior to my trip, one of my friends who studied Islamic philosophy forced me to question my beliefs and practices on an intellectual level. He made me confront the fact that though Sufi practices made sense to me and made me feel good, it was not on an intellectual level. I began to see that within Sufi groups, attention was paid to practical spirituality over rigorous intellectual grounding. Once again, I was uprooted, and began to view my beliefs more critically. I realized I had taken a lot of what I read for granted. The books I read by Nasr and Schuon had the subject matter of philosophy, but they were not philosophical texts. Similarly, all teachings of Ibn Arabi were taken at face value and not critically questioned or analyzed. I had, like many others, read these texts and jumped to believe and accept them. But thanks to my philosopher friend, my intellectual appetite was awakened, and I sought to understand my religion in a more rigorous, philosophical manner.

Seeing the difference in the schools of thoughts, between Sufism and philosophy, the school of Ibn Arabi versus the school of Ibn Sina, I sought to delve more deeply into the philosophical realm. When I was in Iran, I jumped at the opportunity to attend philosophy classes for the summer. I studied Allameh Tabatabai, a contemporary Iranian philosopher's *Bidayat al-Hikmah*, a foundational philosophy text with other philosophy students. It was a lot for me to grasp at first, but it opened my mind to the world of philosophical thinking and reasoning. Living and studying in Iran that summer awakened my soul to the depth of knowledge and culture present in the land, and when I returned, I yearned only to go back to such a state of living.

One of my biggest problems with the modern West was its lack of understanding of manhood; in the Islamic tradition, the paradigm of *futuwwa* exists, loosely translated as chivalry. It's a set of virtues, a code of conduct for true men to follow. This *futuwwa* is exemplified by our

Prophets and Imams, but none represents this model more than Imam Ali. These positive male qualities posit the man as a warrior, a provider, a sage – what has always been traditionally masculine qualities. I grew up with these examples to follow, and it was clear to me how a man ought to be. These principles guided my journey into manhood, but Western culture provided very little guidance in this regard. Growing up in the West felt like a big disadvantage, because gender differences had practically eroded in the West, going so far as infantilizing males. I could see all around me how little this culture did to teach men responsibility – when men in their 30s were busy playing video games all day, and this was a normalized part of society, it was hard to try to become that ideal man I knew I wanted to be. I was grateful to have at least grown up in a good family that promoted those values.

I was also immensely grateful for Camp Taha; it was there that I fell in love with Islam, and my mind was opened to the spiritual path of perfecting the soul. But even more so, it was where I was initiated into manhood. This essential event in a man's life is when he is made aware of the responsibilities to his own soul and his community. There is a lot to say on male initiation in traditional cultures, and the detrimental effects of its absence in modern societies, but Camp Taha gave me something approximating that, and it immediately set me apart from most people I encountered around my age in terms of what our concerns and interests were.

I also read books that kept me on this path; Sachiko Murata's *Tao of Islam* deals with gender in Islam and the yin/yang relationship between male and female: how they exist within this constant state of polarity. Another book I read was *Way of the Superior Man*, written by a Western author but still largely dealing with these gender differences. It exemplified the male qualities that I was seeking to develop and helped me more deeply pave my path as a man in the modern West. Jordan Peterson was another figure that made a lot of sense to me, and I could see

that many were attracted to his teaching because he was in fact highlighting this problem in the West, especially with the infantilization of males.

After undergrad, I started my Master's in Islamic studies at UofT, where I immersed myself in primary philosophical texts. I took courses on Greek philosophy and studied the works of Ibn Sina and Mulla Sadra. Reading Mulla Sadra felt like I was learning about God and the reality of what He was. We often think about God in a personal sense, but through the texts I read, I came closer to an intellectual understanding of what is Being itself. This intellectual pursuit helped me connect with God on a more real level.

I also read Nasir al-Din al-Tusi's *Nasirean Ethics*, where he talks about the soul's purpose and perfection, which can be reached through philosophy. Philosophy "signifies knowing things as they are and fulfilling functions as one should, within the measure of ability, so that the human soul may arrive at the perfection to which it is directed" (Tusi, 2011, p. 26). Humans reach this perfection when they know what purifies their souls and what seduces it, and through practice they bring about their soul's prosperity or failure (Tusi, 2011, p. 36). Since the human soul has potentiality for both perfection or defect, man must through recognizing his defects, strive towards his particular perfection, since "the most perfect of men is the one who is the most capable of manifesting that particularity, and the one most attached to it" (Tusi, 2011, p. 51). Al-Tusi goes on to say that this perfection has two parts: theoretical and practical. The theoretical perfection lies in yearning towards knowledge that leads to perfection towards the One. The practical perfection lies in acting on this yearning – "theory is the starting point and practice the conclusion" (Tusi, 2011, p. 52). When both exist, perfection ensues, which is "the 'purpose of man's existence', for 'perfection' and 'purpose' are approximate in sense, the difference between them being established by relationship: 'purpose' is that which is still in the

confine of potency; when it reaches the confine of act it becomes 'perfection'" (Tusi, 2011, p. 52). When your particular purpose is "realized in external existence, it reaches the degree of 'perfection'" (Tusi, 2011, p. 52). Thus, my perfection lies in understanding my soul and moving towards actualizing my particular purpose.

I also delved more deeply into logic, by reading Sullivan's *Introduction to Traditional Logic*. I became aware of how so much of what we think are merely assumptions and we rarely know things logically. By going through this text, I learned how to think and not just assume things.

I also engaged more with Persian poetry, like Rumi's *Masnawi* and Sa'di's *Bustan and Gulistan*. I remember when I was little and my dad would recite these poems for me, and now I was attempting to read and comprehend these sacred soothing words myself, which was a guidance to my spirit.

Finally, after some year of neglect, I returned to my passion for soccer. In undergrad, I had decided I didn't want to pursue soccer seriously and took a break from it. After I started my master's I started playing seriously again, because it didn't feel contrary to my pursuit of knowledge – in fact, it was complimentary to it. It reminded me of my younger days, when the soccer field was my first spiritual playground, and remembering its value in my formative years drove me to find a calling in being a soccer coach. I felt like I had come full circle.

Since my program at UofT was largely secular, I decided to pursue Islamic studies at a university where importance was given to the sacred. When I received a scholarship from Qatar, I decided to pursue my studies there; finally, I found myself at an educational institution where I was not the outlier, fighting against the system. I was immersed, with the students and professors, in the actual study of Islamic ethics.

Studying Islamic ethics proved to be both spiritually and intellectually significant for me. It dealt with the topic of the soul and knowing its faculties, and how to attain perfection of the soul. Topics of the purpose of the human being were enlightening because whereas I could grasp at it before, I was not studying it in a systematic and philosophical manner, which gave me a solid rational ground. This level of intellectual grounding may not be important for most people, but I desired to know the philosophical and rational foundations of who I am and why I do what I do. This rational understanding of morality, rather than just being told to be good and pray, really enhanced my conception of why I am supposed to be good and pray, especially for the development of my soul.

Essentially, as our soul is made up of both an animal part and an intellectual part, the aim was to have my intellect govern my animal side. When you learn rationally that the the soul's perfection and happiness relies on perfecting the intellect, you strive to bring about that balance in the soul. Knowing that the perfection of anything lies in its proper function and to function properly I have to perfect my intellect really helped me understand who I am. Everyone answers the question of "who I am" uniquely, pointing to their personality, but I had discovered the immensely powerful knowledge of this one concrete and fundamental thing that defines all humans. I learned to prioritize the perfecting of my intellect and centered my life around it. Once I did that, everything from religious practices and worship to doing good in the community and learning and growing intellectually were all aligned with perfecting my intellect and soul.

For my thesis, I decided to focus on perfecting my particularity; I began thinking and researching about moral development in sports. Since I was in the field of applied ethics, I wanted to create an Islamic framework and guideline for character development and education in sports, specifically youth in competitive elite sports. Since these youth are devoting their time

and energy to becoming competitive athletes, it would be the perfect training ground for their moral and ethical character development as well. Their presence could create ripples in the Muslim world, as sporting competitions are valued and celebrated socially, and one man can move a nation. The biggest example before my eyes was Mo Salah, who became such a celebrated figure in the world, that he became a positive representation of Muslims for holding on to his faith and values. I wanted to reproduce more of that by creating an Islamically grounded ethical and pedagogical framework that could be used by elite sporting teams in the Middle East to promote a holistic learning environment.

With my experience in and passion for coaching, I felt confident that I could create a meaningful contribution to this field. The sport field was my first spiritual playground, and I knew working with youth within this context and providing meaningful spiritual guidance could transform their lives and create a positive ripple into the world. I was grateful to God for guiding me here, throughout all my experiences, quenching my thirst to know and pushing me to guide others. And I knew, I would never stop learning, would never stop growing on this infinitely meaningful path towards my God, and towards myself.

Story Two

1.

The air rushed past my face as I pedaled my way to my mosque an hour before *iftar* for our youth Quran circle. With the help of some guys in the youth group, I worked hard to create and maintain the library on the third floor of our mosque which became a hub for the youth. For the month of Ramadan, we decided to have a Quran circle to read one section a day, thereby completing the book in the 30 days of Ramadan. The resident scholar's son would take us through the correct pronunciation of the Arabic. It was a comfortable setting where I could stumble over the Arabic words without embarrassment.

As soon as the session ended, I ran downstairs past Dr. Ansari's lecture to grab my bike and make it home in time for *iftar* with my family. I loved living so close to the mosque because it allowed me to venture back and forth between these realms with ease.

After a warm and gratifying *iftar*, I head upstairs for my Ramadan nighttime routine. My favourite part of Ramadan was the nights I stayed up reading, watching lectures and movies, and reciting duas and Quran. I bring with me my chamomile tea and chocolate, and settle in bed, playing Dua Iftitah on my laptop:

All Praise is for Allāh who answers me when I call Him. Covers all my faults, yet I disobey Him, increases His bounties on me but I do not acknowledge them. How many pleasant gifts He has given me, how many great fears He has removed, And how many delightful joys He has shown me. Thus, I glorify Him, thanking Him and I sing His praises.

I nourish my heart and soul with the dua and tea, then decide what movie to watch; I'd been really into movies about authors, as I always wanted to be a writer – they help me both glimpse into a possibility, as well as relate deeply and intimately with characters who share my

passion. I decided on a movie about Jane Austen and was shocked and moved to find that despite her many novels on romance, she herself had a short-lived love life, and had never married.

I spent the rest of the night munching fruits and reading *Siddhartha* by Herman Hesse. That night it accompanied me all the way to dawn as I flipped to its final pages. The story was deeply moving to my soul and intimately known in my heart. Having read the entirety of his spiritual journey, the many paths he traversed and what he learned, I felt grounded. His journey gave me insight, and I could see how all spiritual travels had one path and one end: that of unification, the oneness of Being. Siddhartha's whole journey was "nothing but a preparation of the soul, a capacity, a secret art of thinking, feeling, and breathing thoughts of unity at every moment of life" (Hesse, 1997, p. 106).

This related deeply to the first tenant of Islam: *tawheed*, signifying not only the Oneness of God in numerical terms, but the unity of God and the entire universe, especially within one's soul. The famous prophetic saying rang in my ears: "One who knows themselves knows their Lord". It was reminiscent of Siddhartha's musing that "one must find the source within one's own Self, one must possess it"; everything else was "a detour, error" (Hesse, 1997, p. 5). And with thoughts of union with the Beloved, I fell asleep.

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My parents were both spiritual people devoted to their practice. Growing up, my mom would often read Quran and I would just lie on her lap as she recited the verses over me, adding her thoughts and commentaries. My father was proficient in Islamic philosophy and spirituality and had a verse of mystic poetry ready for any occasion. I grew up in the environment where faith and spirituality were deeply embedded; not explicitly pushed on my siblings and I, but

implicitly underlying our whole life. My parents had instilled within me not only a foundation of seeking knowledge, but also kindness and clarity.

Growing up in Canada, I didn't have a strong connection to my religious identity; aside from my parents, we would only go to mosque once or twice a year. Four years ago when my mom told me about signing me up for an overnight camp in the US, I was ecstatic, until I realized it was an Islamic camp. I became resistant, scared and uncomfortable, but my first year there was a blast, as I made many friends. We had the greatest time ziplining, canoeing, going to the pool, playing basketball, skipping the lectures or giggling through them, and dealing with the usual teenage drama. The following year, however, everything changed. We had moved from downtown Toronto to North York, where I felt isolated and uprooted. I started 8th grade at a new school and felt far away from myself. Emptiness overtook my being and I felt like I lacked devotion and faith.

The second year I went to Camp Taha, I was in a sensitive state where I was open to the teachings. Every day, there were different workshop topics that campers chose to go too, and it was meant to be informal and dialogical as opposed to a lecture. On the first day, it was announced that there would be an on-going workshop series called "From Darkness into Light" for the duration of the two weeks, and while all my friends explored different workshops, this one piqued my interest as it felt familiar to what I was experiencing. I attended that workshop every day for the next two weeks, and it ended up being an intensely transformative experience. Suddenly, I felt propelled quite literally from darkness, into blinding light.

At the beginning of the two weeks, my cabin counsellor told me to practice my hijab properly – to cover all my hair and wear loose fitting clothing. I was very resistant at first as it felt foreign to my body, but when I tried it, I found myself loving the experience. I felt free in my

body. I felt my soul begin to shine through; it was there that I began realizing I had a soul. That I needed to take care of it, nourish it, and let it expand. That I had been neglecting it and not feeding it. Thus, began a lifelong journey of spiritual becoming: beginning to understand my heart and soul, and taking care of them.

My outlook and inner being turned 180 degrees in those two weeks. When I came back, my parents were surprised to find me taking my religion so seriously. They were slightly worried even, as it was such a radical shift. That first year of practicing Islam was a huge learning lesson for me: I was extreme in my practice of hijab and beliefs, but as time went by, I became more aware of my inner state. Although my conviction was real and my desire to practice was intense, my mind and soul had to be molded and shaped into a more loving, peaceful, and spiritually attuned entity.

Within the next year, as I was exploring my Muslim identity, I realized that as a Shi'a, we were a minority of the Muslim population. This came as a shock to me, as it was all I had known, so I had to search hard to understand why I was a Shi'a, if we are such a minority. I read the book *Shii Islam: Origins, Faith, and Practices* by Mohammad Ali Shomali. It was a comprehensive introductory explanation of the Shi'a faith, and it opened my eyes and deepened my belief in Shi'a Islam. Later that year, I read the book *After the Prophet: The Epic Story of the Shia-Sunni Split in Islam*. The author was a Jewish scholar who recounted the history and politics after the Prophet's death from an outside perspective, and even that more deeply solidified my belief in Shi'a Islam.

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Soon, summer was over, and school started again. I was feeling motivated, but it didn't take long for me to start skipping school to pursue my own interests. I continued watching films

of artists, who usually did not have an easy or straightforward life. Feeling a spiritual void and confusion, I decided to instead direct my attention learning about Prophet Muhammad. I borrowed as many books as I could find in the mosque library on the Prophet and started reading them simultaneously. It felt inspiring and awakening to read the historical accounts of the Prophets life, and the subtle details I did not know. The accounts of his character made me want to strive for that perfection, but I was simultaneously met with my internal weaknesses and flaws: my inability to concentrate in school and show up to my own life. It created a yearning and desire in me for something that felt out of reach.

One day, I picked up *Nausea* by Sartre, which had been sitting on my sister's bookshelf for years. I loved everything existential and deep, so I started reading the book. It felt slow and dragged on at times, but I fell in love with the writing style and its existential expression. As I walked to school late one morning reading, I reached its final pages and was struck. The entire book was a historian's slow work progress, relationship musings, and sudden existential breakdowns resulting in nausea. Quickening my pace, then stopping altogether, I read the last page where the historian decides to write something "above existence" – a novel, and as his heart beat fast, he could feel his future looking back saying "that was the day, that was the hour when it all started" (Sartre, 2007, p. 178). I laughed, grinned, and had a spring in my step the rest of the way to school; for me, that had felt like the day, the hour that I understood existentialism – the necessity of making meaning in one's life, because otherwise we float around absurdly detached from ourselves.

I continued to ride this existential wave, torn between my active inner world and my mundane outer one, between my soaring spirit and my heavy heart, seeking guidance from an eternal source while feeling wholly situated, and even stuck in this temporary realm. I had high

ideals for myself that my lowly flesh and weak mind would no live up to, leaving me burdened. That winter, I went to Iran for the first time alone. I had started feeling numb, lost, and disconnected, but reuniting with my country, my culture, my language, and most of all my family – the lost and numb parts of me were found and filled up; I overflowed emotion in the shape of late-night tears and early morning laughters. Going alone gave me the unique experience of talking and bonding with all the members of my family individually.

Most of all, I was impacted by the practice or perception of religion, since Islam practiced in Iran has many sociocultural connotations. This was eye opening for me, especially peoples' reaction to my practice of hijab. One of my relatives highly praised me but would always link my practice of hijab with being a good Muslim girl looking for a husband. On the other hand, some of my other family members thought I was putting a barrier between us through my hijab. These views hurt me, and it was frustrating that my hijab allowed people deem me as an idealized Muslim woman in need of a husband. I felt like I was in the Muslim version of *Pride and Prejudice*: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a woman wearing proper hijab, must be in want of a husband". I was already used to this from my mosque, where I would be proposed to simply due to my practice of hijab and community involvement, despite not being known for who I was. This made me feel objectified in my hijab, which was supposed to serve the opposite purpose, and it was very difficult for me to negotiate that with myself.

Coming back from Iran, I fell into a deep winter fog. I had fallen in love with Iran, its culture, my family, and coming back made me feel very alienated and disconnected from my surroundings; I skipped school and spent my time reading my own books, feeling burdened by all the atrocities in the world that I could do nothing about. Both history and present haunted me, but I also felt an immense amount of love that I wish I could give to people, to heal our never-

ending webs of pain and hurt. The problem was most days I couldn't even really help or heal myself.

Sohrab Sepehri was the perfect poet for my restless heart. As a contemporary Iranian poet, his free verse flowed from my lips and sounded smooth to my ears, and he perfectly united Eastern and Western mysticism in his poetry. On evenings when it all felt too much, I would get under the covers and play a recitation of his poems:

We must wash our eyes

We must see anew

We must wash words

Words should be like wind, like rain itself,

We must close our umbrellas

We must go under the rain

We must take our thoughts and memories under the rain...

Life is to get more and more wet

Life is to swim in the pond of now

Let us take off our clothes

The water is a step away

Let us taste the light. (Sepehri, 2010, p. 231)

As spring rolled around, my heart began to grow again. I would walk to school barefoot, Sohrab's words in my ears connecting me with the earth beneath me. His poetry became a meditation throughout my spring highs and lows. I finally started feeling situated and contextualized again, taking up my own space.

I read Malcolm X's autobiography that spring and gained grit, motivation, and passion for truth and justice. To live a life of such devotion to truth and betterment of not just oneself, but her community, her world – this was the devotion I felt inside me, with no cause to commit to, feeling stranded and floating.

Nature always saved me though. I spent most weekends biking to my favourite trail. Just ten minutes from my house, this trail satisfied my endless adventures into the wild. Containing many twists and turns, dense and open spaces, it was any biker or hiker's dream. It satisfied my 16-year-old heart. I would go there with a notebook and book in bag. Deep within nature was my favourite place to do my favourite things: read, write, and bask in the peace and harmony of the living and breathing entities around me.

That summer, I read Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, and Sharitai's *Fatima is Fatima*. Reading them together was incredible; as Woolf critiqued the social conditioning placed on women, Shariati critiqued the Muslim scholars who had reduced Fatima the daughter of the Prophet, and thereby women, to a limited mold. Both argue against systems of oppression in place that take away the female power. Interestingly, both were delivered as lectures in their time period where such issues were pertinent – though they remain relevant till today. Shariati healed a part of my heart when he talked about the dilemma women today face by saying:

Women who have remained in the 'traditional mold' do not face the problem of identity while women who have accepted the 'new imported mold' have solved this problem. But in the midst of these two types of 'molded women', what should those who can neither accept their hereditary, traditional form nor surrender to this imposed new form do? They want to decide for themselves, to develop themselves. They need a role model, an ideal example, a heroine. For them, the problem of 'Who am I? and who do I become?' are

urgent. And Fatima, through her own 'being', is the answer to these questions. (Shariati, 1983, p. 5)

The books give me strength, power, and motivation to claim my own space, and create my own mold of being and becoming a woman. That summer, I began taking yoga classes: it was a new and exhilarating world for me to explore spiritually. One night, as I practiced tree pose in my bedroom, I focused hard on a single point to keep my balance. Then it dawned on me: staying balanced, strong, and steady in life requires the same vision. Gently but firmly rooted on the ground below you, laser focus on a point ahead of you. There would be no success without a goal, a driving force, a steady gaze, and any distraction from this point, no matter how slight, could crumple your structure.

*

I entered grade 12 unprepared for what I was about to face. I felt excited for life, feeling the raw energy of coming into myself, feeling open, empowered, and trusting. I was living in a world of my own creations, and I was enjoying every bit of it. Until winter came, and a storm entered our lives that threatened to sweep away everything we knew to be real. Suddenly, I was dealing with faith a lot more intimately, clinging to the myriad spiritual practices that are supposed to guide through dark times: patience, love of God, detachment from the world, rising above the ego and the self, letting go of external circumstances and focusing on finding peace within. A lot of beliefs and practices became deeply embodied for me. That year, the sound of Quran and prayer filled the house. The only way to get past the trauma, hurt, and pain was to cling to faith. Despite being the lowest point, it was also a deeply spiritual time. There were points in the darkness when suddenly I would cross over to the other side – faced with blinding

light, I would whirl around, my crying would turn to laughter, and I could feel myself floating beyond what was weighing me down.

At nights, I would light a candle and read soothing *duas*. In moments of grief and confusion, I wept,

O you, who are my hope and aim!

... I see no one but you to mend my brokenness!

... let the cloud of your mercy cast its shadow upon my sins

and send down the cloud of your affection to cover my faults! (Whispered Prayers of the Repenters)

In moments of love and union, I recited,

O! My God, who is the one to have tasted the sweetness of your love and then looked for a replacement in place of you?

Who can claim to have become familiar with your nearness, then wanted removal from you?

...O the utmost of the hopes of the lovers! (Whispered prayers of the lovers)

I read the book *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* that spring. It was about a seagull who wanted to learn to fly fast more than anything but was banished from his flock for doing so. He didn't give up; he persisted, until he found a teacher who taught him that perfect speed doesn't have a limit, since perfection is not limited. Perfect speed was simply "being there" (Bach, 2006, p. 45). To use this unlimited perfection, Jonathan must realize that he is "a perfect, unlimited gull" (Bach, 2006, p. 57). His teacher taught him that once he learns to fly even beyond time, he can begin "the most difficult, the most powerful, the most fun" lesson of all: "to fly up and know the meaning of kindness and of love" (Bach, 2006, p. 58). Soon, his teacher left him and he

began to teach other outcast gulls. He would teach them, “your whole body, from wingtip to wingtip, is nothing more than your thought itself, in a form you can see. Break the chains of your thought, and you break the chains of your body too” (Bach, 2006, p. 75). The whole story was very moving to me, most of all the spiritual and friendship elements that pervaded space and time, and Jonathan’s question near the end: “Why is it that the hardest thing in the world is to convince a bird that he is free, and that he can prove it for himself if he’d just spend a little time practicing?” (Bach, 2006, p. 88). Regardless, this does not stop him from going back to the flock and spreading this message of flight, despite the flock’s resistance and torment of him and his students. When asked about how Jonathan could love them despite their hatred, he responded, “you have to practice and see the real gull, the good in every one of them, and to help them see it in themselves” (Bach, 2006, p. 89). It was a beautiful story overall, one that I recommended to everyone and reread as the years went by.

It’s amazing how the simplest stories can carry the deepest symbols and meanings. Another one of the books that carried me through this dark time was *The Little Prince*. So many themes in the story touched my heart. The little prince’s innocence on his planet, his love of his rose, and most of all, his friendship with the fox whom he tames. The fox teaches him the greatest lesson through this process: that “it is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye” (Saint-Exupery, 2017, p. 72). Their departure was tearful, since “one runs the risk of weeping a little, if one allows himself to be tamed...” (Saint-Exupery, 2017, p. 84). But the little prince remembers what the fox taught him until the end – that “one only understands the things that one tames” (Saint-Exupery, 2017, p. 70), and this understanding is beyond what is visible – it is internal, embodied, and deeply meaningful.

That summer, I won a free trip to Camp Taha due to my community involvement and organization. On one hand, I felt I was needed at home. On the other, I felt blessed to have a chance to get away and be back at camp again after so many years. I went to a two-week session that none of my friends were going. I was looking forward to having a quiet and calm healing time. When I arrived, I could not believe the immense serenity that washed over my whole being. To be back in the natural environment and community where it all started for me: to have a chance to walk alone and go through the motions of the next two weeks, to heal my heart and soul. Despite my plan to be alone, I made a friend who decided to be there for me through the duration of the two weeks. I found myself surprised to be laughing along my new friend, quiet friend who came along and filled my heart and made me smile.

2.

I started university that year, majoring in Political Science and English. The weekend before university started, I watched the movie *The Fountain*. It shook me to the core, as it was a beautiful narrative of life, death, loss, and love – and the spiritual quest that touched it all. The soundtrack by Clint Mansell was incredible, and I spent most of first semester walking between classes with that ethereal sound playing in my ears. Hauntingly beautiful, it accompanied me through fall in the downtown campus of University of Toronto, where the trees and leaves were reminiscent of my internal states. I also frequented graveyards a lot that semester. I would walk around reading the many headstones, thinking about all those whose lives were gone but whose memories live on. I sent my energy to them and wondered what would be written on my grave when I died. I was with my lonesome, and content to be so. I was quiet internally, healing from my past years' experience. I borrowed so many books from the library, and just drowned myself in them.

I also spent a lot of time in the prayer rooms on campus. My favourite one was in Bahen, the computer science building; it was open concept, with no door to create a barrier between those praying and the swarms of students making their way from one class to another. The external noise and movement heightened my internal silence and stillness. I felt myself whole, connected to my infinite source, and abiding in my center.

My time in the prayer room was crucial in keeping me rooted first year. I had assigned myself to read the same chapters of the Quran on the specific days of the week after prayer. On Mondays, I read chapter 29, where God says, “Do men think that they will be left alone on saying, we believe, and not be tried?” (29:2). On Tuesdays, God reminds me, “Of His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth and the diversity of your tongues and colours;” (30:22). On Wednesdays, my favourite verses are a balm for my soul: “Say: O my servants who have acted extravagantly against their own souls, do not despair of the mercy of Allah; surely Allah forgives the faults altogether; surely He is the Forgiving, the Merciful” (39:53). On Thursdays, my vision clears when I read: “We will soon show them Our signs in the universe and in their own souls, until it becomes clear to them that it is the truth” (42:53). And on Fridays, I am reminded: “God does not change the condition of a people until they change their own condition” (13:11).

I also read *The Conference of the Birds* throughout first year. It was a classical Persian epic by Farid ud-Din Attar, a Persian Muslim mystic. In this story, the hoopoe calls all the birds in the world, announcing that they should go seek the mythical *Simorgh* – a version of the phoenix in Persian folklore. The hoopoe leads the birds on a long and arduous journey to the other side of the world where the *Simorgh* is rumored to be. Every bird on this journey represents human qualities and flaws, and one by one at different circumstances, each bird according to its flaw decides to go back, gets sick, or dies. The journey represents the long spiritual journey to

reach God, and the many reasons people fall short of reaching this destination. By the end of the story, there are only thirty birds left who make it to the fabled *Simorgh*. The beauty of this tale lies in the Persian word *Simorgh*, which literally means thirty (*si*) birds (*morgh*). As such, when the birds arrive at their destination, they realize they've only arrived at themselves. Through the journey they undertook, they were purified and became one with the source of all Being. The entire epic poem serves as a similar journey for the reader, who also accompanies the birds to find themselves at the end.

Another spiritual text I encountered that year was the first book I read by the Andalusian mystic, Ibn Arabi. The book was called *The Tree of Being: An Ode to the Perfect Man*. My favourite quote from that book shifted my mindset:

The truth of the attributes, the beautiful names of God, is infinite, and manifests in different ways at different times. The proof of Truth is in the realization of the oneness of all creation. Yet multiplicity is a part of the one. Unity manifests itself in multiplicity. With all their differences, and in the infinity of manifestation, the parts interconnect and add up to a whole. Whoever can find this in himself, knows his Lord. God has created the perfect human being in his own image—in the image of His attributes. Many Sufis believe that to be able to realize this unity of the self, one must obliterate the manifestation of many "I"s in oneself—in fact, one must deny them existence. Through intensive worship, fasting, meditation, and refusing the desires of the flesh, they attempt to submit their wills to the will of God, and to purify their behaviours and habits. All of this discipline and effort is built on the assumption that these many "I"s that one is trying to give up actually exists. Yet there is no "I" other than God. There is nothing but He. How can one manage to give up something that never was?

The only way to know your Lord is by knowing your nonexistence. (Al-Arabi, 2012, p. 57)

Unity manifested into multiplicity... not killing the many “I”s because they are false realities – only He exists ... It created a huge shift in my reality, and even in how I felt within myself and dealt with my own soul, my many “I”s. Less control and discipline, more ease and reflection of the Divine Reality, that manifests in a myriad of different ways all around me and within me...

By the end of first year, I realized my self-medication through books had not healed me. Mostly, I found myself alone, feeling distant from others, especially as a result of my hijab. I still felt idealized in my community and would get proposed to – even though I felt spiritually low and just wanted friends to know me for who I was. At university, I hadn’t made many friends, and I felt that the hijab was a physical barrier for many in approaching me. I had a long and difficult conversation with my mom that spring saying I was ready to take it off, before starting second year.

That summer, I got a position in Turkey for two months to live in a house of care for young girls. Despite the intensity of the work, it was a beautiful experience. My other coworkers and I, also Muslim girls from Canada, were chosen because we were Muslims with hijab who could have a positive influence on these girls. This experience allowed me to face parts of myself and connect back to things that held meaning for me. I was the only Shi’a amongst the girls, and Turkey is a Sunni majority country, so my Shi’a identity rose to the max. Especially in Ramadan, when Shi’as and Sunnis have some differing rituals. On the special night of *Laylatul Qadr*, which for Shi’as also coincides with the martyrdom of Imam Ali, I trekked my way to the only

Shi'a Mosque I found in the middle of nowhere and entrusted myself to God to be guided back home.

My experience of hijab also changed, as I began to practice it more open heartedly. In Turkey, there was a complete mix of hijabis and non-hijabis, so you did not stand out if you were either. Having that freedom, I found myself embracing my hijab deeply and feeling the same liberation and love that I felt for it when I first started in Camp Taha. I realized my decision to take it off was deeply related to other people and how they perceived me. But my relationship with it had solidified as my own, and I continued to practice it passionately when I returned to Canada.

Second year was a calm time. My faith was solidified. I knew, inside, that what I believed was not shared by everyone, that I must deepen my practice by myself. I was involved in my mosque's youth group. I also joined the MSA at university and planned social justice events throughout the school year. I naturally continued with my own personal readings and learning, and I entered a quiet and meditative period that year. I made my way through the *Theology of Discontent* by Hamid Dabashi, which looks at the lives of the eight main thinkers who formulated the Islamic ideology that led to the Iranian revolution. It was a fascinating mixture of deep theory in hindsight and deep examination of the individuals' lives, and how within their context they contributed to the Islamic ideology that fueled the 1979 revolution in Iran. I woke up early in the mornings for morning prayer, made myself coffee and worked my way through the text, making notes extensively as I read. It was the first time I was reading something so seriously and avidly taking notes; I loved seeing how different people lived their life, and how the different aspects of their life contributed to their fate in changing their society.

I also immersed myself in Persian poetry during that time. Through the maturation of my faith, I delved into Hafez and Maulana Rumi who speak candidly of spiritual states and metaphysical realities—not to say that they were not already a regular part of my life. My mother had been explaining stories from the *Masnavi* to me from when I was little, lines of poetry from Hafez and Rumi always decorated our house walls; verses would be recited daily, often a commentary on different contexts, whether political, social, or personal. Both my parents were proficient in Persian poetry, and for both, this was foundational to their faith. They recited many verses from the heart, often finishing each other's recitations if one got stuck. While I was a grateful absorber of these verses and concepts my whole life, I had not personally and deeply ventured into them on my own until then.

In the days leading up to my 20th birthday, I was reading Hafez's first *ghazal* repeatedly; the night before my birthday, I listened to an hour-long analysis of it on Youtube. The next day, I wrote the entire poem out for my journal entry that day.

O Saqi, come pass the cup 'round and fill it up
 for love seemed easy at first, but then came difficulties
 Longing for the sweet scent the morning wind unlocks from her locks
 many a heart filled with blood for the curls of her musky tress
 What assurance of joy can I have in the beloved's home/station?
 when every moment the caravan's bells cry, "pack up and go!"
 Stain the prayer mat with wine if the Magian Pīr tells you to
 for the traveller knows the rules of the road's stations
 Dark night, fearful waves, and whirlpools so terrifying
 how can those lightly burdened on the shore know our plight?

All my work for my own sake gave me a bad name in the end
 how can the secret told at gatherings remain hidden?

Hafez, if you still desire presence, do not be absent from Him.

When you meet the one you love, leave the world, forget it. (Hafiz, 1850, p. 1)

For a while, I felt stable, focused, and at ease. I was integrating things in my life and experiencing linear growth. But one day, months later, I awoke in a spiritual frenzy. Looking for something, anything to distract me, I grabbed a book from my bookshelf which had sat there unread for years. It was *Narcissus and Goldmund* by Herman Hesse. Instead of distracting me, the book took me deeper into my musings. I spent the next two days and a half reading the book before and after class, on my commutes, and before sleeping. The book was about two men; Narcissus, an ascetic monk and stoic spiritual teacher, living and teaching in a cloister, and a student with whom he creates a close friendship, Goldmund. Goldmund was passionate for the sensual pleasures of life; art, music, love... the book took me on the journey of Goldmund's decision to leave the cloister, and his adventures in the physical world, while remembering and encountering Narcissus near the end of the novel. The two characters represented the duality of the creative and sensory experience of life, and the enlightenment of intellectual stability.

This book beautifully, enchantingly, and touchingly delved deeply into my questions. My very thoughts, fears, and musings presented themselves in *Narcissus and Goldmund*: the duality of life, the multiplicity of existence, questions of faith, God, reason, art, passion. Many a times in the book my heart quickened as I connected deeply with the characters, a lump formed in my throat as I felt their pain, and the last chapter was spent sobbing at the beauty of not knowing, of not having the answers, yet regardless being open to the experiences of life, love, friendship, and

faith. It was a chaotic, uncertain, and deeply profound experiential state for me. At a time when I felt alienated in my questionings, I was able to find solace, beauty, and truth in this book which reflected my very own thoughts and emotions.

This experience reminded me of Hafez's poem; this was the nature of love, which appeared easy at first and then got difficult. This was the stormy night that those on shore cannot relate to. These spiritual ups, downs, and frenzies were a natural part of the maturation, of going deeper, of being blocked but pushing past it. It was a tale of faith, of patience, of endurance. Not passively or carelessly, but with passion, with awareness, seeking nearer despite the separation at times. So, I continued my path, not giving up, not slowing down.

*

In third year, the darkness came back. Though I had tried to grow past my trauma and immerse myself in spiritual experiences, I could not help but feel shackled to a lower state of being. It was like I had created my own personal hell. I could feel the flames of torment and I yearned for the bliss of paradise. This put a deep urgency to my faith, a tangible necessity for union. I lived in deep want of the Beloved, so I accepted the pain and surrendered before the Source of Love.

I had a lot of responsibilities that year. I was an exec member of the MSA, the largest on-campus club. I was also an intern at the U of T Multi-Faith center that year, organizing inter-religious and spiritual programs. Busyness was my saving grace. Work served as a form of amnesia. I tired my body out so my mind couldn't think, because my thoughts were too unbearable to bear.

That fall, I read *To the Lighthouse* – Virginia Woolf wrote as if she understood my soul. Her writing pulled me into myself, as she said:

And, resting, looking from one to the other vaguely, the old question which traversed the sky of the soul perpetually, the vast, the general question which was apt to particularise

itself at such moments as these, when she released faculties that had been on the strain, stood over her, paused over her, darkened over her. What is the meaning of life? That was all—a simple question; one that tended to close in on one with years. The great revelation had never come. The great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark; here was one. This, that, and the other; ... making of the moment something permanent—this was the nature of a revelation. In the midst of chaos there was shape; this eternal passing and flowing (she looked at the clouds going and the leaves shaking) was struck into stability. Life stand still. (Woolf, 1927, p. 236)

The great revelation never comes, only small daily miracles...the way the character wonders, “could loving, as people called it, make [them] one? for it was not knowledge but unity that she desired, not inscriptions on tablets, nothing could be written in any language known to men, but intimacy itself, which is knowledge...” (p. 83).

And I wanted intimacy itself, so deeply yearned for the union that was true knowledge, but my own ego held me back.... and when I read Salinger’s *Franny and Zooey*, I felt what Franny said when she cried: “I’m just sick of ego, ego, ego. My own and everybody else’s. [...] I’m sick of not having the courage to be an absolute nobody” (Salinger, 1961, p. 26). And I wanted to be an absolute nobody, living in my own world. But Franny’s brother Zooey shakes her out of this state and argues that we live in this world – we will be known whether we like it or not, we cannot be passive, we cannot sit back. And if we’re serious about being spiritual and being with God, then, he tells her, “the only thing you can do now, the only religious thing you can do, is act. Act for God, if you want to—be God’s actress” (Salinger, 1961, p.167). It shook

me when I read it – I resonated deeply with Franny, but the way her brother responded to her made sense to me.

My favourite event that I hosted as an intern at the Multi-faith center was a three part discussion series on the life and poetry of Rumi, and his relationship with the Divine. The weeks leading up to it, I was reading books on Rumi's life and experiences, his poetry, and his perspectives on religion and spirituality. Rumi was a 13th century Islamic theologian, mystic, and poet. His father was a theologian, so Rumi grew up to become an esteemed scholar himself. In his late thirties, however, he had a transformative encounter with a traveling Sufi named Shams, which turned him from a theologian to a mystic, inspiring his divine poetry. From then on, Rumi overflowed with spiritual verses which were deeply connected to Quran's esoteric message. It felt incredible to share Rumi's story, and his deep poetry with its intimate links to the Quran, especially at a time when his poetry had become Westernized and stripped of its Islamic essence.

3.

That spring led me to bell hooks' *All About Love*. It was a compass of loving my way out of my pain. I sat in my prayer and meditation corner and read "remaining open to love was crucial to my academic survival. When the environment you live in and know most intimately does not place a value on loving, a spiritual life provides a place of solace and renewal" (Hooks, 2018, p. 80). Yes, this space was my solace and renewal between hours of Political Science classes; talks of war, cycles of poverty, violence, criminality, the structures put in place by man to control the vulnerable and disadvantaged – all this weighed heavily on my heart, but I sought peace, release, stillness and silence in my prayer corner.

All About Love became my guide map of alchemizing pain into love in the hardest of circumstances. It taught me the power of affirmations, so I wrote them down and repeated them

in my head as I took every step between classes and work. They became *dhikr*, a mantra, meditation. Something to keep myself focused on staying good.

My persistence, my hope, and my need for betterment all guided me to spend my summer of third year in Spain, teaching English in a summer camp. I was ready to move on, to break the shackles that held me back, and Spain helped me do just that. The natural environment, the culture, the people, and most importantly, the kids – they all opened my heart to a loving and moving experience.

Living by the Mediterranean Sea and taking evening and early morning walks on the beach was healing for my soul. The cities I visited, from Barcelona to Granada, were a perfect mix of East and West – for the first time, I felt seen and present in both sides of myself. The one word I would use to describe my experience in Spain is liberation. This liberation had to come from a sense of security – in deserving to be liberated. Finding myself worthy of being liberated led me to becoming more open and flexible in ways that I hadn't been before because of my previous discipline and authoritative mentality which was shadowed by fear.

While in Spain, I read Amoli's *Life of Gnosis, A Mystical Study of Imam Ali's Life*. It was an incredible work that talked about the limits of rationality and the reality of mystical knowing and being by using Imam Ali's life as an example. As Spain's natural environment healed me, I felt God all around me as I read:

The Quran is God's verbal book, the cosmos being His existential book. These two books are entirely consistent, such that should the Quran become manifest in an existential form, it would take the shape of the cosmos, and should the cosmos transform into verbal expression it would appear in the form of the Quran. Thus, one who comprehends the

Quran immediately in its diverse aspects is ipso facto aware of the secrets and mysteries of the cosmos. (Amoli, 2014, p. 36)

Fourth year began. I had finally made peace with myself and felt open to possibilities. In November, I met the man who would become my husband. He was different than anything I had imagined for myself; he questioned and challenged every belief I held dear. His existence in my life began to serve as a question mark, and this question mark created ripples of doubt and seeking within the still waters of my mind that forced me to truly question my beliefs. Those ripples showed me how weak most of our convictions are, how baseless, how habitual and blind.

It was a difficult and uncomfortable place to be, but a necessary one. It allowed me to come out of my own tunnel vision, something that had already started in Spain but was pushed further by him. His challenges were not rude or forceful, they were genuine and curious, sometimes even frustrated as he could not see or feel what I did; his main questions revolved around how I could be so certain of my faith and belief.

His challenges made me stronger and shifted my entire perspective; I realized I had been blocking out so much of the world—so much of life, light, and love. I remembered Rumi and his stories. I remembered the life of my Prophet. They were never above others, they loved all equally, found meaning and beauty in all, not only what they believed to be sacred. My relationship allowed me to put in check a quality that unknowingly seeps and takes roots into the heart of everyone who strives to grow in a certain path—conviction and pride in one's own truth, *only*. It is especially incredible since the narratives that I surrounded myself with all these years, from Sohrab to the Quran, to Hesse and Rumi and Hafez have all preached this message. I began to realize how truly difficult it is to adopt what we believe wholly, to purify our hearts not just in the path we believe is right, but in suspending judgement towards others. Inherently, I have

always been open and accepting which is why I was driven to such sources, but even then, everyone creates mental barriers and biases for themselves that need to be discovered and rooted out.

The process of seeking continued. Like Sohrab, I “climbed up the stairs of religion, to the alleyway of doubt, to the cool air of self-sufficiency...” (Sepehri, 2010, p. 221). My dialogue with God continued, got deeper, more intimate, more secure in a different way; it was then that I knew, in my heart, that I believed, even in moments of doubt and questioning. I surrounded myself with spiritual friends, but many of them set aside Islam to practice their spiritual expansion; I do not blame them, but I always tried to come to it from an Islamic perspective, because I knew this was Islam’s essence. I would get frustrated that these details of Islam were not being highlighted, practiced, or put forth, and so it gave me more strength, drive, and ambition to create this space for myself as a Muslim, to claim and share it with others. It frustrated me how deeply Muslims dug themselves into a dogmatic and dry practice that is exclusionary and unwelcoming to many who are struggling with faith, questioning, or trying to understand. Even my fiancé questioned my belief and faith only because he was trying to understand more deeply for himself, because he had asked others and gotten no response, or vague ones like “because God said so”.

After finishing undergrad, I moved to Ottawa for my MA in Education, and moved in with my fiancé. During my year of courses, I learned more about myself and what I want to do than I did in my undergrad. One theory that affected me most was sociocultural theory, which argues that human development is socioculturally situated; therefore, humans are products of their sociocultural environments, but they also change and shape their environment through their participation of it. I found it deeply relatable; I spent most of my youth trying to understand why

we have different beliefs, understandings, and value systems. I was able to recognize, by digging deeper into my own experiences and interacting with those different from me, that we come from very specific socio-cultural contexts which affects how we think, act, behave, and identify deeply. I used this theory to continue understanding myself and my context more deeply, and to even question it, as well as having more understanding, empathy, and unity with others despite our differences.

The summer after my first year, I read the book *Open to Reason: Muslims in Conversations with the Western Tradition*. It helped me understand Muslim philosophy in relation to the West. It also introduced me to the whole world of modern Islamic philosophy. In most discussions of Muslim philosophy and mysticism, the scholars quoted are from the earlier Islamic period. But we have had Muslim philosophers in the recent century who have spoken out about Islam's stagnancy and have provided visions of Islam in the modern world. In my favourite passage that helped me move beyond the dichotomy of Islam in the modern world, Diagne (2018):

"Modernize Islam" and "Islamicize modernity" are two opposed answers to the same poorly posed question. In fact, it is the point of departure for these two formulas that must be put into question; the false problem lies in setting our sights on modern times and Islam. Becoming must be understood otherwise, by realizing that time is not exterior to religion but is its texture. Time is not- or not only, or not first of all- a trial that religion must overcome, but constitutes its own self-deployment: time is God. Put differently, the response to the challenge of changing times, so as to continue the intention and emancipatory dynamic of religion according to the demands of today, in the domains of social justice, the equality of men and women, of respect for the principle of pluralism- in

short, the necessary “reconstruction of religious thought in Islam”- requires bringing to light a thinking of time as creative becoming, a cosmology that would be continuous emergence, *élan vital*. (p. 85)

I was introduced to many scholars through this book, but none sparked my interest as much as the modern Muslim philosopher, Muhammad Iqbal. In the next month, I devoured his two academic works: *The Development of Metaphysics in Persia*, and the *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*.

What was amazing for me in *The Development of Metaphysics in Persia* was how in line it felt with sociocultural theory, though Iqbal predates it. Iqbal viewed people as a constant becoming - a flourishing of ideas and experiences that differ based on time and space. He believed that “the human mind possesses an independent individuality” which “can gradually evolve out of itself, truths which may have been anticipated by other minds ages ago” (Iqbal, 2001, p. 76). We constantly uncover embodied truths which we can better articulate as we grow and evolve. Through his exposition of the history of Islamic thought, he highlighted the merging of cultures and inter-cultural learning which allowed people to reach higher understanding.

Iqbal traces the history of Sufism back to Persia due to its geographical position which stood “midway between the Semitic and the Aryan, assimilating ideas from both sides, and giving them the stamp of its own individuality” (Iqbal, 2001, p. 83). Islamic spirituality grew in Persia because of “the influence of cultural contacts and cross-fertilization of ideas” which synthesized “both Semitic and the Aryan formulas in the higher category of Love”, by assimilating Christian Gnosticism as well as “the Buddhist idea of Nirvana (*fana* – annihilation)”, while finding the roots of these views in the Quran (Iqbal, 2001, p. 83).

He maintains these views while looking at Islam in the modern age, arguing that it is “necessary to examine... what Europe has thought and how far the conclusions reached by her can help us in the revision and, if necessary, reconstruction, of theological thought in Islam” (Iqbal, 2009, p. 6). He also finds “the most remarkable phenomenon of modern history” to be “the enormous rapidity with which the world of Islam is spiritually moving towards the West” (Iqbal, 2009, p. 6). Firstly, he recognizes that Islamic spirituality, like it once took root and flourished in Persia due to its geographical position, cultural openness, and inter-cultural and religious dialogue, has now moved rapidly to the West for the same reasons. Secondly, he argues that Islam should be able to expand and flourish in societies that are intellectually advanced and allow for openness of thought and dialogue.

In *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Iqbal (2009) emphasizes the co-creation of reality between humans and God. In the most moving passage I read from this book, Iqbal explains how “man’s first act of disobedience was also his first act of free choice” (p. 85) – and that’s why within Islam, Adam’s digression is forgiven. He explains this because “goodness is not a matter of compulsion; it is the self’s free surrender to the moral ideal and arises out of a willing co-operation of free egos”, and thus freedom is a condition of goodness (p. 86). But the freedom to choose also means we can choose evil, and the fact that “God has taken this risk shows His immense faith in man; it is for man now to justify this faith” (p. 86). My favourite part about this passage is Iqbal’s reflection that since the Quran says “We test you with evil and good” (21:35), good and evil “fall within the same whole”, though being opposites. Since as humans we are open to infinite growth and infinite knowledge, we expand only through trial and error: “Therefore, error which may be described as a kind of intellectual evil is an indispensable factor in the building up of experience” (p. 86).

Iqbal deeply helped me in drafting my research proposal, to examine the spiritual development of young Muslims in the West within their sociocultural context and the literature they immersed themselves in. Since I was spending the next year working on my thesis, I decided to invest in something that would help me grow and keep me grounded throughout this process. In my first year in Ottawa, I found myself stretching and doing yoga more than before. It had remained an inconsistent practice in my life, but something I had always wanted to dive deeper into. When I found the perfect program that fit with my schedule, I was ecstatic to start my Yoga Teacher Training, deepening my practice and understanding of Yoga.

We read great texts throughout the program, like Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*, *Bhagavad Gita*, and *The Yamas and Niyamas: Exploring Yoga's Ethical Practice*, which was my favourite read. Since it was a contemporary book, it was a lot more relatable and provided questions at the end of each chapter which gave me journalling prompts to go deeper. The Yamas and Niyamas are the first two limbs of the eight limbs of yoga. Yamas means restraints, and it contains non-violence, truthfulness, not stealing, non-excess, and non-possessiveness. Niyamas means observances, and it consists of purity, contentment, self-discipline, self-study, and surrender.

Learning about yoga philosophy and implementing yogic rituals and reflections in my life deeply rooted me in my faith. I couldn't help but draw continuous parallels between Islam and yoga. The more I delved into yogic spirituality, the more I was grounded in Islamic spirituality. I was learning to inhabit my body, to become aware of it and take care of it as my vessel in this world. I began to realize how much grief and anxiety was pent-up in my body. Though my mind had become liberated since Spain, my body still carried the after-effects of embodied experiences. Through the physical yoga practice, and especially through practicing deep breathing, I let the suppressed parts of me come to the surface. It was uncomfortable, yes, but

yoga is about being comfortable with the discomfort. And as I allowed my body to release its constraints, I felt myself being born anew. I became more present in my daily prayers. I looked for God around me, and I felt Him residing deep within my heart. “He is the First, the Last, the Apparent, and the Hidden” (57:3), and every day, I peel back a new layer of where God resides.

Most of all, as I immersed myself in my research and faced the dichotomous narratives that fragment being and becoming, I found a unity within and around me. I knew deep inside that the sacred is not divorced or detached from everyday life, the little moments, from space and time, in between one culture of another: every moment, everywhere is sacred, if we are open to that communion.

Chapter 5: Tensions, Harmonies, and Conclusion

The two stories reflect on the creative becomings of two young Muslims in Toronto. They explore the harmonies and tensions that exist for these youth, and the various ways they make meaning throughout this process using textual influences. It is an intimate exploration of their spiritual development through literature amidst their sociocultural challenges. It is impossible to convey the entirety of one's spiritual journey. Through the limited examples brought forth, I tried to ground these experiences in sociocultural context and literary endeavours.

These personal stories depict the identity formation and spiritual development of young Muslims in the West – their processes of becoming. By exploring the texts entangled within their contexts, I demonstrate how deeply linked these becomings are with the written word, which gets lived out into the world. As socioculturally situated beings, the characters formed their identity within the con(text)s they lived in. Through this identity, they made meaning while interpreting their con(text)s and transformed their contexts by living out their meaning. Contextualization was one of the most important aspects of the stories. By contextualizing, we move beyond over generalizations. We understand things in a more nuanced and intimate way, and can navigate the myriad boxes and labels that block our view of con(text)s.

Both stories demonstrate lived experiences; how knowledge becomes embodied when it is meaningful, and that meaning gets carried out into the world. They also reflect the relational nature of it all; no emotion, thought, meaning, or belief is divorced from “the other”. We are always, within our narratives and identities, co-constructing our stories relationally with everything and everyone around us. This holistic and relational view allows us to tell stories

about ourselves and our world that forms a “meaningful unity” (Bruckmayr, 2020, p. 240). It is through self-reflection and interpretation that we make our stories more meaningful.

The hardest part in writing these two stories was that one was my own life story that I knew intimately—blindingly so—and the other was someone I had no personal contact with except the interviews. I was not him, trying to be him. And I was me, trying not to be me. While writing his story, I immersed myself in his books and experiences and tried to tell the journey as best as I could. With my own, I read some texts, but mostly found quotes that I had saved. I followed Pat’s advice – to stay on the surface, because I was getting caught in the deep end of my own narrative. Within both stories, I existed as a third person, in a third space between self/other.

The stories allow us to “open binaries to other possibilities” in favour of our continuous becomings (Watt, 2016b). They detail social and communal strength, weaknesses, and areas needing attention and care. In this section, I will reflect on the tensions and harmonies that exist within and between these stories. Tensions are spaces of potentiality, generating possibilities by becoming third spaces where meanings can be contested, and productive growth can occur. Harmonies highlight the strengths that continue to ground and create a safe space for tensions to exist.

Tensions

Gender

The biggest tension between the two stories is gender. The stories were told by a male and a female, and they both had different experiences and understandings of gender.

As a Muslim woman, I felt limited and put into a mold by both Muslims and non-Muslims. I had to, through the books I read and internal exploration, stand strong and fierce

against the stereotypes and expectations encroached on me. I explored my relationship with the hijab, which as a physical practice, is simultaneously a personal choice, as well as an external indicator, thus highly controlled/contested by both Muslims and non-Muslims.

The male participant felt his manhood diminish within Western culture and enhanced through Islam. He subscribed to traditional notions of manhood and chivalry as promoted within Islam. He mentioned Camp Taha as the place he felt initiated in as a man. I also started the physical practice of hijab at the Camp. While I loved and appreciated my experiences there, these gender perceptions and expectations were deeply embedded and perpetuated in that environment. This tension is felt in mosques as well, but the influence of camp was its deeply immersive and impactful atmosphere.

I read the two books he mentioned about gender, *Tao of Islam* and *The Way of the Superior Man*. They were uncomfortable for me to read, especially *Tao of Islam*, which was a collection of primary sources of Muslim philosophers and mystics who wrote about gender throughout history. All these scholars were men, and the author of the book, a female, did not trace the early Muslim scholars' biased views of gender to their sociocultural context, rather she solidified these statements as the fact and basis of Islam. It is precisely these notions which have dominated Islamic theology and gender relations which create a tension within me to resist, rise above, and create a third space where we can discuss and unravel these concepts. My participant also felt this tension against his manhood in the West, which motivated him to hold on to traditional Islamic conceptions of manhood.

While my male participant had many male role models to look up to, from contemporary Muslim scholars and academics to early Muslim philosophers and mystics, I had few female role models to look up to within the Islamic world. Even the female figures that were highlighted

were always interpreted or explained through the lens of a male scholar, and thus rarely relatable or personable.

In my own experience, the works of contemporary Iranian sociologist Ali Shariati on gender were deeply impactful, namely *Fatima is Fatima*. Outside the Islamic tradition, I was deeply impacted by female characters and authors such as Virginia Woolf, Jane Austen, Anne of Green Gables and Jo from Little Women. These characters and authors have, since my childhood, given me a female model, a representation of who I felt I was, or who I could be.

Modernity vs. Tradition and East Vs. West

Tensions existed within these dichotomies as well. I worked on my literature review while I read the Seyyed Hossein Nasr texts relating to my male participant, and it opened my eyes and fuelled my fire. Though I respect this academic for his immense scholarly work, I found the biased and binary way he upheld tradition over modernity, and the east over the west to be distasteful. My male participant, in our interviews, also voiced that he felt the same way; that tradition and the east were inherently good, whereas modernity and the west were inherently bad. As a daughter of both modernity and the West, and as a woman limited through tradition and within the East, I could not help but wholly disagree. However, I do not paint modernity and the West as saving graces – I believe both have good within them, just as both have bad within them. They should be equally critiqued and contested when promoting bad, such as the over-sexualization of women in the West and the use of female pleasure for profit, as well as the limitation and barriers for women in the East and the diminishment of their power. And they should both be respected and promoted when upholding good, such as freedom of speech and liberty in the West, and political stances against Western hegemony and power in the East.

This remains a strong point of tension, which is not altogether divorced from different gendered conceptions and experiences.

Harmonies

Many harmonies exist between the two stories, as both participants came from similar ethnic, religious and spiritual households and communities, and had similar spiritual and intellectual interests and practices. The biggest harmony was their spirituality, which grounded them throughout their entire experiences, and which is deeply linked to their upbringing and how they make meaning and identify themselves in the world. These harmonies can be easily witnessed within the two stories, but I want to highlight two harmonies in particular that I found meaningful.

Physical Embodiment

The male participant had a passion and drive for soccer from a young age. It was his first spiritual playground, linked intimately with his spiritual development. While this physical embodiment took a back seat during doubts and deep striving towards spiritual growth, it made a comeback after he felt settled spiritually, and could use soccer again to further advance. Similarly, I found yoga from a young age and felt deeply impacted by its ability to physically embody spirituality. While my practice was inconsistent for many years, I finally committed to the practice after undergrad. Doing so rooted my spiritual identity even deeper into my physical being.

I found physical embodiment to be the unexpected but appreciated harmony between the two stories. It deeply attests to the importance of the union of mind, body, and spirit, and how we attain wholeness when we are embodied and situated. Not only does our spirit drive us to move, but our movement elevates and enhances our spirit through its deep embodiment and imprint

within our physical bodies. It no longer remains abstract but becomes solidified through physical embodiment. As we are transformed internally through taking physical action, we are transformed externally, and we transform our external reality.

Multiple Cultural Worlds

I found the participants' multiple cultural worlds to also be a point of harmony, especially within tensions. Being a part of different cultural worlds and different third spaces, the participants were able to embody a fluid identity. They had various communities and identities so through times of identity fragmentation, they were held and supported by seeking refuge in one identity or community over the other. When times of tension arose, they sought peace and harmony to resolve these tensions within their available cultural worlds. This points to the multidimensionality of all humans, which forms a whole that accepts and makes space for all its parts.

This can also be witnessed in the stories through their travels. Both participants had deeply transformational travel experiences, which is a result of finding the self through "the other". Of having one's cultural identity enhanced through interactions with other cultures. This experience also has a deeply embodied nature, transforming the self through its physical movement in the world.

Conclusion

Muslims in the West face a variety of challenges. In the earlier chapters, I reflected on where, when, and how these challenges came about historically, sociopolitically, and philosophically. I also discussed how this is more difficult for youth who are going through the process of identity formation to face these issues. If both the Western education and social

system and the Muslim community do not offer third spaces for youth to contest and negotiate meanings, youth can end up feeling fragmented, marginalized, and develop a weak self-identity.

The difficulty of being a young Muslim in the West is equal to its privilege: young Muslims who actively question, reflect, and engage their spirit against limiting conceptions can emerge with a powerful vision of what it means to be a Muslim in their context. They exist within a third space, a *kharabat*, where belief can be dismantled and faith can be restored, where meanings can be contested and co-constructed, and identities can be negotiated rather than negated.

This space reawakens the culture of learning in Islam, one that is deeply situated locally, yet open to the world globally. In this space, Muslims can witness the unity in multiplicity and actively participate in meaning-making and co-creating their reality. This active meaning-making is embodied knowledge and inherently spiritual, as spirituality is “central to the making of meaning in terms of ontological inquiries” (Geary, 2013, p. 29).

By bringing their spirit into the conversation, and making meaning about their place in the world, Muslims can reclaim their narratives and grow productively within their tensions and harmonies. The goal is to approach these problems from a place of care, through dialogue, mutual respect for the other, and deep understanding of con(text)s. It is by opening our dialogue with the world that we can, as Dabashi (2016) said, redefine who we are “from a position of care—care of the other, of the world” (p. 10). Only thus can we grow, evolve, and flourish, paving and opening an ever-renewing path for future generations: a third space where we can playfully grow within our tensions and harmonies.

Appendix – Translations of Words

Ahlul bayt: literal meaning is people of the house. In Shia Islam, this term signifies the immediate family of the Prophet, consisting of his daughter Fatima, his son in law Ali, and his two grandsons, Hassan and Hussain.

Dhikr: literal meaning is to remember. In Islam, it's used as a mantra meditation, usually reciting the names and attributes of God.

Dua: literal meaning is invocation. In Shia Islam especially there is a wide array of prayers and invocations passed down from the lineage of the Prophet.

Futuwwa: literally translated as young-manliness, its English equivalent would be chivalry. It's a code of conduct and moral standard of being a man in the Islamic tradition.

Ghazal: a short rhyming poem expressing the pain of loss and separation, and the joy of union and love.

Halal: literal meaning is permissible. Used to denote what is allowed in Islamic law, usually referring to meat made according to Islamic law standards.

Iftar: the meal consumed to break the fast in Ramadan.

Irfan: signifies knowledge and awareness of a spiritual and metaphysical reality. The English equivalent would be gnosis or mysticism.

Laylatul qadr: the last days of the month of Ramadan, in which the Quran was revealed down. For Shi'a Muslims, it also coincides with the martyrdom of Imam Ali, the Prophet's son in law and the first Imam in the Shia tradition.

Muharram: The first month of the Islamic calendar. For Shia Muslims, this month commemorates the martyrdom of Imam Hussain, the Prophet's grandson and the third Imam, at the battle of Karbala.

Muhasaba: literal meaning is accounting. In the spiritual tradition of Islam, this is used as a tool to account for one's actions, thoughts, and inclinations throughout the day, aiming to become more God-conscious.

Simorgh: a mythical bird in Persian mythology, equivalent to the Phoenix in the English tradition.

Suhoor: the pre-dawn meal in the month of Ramadan before starting the fast.

Surah: the term used to signify the chapters of the Quran.

Tajweed: the technical rules that teach the proper pronunciation and enunciation of Quranic recitation.

Ya Ali: "Ya" is equivalent to "O!". Ya Ali is used as an invocation by Shia's to call on their first Imam, "O Ali!".

Ya anis al gholoob: Literal meaning is "O friend of the heart". It is an invocation towards God, mentioned in the dua Jawshan Kabeer, often recited in the month of Ramadan.

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