



Assalamu Alaykum

Dear Students,

I hope this letter reaches you with the best of health and Iman. Just sending a reflection.

In the past decade, related to experiences in my own life, I discovered that so many people among us are in pain. Frankly, the great majority of people you will come across have wounds. You, reading this, might have your own. Consider how it feels, for example, if you are just unable to please someone valuable in your life. It hurts, deeply.

One of the central threads in our Tradition is the thread of connection and interaction. Meaning, we each are wired with an innate need for connection, for interaction. When we are disconnected from others, the experience is often a type of suffering. Some of us are able to conduct ourselves in solitude; many of us, however, experience loneliness.

When that need for interaction is unmet, we overcompensate by seeking it somewhere, somehow. Sometimes we look for interaction. Sometimes we engage in other behaviors that give us the illusion of interaction, or almost a quick fix. Many of such behaviors are unhealthy.


Further, not only do we have this thirst to give and receive, the heart of it is a thirst to receive and give compassion (rahma). As we know, the primary attributes of the Divine with creation are those of rahma. The primary relationship that the Prophet, may peace be upon him, has with all is rahma. The primary relationship that believers are to have, especially as spouses, is rahma.

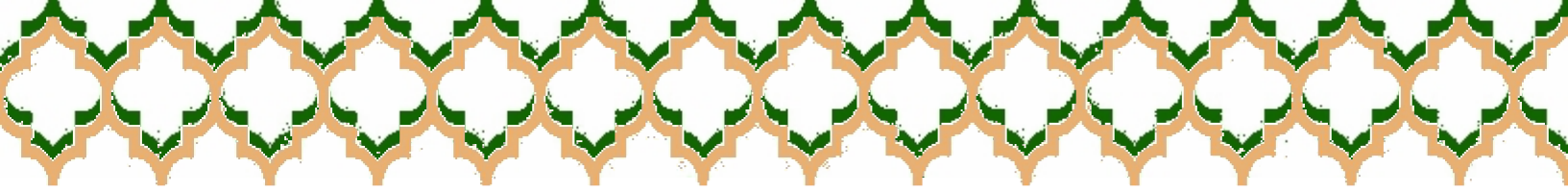
A problem here is that our modern industrialized era is frequently hostile to a person's needs for rahma. Consider how much time you spend in your day communicating with people through an electronic screen against how much time you spend communicating with people face to face. The convenience of technology contributes to an alienation from each other. I'm as guilty as anyone.

Positive compassionate texting is better than no communication. Email, because it is usually longer, is better than text. Phone, because it involves your voice, is better than email. Face to face conversation, however, is best of all. Of course, this assumes that we are speaking about compassionate communication.

I've left out handwritten communication, because it is so rare, but (back in the olden days, meaning almost my whole life) there was a thrill in receiving a long handwritten letter from someone. Think about the difference in feeling when you receive a greeting card that is typed, against one that is handwritten. The former seems impersonal, while latter seems so precious.

Or, consider the way we mass-interpret people, even those we might talk to frequently. Consider that we often identify people according to what we perceive as their ideological bent. So, we ignore the complexities each of us has in our beliefs. More than that, we ignore the life of hopes, dreams, joys, and pains that each person has. Most of all, we ignore the the beating heart inside. That is not the way of rahma. I share my office with the Jewish chaplain, and I've seen how she works. The modern history of our two communities has tremendous space for improvement. Imagine if I saw her only as an agenda, or vice versa. There could be no trust in such a relationship.





The point here is that I'm urging you to speak to people with compassion. In the course of this year in particular, and your life in general, you will definitely meet people whose practices and views will seem repugnant, but you must respond with compassion. You will meet people whose existence offends you, and you must respond with rahma. You will meet people who are actively hostile to you, and you must respond with rahma.

It might be that if you do give someone rahma, you might give them exactly that small dose that they needed in that day, for we are taught that even a smile is charity. We know the opposite is true: perhaps you have had that experience when someone said the worst possible thing in the worst possible moment for you, and it sent you off an emotional cliff. When fighting couples come to me, this is often the case. It happens so frequently: one of the two spouses does not smile at the right time. The other gets upset. Then, the whole weekend is lost to fighting. It sounds absurd, but it's common.

Essentially, I'm saying to take that brief extra step to turn a common conversation into something compassionate, in the way you give your attention and/or the way you communicate. But, more than that, I'm encouraging you to stop by for some friendly face to face conversation. Perhaps it will provide something that we all seek, when we did not receive rahma when we especially needed it: healing.

Your assignment is simple: with Muslims regardless of gender, you must start greeting each other with the Salam. With everyone, I'm asking you to, at the very least, smile. Maybe you will give someone exactly what they needed to get through the day. And if not, you're still getting rewarded for it. Even better: you are following the way of the Prophet, may peace be upon him.

May Allah bless you,

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