



Assalamu Alaykum

Dear Students,

I hope this letter reaches you with the best of health and Iman. Just sending a reflection. This letter was supposed to be an end-of-semester rally, hoping to inspire you to work hard on Finals. But, recent events have compelled me to speak about something else.

The single most common theological question I receive is the question of Free Will. All other questions are a distant second, starting with the question of Evil or the question of Suffering or the question of “Why?” Many of you know my answers to these questions, but I want to focus on one thing: we have no idea what is written for us. We have no idea where life will take us.


Is life a straight line? In one way it is. But, when we are in the middle of it, it seems the opposite. Looking back on my 40+ years (Masha Allah), I’ve traveled an assorted series of twists, turns, loops, and somersaults. I had no idea I would someday be a chaplain. No clue I would someday be a college professor. No clue I would someday be part of the Loyola community. No clue that my academic life, my professional life, and especially my personal life would take the directions they have taken.

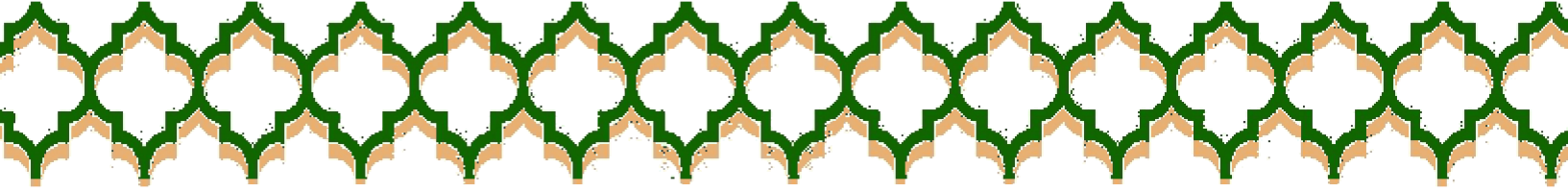
Thus, I have some guesses, but still no clue where I will be or what I will be in five years. I am as clueless about that as I was five years ago about where I would be today. My life is full of failures. Full of redemption. Full of resolved and unresolved matters. From some lenses, my life is a high speed adventure. From other lenses, it’s an abominable mess. From other lenses, my life is simple and small. In the process, I hope I learned a few things.

But in one way, life is very much a straight line. Our moment and location of death is set. Our whole process of life is a path leading to that moment, in that spot. We hope that our final words, our final sentiments will be some sort of smiling, appreciative praise and appreciation for the Divine. But, each of us is headed on a non-stop road to that moment, to that location. On Friday night, Mutahir Rauf reached that location, that moment, just a few blocks away from campus. I do not know if he woke up yesterday morning knowing it would be his last. I do not know what his final thoughts were. Perhaps it was a prayer to the Divine. But, I know that that moment was set for him. And I know that that night, the lives of his family and closest friends turned upside down.

You do not recover from the death of a loved one: you morph into something different. When your loved one dies, the moment of detachment yanks you into a different reality. It is not unlike the tension you experience when you travel to a completely foreign land, only intensified, perhaps a thousand fold. The whole experience of travel is a tension. As you get comfortable in a foreign land, you start to acclimate. But, your “homeland” will always be a part of you while you transition into your new land. This is the experience of death. Your geography might be the same. Your environment might be the same. Yet, with the death of a loved one, you are suddenly thrown into a completely different world. That loved one will always be in you, but will no longer be with you. Grieving is that process of transitioning.

Some people make the mistake of resisting grief. They try to hide behind theological slogans, insisting to themselves that they are okay. The result is that they’ve transitioned to another world, resisting to accept it. The need to grieve still forces its way through, often through some visceral anger. Too often we turn to anger as some sort of baseline emotion for everything. That in itself is a problem we can talk about at another time.





Consider the path of belief. When we ask Allah in the first Surah to guide us on the Straight Path, we understand that that Straight Path is a Circle. We seek a destination in the Shade of the Divine, with the Divine, but that is also where we started. In essence, we are seeking a return, Home. Some commentators teach us that our most primordial yearning is our yearning to return to Him. From there, all of our pains relate to that alienation we experience in this world, from Him. Our joys stem from moments of closeness to Him. There is a common line of poetry: you enter this world crying, while everyone around you is smiling and laughing, but you should exit this world smiling and laughing, even though everyone around you will be crying. That smile happens with proximity to the Divine.

This distance and proximity spans a location that does not have space or time. If you know Love, then you know what I mean. You derive pleasure or pain thinking about your beloved, even though your beloved might physically be in the next room or the next continent, or in the next phase of life. As you know from our conversations, I think about my daughters all day long. All. Day. Long.

One thing I learned through my various episodes is that people are hurting. There is a lot of pain in our world, in our society, in our community. It is fair to assume that anyone you meet has some struggle, concern, torment that is weighing on them. Not everyone you meet will be in luxury, but everyone you meet will be in struggle. That hurt relates at one level to our distance from or proximity to the Divine.

But, we cannot just tell people, “You hurt because you are far from God.” That would be like telling someone starving, “Your stomach hurts because you have no food.” That is why, when we are suffering, the last thing we want to hear is scripture, because it is such a practice of stating the obvious that it feels like a reprimand. The starting point instead is to extend love, to give compassion, to give an ear, motivated by scripture through our hearts, rather than tossing out scripture from our tongues.

And, with that, I look back at where I was in June, not knowing I’d be your chaplain. I did not know how many different issues and struggles you would share with me, so that we can help work through them together. I went through a horrendously difficult struggle some years ago, and as I yearned for some solace, one ayah changed everything: 9:128. In a nutshell, Allah is telling us that when we hurt, the Prophet (peace be upon him) hurts. I needed to know that my hurt was not alone.

I can tell you from experience that this compassion extends. When the child hurts, the parent hurts. When the apprentice hurts, the mentor hurts. And, when the student hurts, the chaplain hurts. That is the behavior of love. And, as we complete this semester, I can say that I had no clue how much love I would develop for each of you, dear students.

I hope to share life with each of you in the Shade of the Divine, with the Divine, on the other side. Until then, take what I give to you and pay it forward.

And God knows best.

May Allah bless you.

Omer Mozaffar
Muslim Chaplain
Loyola University Chicago

