

Day 23: My Life Changed in a McDonald's Bathroom

While I find that practicing Islam in the West rarely causes open friction with societal norms, one area where this is less true is the practice of *wudu*. *Wudu*, or ritual ablution, is a prerequisite of salah, the five daily prayers that Muslims are enjoined to perform. Mosques and other Muslim institutions provide *wudu* areas, typically stools set in front of a long trough above which are a series of faucets. Standard facilities, such as fast-food restaurants, however, are unused to facilitating ritual washing, so they provide only a sink where most only perform a perfunctory post-toilet rinse.

Wudu ended up being one of my sneaky entry points into Islam. Nabil, the protagonist of the goat curry story covered in Day 4, was a fellow 3rd former, the rather pretentious yet endearing name St. Mark's gives to freshmen. He arrived at boarding school on a spiritual high, having spent the summer before his entry into this foreign ecosystem striving in the "path of Allah." Praying on time five times a day was non-negotiable for him. Naturally, this led to some minor contretemps, especially in the bathroom.

When we would be brushing our teeth and washing our faces, he would be making *wudu*. The first portion of this ablution was only a bit unusual. He would wash his hands and then cleverly cascade water down his forearms. His former's blows to clean out his nostrils and aggressive gargling were a bit off putting but nothing beyond the pale for a bunch of grimy teenage boys. But the final step was the coup de grace: washing his feet. Sticking your feet into the sink iconoclastically breaks an unwritten social covenant that we should tend to foot-related matters only in private.

Yet there Nabil was, washing his feet—especially [between the toes](#)—night after night. He would then return to his room and pronounce the *adhan*, or call to prayer, out loud with his door slightly ajar. This naked flouting of social norms was intoxicating. So many teenagers fear nothing more than standing out from the crowd, but here he was confidently doing so. Most Muslims have developed strategies to avoid being labeled foot-washing extremists. They ceremoniously wipe water over their socks rather than going in for a full foot bath. For those uncomfortable with this dispensation, they usually bring the water down to the feet rather than the more jarring inverse. But Nabil was different.

Eventually, his open and unapologetic practice of Islam, as well as his cogent explanations of his faith, began to pique the interest of several of his classmates, myself included. Seeing this, Nabil invited us to an *ijtema* or spiritual gathering, at a mosque in NYC. I had prayed before, back at our boarding school—and I had even made *wudu* in front of the scornful and mocking gazes of my dorm mates. But never before had I imagined that shy, reticent Marshall (who was once so timid as to fear ordering pizza over the phone) would be washing his feet amidst the frenetic chaos of a McDonald's bathroom. By comparison, our chosen spot for prayer—in a parking space between two exhaust-spewing vans—was serenity personified. I assumed that the masses of fellow travelers at the rest stop would look aghast, but most didn't even bat an eye. These were New Yorkers after all.

The rest of that weekend turned out to be one of the most significant of my life. I didn't quite know what to expect; all I had been told was that there was a big gathering of East Coast Muslims and that the rather grandiose goal of the weekend was to "re-discover the purpose of our lives." Skepticism still reigned supreme, and I didn't anticipate any huge changes in my worldview. I certainly didn't expect to stumble upon a horde of giant-bearded humanity during our middle-of-the-night arrival. Delicately tiptoeing to one of the few remaining empty spaces on the masjid floor, I finally managed to lay out my sleeping bag. The stentorian snores of my newfound family made sleep hard to come by. At 3 in the morning I saw a handful of these brothers arise from bed, make wudu, and then perform long prostrations. They raised their hands and tears streamed down their faces, begging God for guidance and mercy. It was beginning to dawn on me that this would be a weekend unlike any other.

To claim that the 5:00 am *Fajr* (pre-dawn prayer) wake-up call was a moment of transcendent serenity would perhaps be to overstate the level of my spiritual development at that early stage of my life. Nonetheless, by the time I had made *wudu* and completed my preparations for *salah*, I was sufficiently awake to recognize the drastic difference between praying in a small gathering of 4 and an enormous congregation of 400. Never before had I seen so many souls simultaneously submit to the One Creator, so many foreheads pressed to the ground in unison.

Even more eye-opening than the morning prayer was the morning meal. When those now-familiar words "*Kaane tayar hay* (the food is ready)" were first proclaimed to my uninitiated ears, I began my walk towards the basement dining room with visions of round tables and a sea of chairs. Instead, I found about five long *duster khans* (eating mats) laid out on the ground and a motley jumble of ethnically diverse brothers digging into their cream cheese and honey, and, of course, that breakfast of champions, mutton curry. Indeed, it was the diversity of my eating companions that most struck me that morning. Across from me sat a Libyan, to his left a Malaysian, beside me a Pakistani, and to my right a Ghanian. In retrospect, I felt like Malcolm X when he described his epiphany at the Hajj pilgrimage:

Never have I witnessed such sincere hospitality and overwhelming spirit of true brotherhood as is practiced by people of all colors and races here in this ancient Holy Land, the home of Abraham, Muhammad and all the other Prophets of the Holy Scriptures. For the past week, I have been utterly speechless and spellbound by the graciousness I see displayed all around me by people of all colors.

There were tens of thousands of pilgrims, from all over the world. They were of all colors, from blue-eyed blondes to black-skinned Africans. But we were all participating in the same ritual, displaying a spirit of unity and brotherhood that my experiences in America had led me to believe never could exist between the white and non-white.

America needs to understand Islam, because this is the one religion that erases from its society the race problem. Throughout my travels in the Muslim world, I have met, talked to, and even eaten with people who in America would have been considered white - but the white attitude was removed from their minds by

the religion of Islam. I have never before seen sincere and true brotherhood practiced by all colors together, irrespective of their color. ([source](#))

Practically in the shadow of the United Nations, I was for the first time experiencing something that approximated its mission of achieving global harmony. True equality, I discovered, was not to be found in hyped-up slogans or ideologies but rather on the floor of a humble basement of a *masjid* in Queens.

When my Arab companion started speaking about Allah, started assigning distinctive qualities to that Entity that I had always believed in but had never known how to worship, the hair on my forearms stood at attention, and I felt my tear ducts begin to fill. Allah was the Uncreated Creator of all that Exists (al-Samad), the Sole Sustainer of His Creation (al-Rāziq), the Merciful (al-Rahmān), the Compassionate (al-Rahīm), the Subtly Kind (al-Latīf), the Giver of Life (al-Muhyī), the Giver of Death (al-Mumīt), the One (al-Ahad). By the time he finished describing the Beautiful Names of Allah and the radiant simplicity of Islam, I was ready to enter fully into the fold of the religion that I had long been toying with.

At the end of this weekend, an African American brother gave me a piece of advice that I have never forgotten, “Always keep your *wudu*. Always.” I think if more of us could follow this sage wisdom and stick unapologetically to our principles, the world might be a far different place.

11/29/22

Here is a [link](#) to the other essays in this 30-for-30 College Essay Challenge.