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## How It Started For Me

Ever since I can remember I have believed in God. My family was not religious, though both of my parents were quite spiritual. As a result, I was free to explore the vast world of religious thought my own way. Explore I did. As a child I read quantities of mythology from all over the world. The American Indian mythologies touched me the most deeply.

Perhaps that was because of my family's excursions to watch the Easter ceremonies of the Yaqui Indian tribe. These ceremonies are a marvelous blend of Catholicism and the native belief system from before European contact. The dance/drama depicts the struggle between the forces of evil and the forces of good, all staged within the story of the Easter passion. Yaqui society is in large part organized around the year-round preparation and final performance of these ceremonies. Most traditional men become members of one of the dance societies, which then perform this impressive and deeply religious ceremony for its own sake. This is not a staged production; it is an expression of faith, which we were most privileged to be allowed to watch.

Seeing such deep reverence and total dedication to a religious path touched my very soul and awakened my own need for a spiritual path.

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

I also read stories of the European "settlers" of various nationalities. The slaughter and brutal enslavement of the Native American peoples by these Europeans horrified me. The great-

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est horror was that so much of this terrible activity was carried out in the name of religion. (As I have grown older I have learned that this has been the way of conquerors and for all of the major organized religions at one time or another.)

My longing for God and a spiritual path on one hand, and my horror of organized religion and its activities on the other, staged a constant drama in my young life. As a young adult I found a spiritual home for a while in a Quaker meeting, and later with the Sufi Order in the West. Traditionally the Sufis are Islamic mystics, however the Sufi Order in the West had been started by a spiritual student from India whose teacher had given him the task of introducing Islam to the West in a manner that would make it accessible. The group I became associated with was definitely New Age, with very few of its members involved in traditional Islam. In the introduction I mention that a friend gave me my first Quran. That friend was a Sufi.

Below is the story of how this Quran eventually brought me to Islam. The story is reprinted from *THE HOOPOE*, an Islamic literary magazine that is no longer published.

### Into The Light

By  
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IN THE NAME OF GOD, MOST GRACIOUS,  
MOST MERCIFUL.

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

"What if I can't do all this stuff?"

"You'll never know unless you try."

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

“Gay reel mag dooby...”

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



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

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



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

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

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

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

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



Right now she is sitting in front of a computer terminal, wondering how long she could have lasted as a “muslim” if she hadn’t walked through that door, hadn’t met that gently smiling man working just inside the sunny room which felt more like home than even the house she grew up in...if she hadn’t heard about his discovery of the mathematical code in the Qur’an...the intricate code which is God’s own tamper proof seal on His message to each one of us. How long could she have lasted in the cloth chains of hijab [*garments worn by many Muslim women in public*] before she would have dumped them — and everything connected with them?

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

But by God’s great mercy she was there, and she was able. And only by His great mercy will she continue to be, Inshallah!

And of course there is still a lot of growing. But that’s OK, ‘cause as Elliot Paul put it, “Whatever isn’t growing, wears out!”

(From *THE HOOPOE*, Summer/Fall issue, 1988, page 20.)

Though it was difficult to make myself ring the doorbell as I stood there on the front porch, walking through that door into the mosque proved to be like grabbing a lifeline. God had guided me to a group of people who were following the Quran alone, and that is what I needed. I don’t think that I would have lasted very much longer trying to follow all the rules and regulations that the various forms of traditional Islam impose on their women. Nor would I have survived the issues of apparent inequality for women in Islam that I was struggling with. In fact, I had already begun to drown.

