
True Power

Muslim women are indeed beset by many “bulls of inequity,” but that does not really reflect their true power.

Women may not be the visible movers and shakers of a society, but in truth they have tremendous power, no matter what the society’s perception, or their own perception for that matter.

Women are the ones who raise the children. In this duty alone, they have the most important position in the entire society. It is they who mold the future generations. They ultimately pass on the core values of the society.

In a very true sense, the society is what we learn in our mothers’ laps. It has been quite well documented that a person’s essential values are well established by the age of seven, and the earlier years are more critical than the later, especially in the time period before seven. For instance, by the age of three, a child’s brain has grown to ninety percent of its full size. The child has already established many of his or her most basic values, and while they may be somewhat modified throughout life, the core is set.

I have a very dear friend who has struggled against the racial and class prejudices established in her family since she became aware that they existed... for over forty years. Though she can and does correct her attitude, it is still there to be corrected, and perhaps always will be. Our prejudices are among the values that are almost knitted into our bones as we stand clinging to our mother’s knee.

And in almost all cases our mothers are the ones who give us these essential values. In all societies I am familiar with, it is the mother who cares for the very young. In some situations, a

nurse or nanny will substitute for the mother, but these substitutes are usually women also.

Only in very recent years has the phenomena of "Mr. Mom" arisen in the West. As the Western economic system forces more and more mothers to work, there seems to be a growing involvement of fathers in the rearing of their children. Occasionally the father stays home with the children, becoming "Mr. Mom," while the mother pursues her career. Even so, the number of infant and toddling children actually raised by men is minimal. It is much more common for the mother to stay home while the children are very young, or for the children to be cared for by other women.

The Quran recognizes the special role of mothers in the following verse:

*And We have enjoined on man
(To be good) to his parents:
In travail upon travail
Did his mother bear him,
And in years twain
Was his weaning: (hear
The command), "Show gratitude
To Me and to thy parents:..."
(The Holy Quran XXXI:14 [31:14])*

Our mothers carry us in the womb for nine months, often with great discomfort for much of that time. They endure the pain of childbirth to bring us into the world. And then they care for our every need until we can begin to manage small bits of our own care. Our fathers also expend a great deal of effort and worry over us as we grow. For all of this, God commands us to treat our parents well.

*Thy Lord hath decreed
That ye worship none but Him,
And that ye be kind
To parents. Whether one
Or both of them attain*

*Old age in thy life,
Say not to them a word
Of contempt, nor repel them,
But address them
In terms of honour.
And, out of kindness,
Lower to them the wing
Of humility, and say:
"My Lord! Bestow on them
Thy Mercy even as they
Cherished me in childhood."
(The Holy Quran XVII:23-24 [17:23-24])*

Our parents cared for us when we were totally helpless, and when we grew to be just capable enough to get ourselves into terrible trouble. We have a tremendous amount for which to repay them.

But what of our children? What do we owe them, and future generations? I believe it is natural to want to give our children the best we can. We learned that modeling from our parents, and in turn, we teach it to our children.

Providing for our children physically is one thing. It is important, but giving them the latest fashions or the most popular toys is nothing compared to the values we give them. These values will sustain them for the rest of their time on this earth, and give them the basis to make it a good and fulfilling life. Most important, the values they learn from us will help them prepare for the eternity of the hereafter.

And the values we teach our children determine what they will teach their children. In teaching our children, we are essentially creating our culture, our society. Just as most of us will in some way care for our elderly parents, our children will someday care for us. Indeed, we will reap what we sow.

There are innumerable types of values that our children learn. While we are not the only source of that learning, we do set the essential tone very early, and mostly by our modeling. There are a few basic areas that I would like to discuss.

Morality

I believe that most of human learning is done through modeling. We see others doing something and we realize that we can also do it. If the person we are watching is someone we admire, then we believe that we *should* be doing what he or she is doing, so we can be like them.

In the area of morality this is especially critical. One can expect a child to lie if he hears his parent lying (Quran 9:119). If a parent cheats in a game, the child learns that cheating is okay (83:1-4). A parent who has a little “innocent” wine with dinner teaches his or her children that wine is good, and drinking is acceptable (2:219). Parents who flirt outside of their marriage can expect a child to pick up both the habit and the implications (17:32). When a cashier returns too much money to a parent, the way the parent handles the situation teaches the child a profound lesson.

Even something as simple as the movies we watch, the books we read or the songs we listen to impart moral lessons to our children. In today's society, I believe it is particularly important to deliver the right message to the very young. As children get older, the parents can talk about what they are seeing or hearing, but a very young child just absorbs what is going on without any intellectual assessment.

The old saying “Do as I say, not as I do,” does not work with children, especially when they are very young. We learn to do what we see our parents doing, in spite of what they may say to us.

My own family is a good example of the way in which the modeling affects children in this area. My parents were not religious, but were very moral in the way that they treated other people. They were honest and would never have even considered cheating others. They were charitable and both were very hard workers.

I believe that it was from that basic modeling that I, their child, drew the values that have made me who I am.

Righteousness

Righteousness is not turning your faces towards the east or the west. Righteous are those who believe in God, the Last Day, the angels, the scripture, and the prophets; and they give the money, cheerfully, to the relatives, the orphans, the needy, the traveling alien, the beggars, and to free the slaves; and they observe the Contact Prayers (Salat) and give the obligatory charity (Zakat); and they keep their word whenever they make a promise; and they steadfastly persevere in the face of persecution, hardship, and war. These are the truthful; these are the righteous. (Quran: The Final Testament 2:177)

This verse defines righteousness for us. Notice that righteousness is not a matter of following a lot of ritual, or being prominent in a religious community. It is a much more private thing, something of the heart. It requires belief in God, the hereafter, the angels, the scripture and the messengers. And it requires one to be charitable, to observe the prayers, to keep contracts and promises and to be steadfast.

Again, all of these traits are best taught by modeling. A child who sees his parents praying and is encouraged to join them, one who is taught to be charitable by example and instruction, one who sees his parents' steadfastness and trustworthiness has the best modeling possible to follow.

I always feel a little thrill when a tiny person joins our prayer. There is something special and precious to me about the prayer of little children.

Children are often drawn to the Contact Prayer (*Salat*), and many children have a tendency toward charity. Almost all children are naturally honest (often embarrassingly so!), until they learn to be otherwise.

Of course, each child is an individual. And as they grow into maturity, each must find his or her own relationship with God. Many will go through a period of exploration and rebel-

lion. I believe that is part of human nature. However, the values that are instilled when they were tiny children will always be there for them to return to.

Gratitude

Probably the most influential television program I have ever watched was one I caught by accident when I was home from work sick, depressed about my life, and generally feeling sorry for myself. I was bored and turned on the TV looking for just about anything to watch.

Thankfully, I caught the last part of an Oprah Winfrey program where she talked about keeping a Gratitude Journal. She recommended writing at least one thing you are grateful for every day, even if all you can write is "I'm grateful I can write." I realized how far I had fallen from my normal sense of gratitude, and how much that was affecting my mood and my health.

Indeed, God tells us that gratitude is crucial. One of my favorite verses makes this very clear:

Your Lord has decreed: "The more you thank Me, the more I give you." But if you turn unappreciative, then My retribution is severe.
(*Quran: The Final Testament 14:7*)

You may be thinking, "Sure it is easy to be thankful when things are good, but things have been so bad lately...." However, this verse comes right after Moses is reminding his people of the terrible trial they went through when Pharaoh was "slaughtering your sons and sparing your daughters." Fortunately, few of us must go through such terrible trials. Yet, how many of us are ever grateful enough for all of the blessings God bestows on us?

In fact, there are many blessings that we probably don't even notice. When was the last time we thanked God for keeping the energy from the sun from burning up the earth? Or when have we remembered that it was just a short time ago that all people

grew up without electricity and running water, and a great many still do? Do we ever think to be thankful that polio is no longer the greatcrippler of children? There are millions of things that we never even think about, much less are grateful for.

Gratitude, like almost everything else, is first taught by modeling. When we express our gratitude both in front of and to our children, that modeling is stronger than anything we can say to them about being grateful.

I have a friend whose mother is one of the most negative people I've ever known. Her daughter has been Muslim for many, many years but constantly has to fight the negativity she learned from her mother, sometimes failing for long periods of time. Sadly, most people from similar situations do not even realize the toxic nature of such negativity, and they go through their entire life in a cloud of negative misery. I believe that Oprah Winfrey's show was so powerful for me because she was sharing with the general public the miraculous healing that gratitude can bring.

Education

The Quran never speaks of educational institutions like schools or colleges. However, it often speaks of learning. In fact, the first revelation was:

Read, in the name of your Lord, who created.

He created man from an embryo.

Read, and your Lord, Most Exalted.

Teaches by means of the pen.

He teaches man what he never knew.

(Quran: The Final Testament 96:1-5)

As we saw in Chapter 18, reading the Quran is an important aspect of being Muslim. Moreover, we must read for our own understanding, we must think about what we read. This is clear in the following verse:

You shall not accept any information, unless you verify it for yourself. I have given you the hearing, the eyesight, and the brain, and you are responsible for using them.
(Quran: The Final Testament 17:36)

Thus, we cannot just take what the scholars or religious leaders tell us. We must verify it for ourselves. This commandment affects all aspects of our lives, not just our religion. In order to verify things for ourselves, we must have enough knowledge to be able to do so. In today's modern world, I believe that for most of us acquiring that knowledge requires an education.

Here also, what you model for your children is critical. When my older sister and I were young my mother had the time to read to us every day. She often took us to the library. We saw her reading for her own enjoyment. By the time my younger sister came along, my mother was working outside of the home and had little time to read to her or indulge in the literary luxuries my older sister and I enjoyed. To this day, my older sister and I are voracious readers, while my just as intelligent younger sister rarely reads except what she must.

Courtesy

Courtesy is one of the things that make living in a group of people bearable. God tells us in several places to treat each other well. Here, He tells us to greet each other courteously:

*When a (courteous) greeting
Is offered you, meet it
With a greeting still more
Courteous, or (at least)
Of equal courtesy.
God takes careful account
Of all things.*
(The Holy Quran IV:86 [4:86])

If you have ever been in a situation where people did not return your greeting, you will understand just how important

this commandment can be. It is most unsettling and can cause a great deal of hostility.

From my personal experience I believe that children who learn basic courtesy have a great advantage over those who do not. Other people respond in kind when they are treated with courtesy. Though it seems like a small thing, courtesy can make life much more pleasurable.

In this next verse, God tells us to treat each other "*in the best possible manner:*"

*Tell My servants to treat each other in the best possible manner,
for the devil will always try to drive a wedge among them....
(Quran: The Final Testament 17:53)*

Treating people well is always a good policy, spiritually and even just from a selfish point of view. If you treat others well, they are much more apt to treat you well. This verse can refer to courtesy, and leads into the next topic, tolerance.

Tolerance

My parents came from fairly diverse backgrounds, and met in cosmopolitan San Francisco. Their life experiences taught them respect for all cultures and peoples. They passed that respect on to their children.

As I mentioned in an earlier chapter, I think that it was the Quran's principle of tolerance that first drew me to it. God tells us that it does not matter what you call your religion, if you are submitting to God alone and lead a righteous life you will be rewarded.

*Surely, those who believe,
those who are Jewish, the converts,
and the Christians; any of them who
(1) believe in God and
(2) believe in the Last Day, and
(3) lead a righteous life, have nothing to fear,*

nor will they grieve.
(Quran: The Final Testament 5:69 [and 2:62])

The Quran teaches not only religious tolerance, but tolerance of racial and ethnic differences. In fact, God says those differences are among His signs.

Among His Signs.
Is the creation of the heavens
And the earth, and the variations
In your languages
And your colours: verily
In that are Signs
For those who know.
(The Holy Quran XXX:22 [30:22])

Finally, in this next verse God tells us why He made us as different peoples.

O people, we created you from the same male and female,
and rendered you distinct peoples and tribes,
that you may recognize one another. The best among you in the
sight of God is the most righteous....
(Quran: The Final Testament 49:13)

We must recognize each other, and know that the differences we see are immaterial. They have nothing to do with who we really are. Only our righteousness gives us value, and sets us apart in God's eyes.

Freedom

One of the great gifts that God has bestowed on us in the West is freedom, especially freedom of religion. In fact the United States was founded on this critical freedom. This concept is very Quranic:

Let there be no compulsion
In religion: Truth stands out

*Clear from Error: whoever
Rejects Evil and believes
In God hath grasped
The most trustworthy
Hand-hold, that never breaks....
(The Holy Quran II:256 [2:256])*

The word "Islam" simply means "submission," submission to God. Religious freedom is critical for true Islam, true submission to God. God makes it very clear that He has decreed different laws and rites for different faiths.

*...For each of you, we have decreed laws and different rites.
Had God willed, He could have made you one congregation.
But He thus puts you to the test through the revelations
He has given each of you. You shall compete in righteousness....
(Quran: The Final Testament 5:48)*

God tests us through the differences in our faiths. It is our duty to research for ourselves, to study and investigate, then take the best. That is how God describes the believers:

*They are the ones who examine all words, then follow the best.
These are the ones whom God has guided; these are the ones
who possess intelligence.
(Quran: The Final Testament 39:18)*

To really submit, one needs to be free in all ways. Otherwise, how can you tell whether you are submitting because you are convinced that it is right, or because that is all the society allows you to do?

Oppression is a horrible thing!!!!

You may kill those who wage war against you, and you may evict them whence they evicted you.

Oppression is worse than murder....

(Quran: The Final Testament 2:191 – emphasis added)

I have placed emphasis on the statement “*Oppression is worse than murder*” because it is such an important concept. It is critical for all of us to know and teach this to our children. As soon as we allow oppression, we are killing the best of the society.

This is true with the oppression of any group of people, whether based on gender, race, religion, etc.

Equality

Throughout this book we have seen that men and women are equal in God’s eyes. In this chapter we have seen that, as Rashad Khalifa translates it: “*The best among you in the sight of God is the most righteous*” (*Quran: The Final Testament 49:13.*)

This equality in the sight of God applies to all people, no matter what their social status:

Those among you who cannot afford to marry free believing women, may marry believing slave women.

God knows best about your belief, and you are equal to one another, as far as belief is concerned....

(Quran: The Final Testament 4:25)

Thus, it does not matter if we are male or female; white, black or brown; free or slave—we are all ultimately judged by our righteousness alone. We are all equal, though we may not be treated equally. That is where mothers come in. Teaching equality is one of the most powerful things a woman can do. She may not see equal treatment in her own life, but for her children and her grandchildren, she has left a priceless legacy.

As the guardians and teachers of our own culture, women have an unequalled opportunity to create major social change. It may not be immediate, but it will be long lasting. We owe it to ourselves, and even more to our children, to teach them the basic Quranic principles of Morality, Righteousness, Gratitude, Education, Courtesy, Tolerance, Freedom and Equality.



A couple of years ago all the employees of my organization saw an amazing video by Jane Elliott. It illustrated the old maxim "you get what you expect," but with an unexpected twist. This video convinced me that it is critical to treat everyone in the society with equality and respect if you want to have a productive society. Here are my impressions from that video.

Blue-Eyes Brown-Eyes

Jane Elliott was teaching fourth grade when Martin Luther King was assassinated. Dr. King had been one of the people they had studied as a "Hero of the Month" in their class. The kids were very confused by the assassination and in trying to answer their questions, Jane Elliott devised a demonstration for them of what prejudice is. Later she arranged to have the exercise filmed by an outside camera crew, and repeated it. We got to see this film of children actually going through the exercise in the late 1960's.

Jane Elliott divided the class into two groups, based on eye color. On the first day the children with brown eyes were "on top." They got extra recess time, and the entire class was told how good and intelligent the children with brown eyes were. Their successes were praised. They got to boss around the blue-eyed children, and they took full advantage of the privilege.

To make identifying kids from a distance easier, the kids with blue eyes had to wear a special collar. The class was told that the blue-eyed kids were unintelligent, lazy, and not trustworthy. They could not drink directly from the drinking fountain, nor have a second helping at lunch.

Surprisingly, the brown-eyed children really excelled, even where it seemed impossible. Dyslexic kids could suddenly spell words they had never been able to spell and read words they had never been able to read. Conversely, normally bright, self-confident blue-eyed children became uncertain, timid under-achievers. The results were profound.

The next day the roles were reversed. The blue-eyed children were “on top” and received the preferential treatment. They got to take off their collars and put them on the brown-eyed children. Now it was their turn to be the bosses, and their behavior toward their former oppressors was no different from what they had received. Again, the change in position reflected in the kid’s academic performance and sense of self worth.

This exercise deeply affected the children involved. For many, it changed their attitudes for life.

Just watching the video had an enormous effect on me. It made me realize how very critical it is to treat people well, to encourage and treat them with courtesy. In short, it made me realize that when you treat people in the best possible manner, as the Quran commands, you enable them to be their very best, and thus to contribute the most to society.

From a purely selfish standpoint, it only makes sense to enable all people, regardless of their race, sex, age, religion, ethnic background, etc., to do their very best. A productive society is a benefit for all of its members.



It is one thing to watch a video like the one described above, it is quite another to have lived “the script.” In my years as a Muslim I have been blessed to meet some of the most beautiful sisters imaginable who have come through the smelter of racial prejudice, refined and purified to a degree that puts me to shame. Here is the story of one such sister.

Muslim Sister / African American

It is a complex task to explain what happens with African Americans who embrace Islam as their religion. There are clearly cultural differences from those born in countries where Islam is in widespread practice but there are also understandings

about race and this U.S. society that those who are not from this country have difficulty understanding. To live a double consciousness of who you are not only as a person but as a black person is a challenge. We speak as equal souls from Allah but also as marginalized, historically second class citizens in this society. African Americans who say “Allah” to reference God are often the first in their family to be called Muslim. Increasingly we reflect second generation Muslims. There are hundreds of thousands of us. However, the growth in the numbers does not necessarily reflect a comfortable transition to Islam. In fact, for some it has been a difficult journey in many respects, one that reflects a great deal of struggle to hold onto the rope of Allah’s mercy.

The message of worshipping God alone and adhering to the teachings of the Quran was shared with me more than 13 years ago by a wonderful sister from Egypt. But I declared a belief in worshipping one God, was making *salat*, fasting and striving to be a Muslim more than 16 years before that. Washington D.C., my birthplace, was like many urban settings, home to thousands of African Americans who embraced Islam as practiced by Africans, Arabs, Persians and the Nation of Islam. In the early sixties and seventies more than a dozen small, community-based *masjids* (mosques) were established in Washington by African Americans. Houses, store fronts and even apartments were places of congregational worship right along with the larger *masjids* established by the Nation of Islam and those primarily servicing immigrant brothers and sisters. This period reflected a searching time in the African American community. Nationally and internationally, black people were interested in combating the lasting effects of a society based on white supremacy, racial inferiority, and wealth held in the hands of a few. The vast majority of blacks worked low-income jobs to barely escape the grip of poverty.

In 1970, a friend from college asked me to come to one of these *masjids* in a big warehouse and there I saw a group of black men and women reciting, standing, bowing and pros-

trating on the floor. Their words were meaningless to me but there was clearly a sense of unity of movement and voice. My curiosity was stirred but when I asked one of the women what they were doing she said so many unfamiliar words that I merely nodded. (Months later I came to know those words as practices in my own worship: *khalima, salat, fajr, dhur, asr, maghrib, isha, zakat, seyam* and *hajj*.) She had shared what she knew of the familiar 'pillars' of Islam and had overwhelmed me. Nevertheless, I stayed around the group. A few months later my friend from college became my husband and we parented two sons. We were not introduced to *hadith* and *sunnah [sunna]* traditions and were told that our worship reflected verses from the Quran. It was, for me, in my early twenties, an affirmation of what I already had known as a child raised as a Baptist and then Jehovah's Witness, God is! But so what? These earlier Christian teachings had not addressed race, class and gender oppression. These issues concerned me as a young black woman raised in the era of the civil rights struggle, the Pan Africanist movement and women's fight for equal treatment under the law. I could now practice a religion wherein God cared about my belief but also my life as a black woman.

As I studied the Quran I made connections between who we were as submitters and who we were as African Americans. The book spoke of oppression and injustice and God's love for those who fight against injustice. I began linking belief in God to an understanding of what many African Americans experience on an everyday basis – racism in an historically unjust, classist society. Islam provided answers: How can we raise our families, how to conduct business, why there is so much violence, and how can we respond. Another sister and I started a school for our little community's children. We understood the importance of educating our children with a different belief system. We wanted our children to learn about reading, mathematics, science and social studies but not from a traditional nonreligious curriculum. We wanted them to develop a love for Allah and the things created by God, to be comfortable stopping and praying in the day, to be reinforced by the day to day Muslim

fellowship an educational setting can support. I began to understand the importance of studying the Quran and Allah's system of creation.

What I did not understand was marriage in Islam. My husband wanted to be married to someone else, pursued the relationship and I left the group of brothers and sisters. I went back to live in my mother's home with my two small children. Confused, hurt and struggling, I started attending one of the largest *masjids* [mosques] in Washington, D.C., the Islamic Center. The Islamic Center, built on embassy row, had muslims attending prayers from all over the world, from Pakistan and Indonesia to the Sudan and Sweden. Over the next four years I went back to college, married again and got a bachelor's degree in education. Working with a group of 'sunni' muslims we established a school and summer camp at the Islamic center. It was one of the largest muslim operated schools in the city, educating primarily African American children but also a few Iranian children. We surmised that many of the 'foreign' born muslims were afraid to entrust their children's education to black people. But the Iranians were not. They trusted us to care for their children, volunteered to work with us and saw supporting the school as their Islamic responsibility. My husband began working at the Iranian embassy and began to study Shiite Islam. Several other African American families began to contrast the practices of Shiite and Sunni Islam and left one practice for the other, finding the message of the Iranians a more politicized one that actively fought against the capitalist mindset of US culture. While my husband fully embraced the Shiite teachings and traveled to Iran's holy city of Qum, I remained ambivalent and continued to practice Islam the way I thought the Africans and Arabs did—the *sunnah*. But several events came together to change all that.

Through friends I was encouraged to read a new translation of the Quran by Rashad Khalifa. It altered my life. Along with several other muslim brothers and sisters we began a regular study Quranic group at the home of my friend from Egypt. The teaching of *hadith* and *sunnah* soon stood in conflict to what I

read in the Quran. A small contingency of African Americans from Pittsburgh, New York and Washington D.C. attended the first national conference of submitters in San Francisco. We were inspired by the camaraderie. Back home, my husband was furious. He was angry that I no longer wanted to practice Islam according to what we had learned at the Islamic Center, or with followers of the Iranian leader, Imam Khomeini. I stopped covering my head; I changed my *salat*, no longer saying the familiar words of blessing on prophet Muhammed in my prayers. Perhaps what was even greater than his anger about my worship was that he wanted to be involved with another woman. He had met someone and again I was not going to be in a polygamous relationship. Despite more than twelve years together and four sons, we divorced. He remarried immediately.

My sons remained in our family home with their father and his new wife. Confused, hurt and struggling I went, once again, back to my mother's house. But this time I was better prepared, I had the message of worshipping God alone. I had a degree in education and began teaching in the public schools. Allah blessed me so much. I was offered a fellowship to do my Master's studies at Miami University in Ohio. It was with great difficulty that I accepted the offer because it would mean leaving my children in another city but Allah blessed me with support and encouragement from all my friends. I not only received my master's but continued to study and got a doctorate as well. Every month I would drive back to Washington, D.C. to be with my children, fellow submitters, to attend *Jumaa* prayers and get revitalized in spirit.

Allah has continued my blessings and I am now a tenured faculty member at a Midwest University. Four of my sons live with me, make *Jumaa* prayers in our home, and sometimes share the message of worshipping Allah alone with their friends. They too struggle with their identities and the images that the larger society has of African American males. As their mother I have many concerns that they may stray from the righteous path—the availability of drugs in our community, police bru-

tality, promiscuity – but I maintain them in my prayers, knowing that Allah is the protector and guide.

There isn't much in the literature about African American Muslim women. By "not much" I mean in comparison to the thousands of books, articles, and personal memoirs written by, and about, white women and their religious convictions. Closing the gap is an important task because the folklore surrounding black women's lives are filled with whore stories, bitch tales, and matriarch myths. The mediated textual imagery and the printed literature is grossly exaggerated because the real truth is that many African American women are deeply religious and have held onto their beliefs in God because it is the only way to survive and be successful.

– *Khawla, U.S.A.*

