

“A Holy War”
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I. Jihad over dinner

Not long before I moved to Minneapolis, I went out for a send-off meal with a friend of mine (let's call her Nadia, though that's not her real name). She suggested a little Persian place in a strip mall near Venice Beach. And so we squeezed ourselves into the cramped restaurant at a tiny little table. The waiter's English was not very good, and as a result, Nadia was served a meal that she didn't exactly order. We wound up swapping plates, as I was so hungry that I didn't much care what was in front of me.

As I sat there, downing forkfuls of pink and yellow rice, skewered chicken, and sour cherries, Nadia began talking about her Muslim faith. Ramadan was almost over, and she had been doing a lot of reflection. We talked about the struggles of the soul, about how time and fasting during Ramadan (or, in my case, Lent) can help you see your full self a little more clearly. So there we were, a North Africa Muslim born in Europe and a Protestant minister born in Kentucky, talking about inner spiritual struggles over kebabs in California.

In the midst of this conversation, Nadia began talking about the meaning behind the word *jihad*. She mentioned that this was the word in Arabic for an inner struggle or conflict, a kind of psychological and spiritual battle with demons and issues that keep us from experiencing life fully. Muslim extremists, by her estimation, were basing their armed conflict with the West on a narrow view of the word *jihad*. It was a word describing first and foremost an inner war (and not an external war). On saying this, I saw something very interesting happen. She took a breath and held it; she looked away in silence, breathing out through her nose; she paused for a moment; then she took another breath, turned her glance back towards me, and changed the subject.

II. The exasperated breath of deflection

I had seen Nadia pull this move on other occasions. I saw it when I walked into her office and saw an irate client unfairly chewing her out. I saw it when Nadia got a call one day from upper management, and she could barely get a word out without being yelled at over nothing. I could see it whenever Nadia spoke of her ex-husband, which she did only rarely and always briefly. Every time, the move was the same: a breath in through the mouth, then the lips shutting before they could speak; a conscious turn of the head to the right, while breathing out through the nose; another breath in through the mouth while looking away, then turning back to the conversation (usually to change the subject).

It was a complex little move, but she did it so quickly that she would often be speaking again before it registered in your mind. I imagined that most folks assumed that Nadia was just struggling to find the words in English (one of the five or six languages she spoke), but I could see the struggle within her. I could see the tension of competing impulses, as she struggled not to blow up at someone who really, honestly, probably deserved it.

This same expression was there at this little Persian restaurant, where the men sat out front smoking hookas under the strip mall's fluorescent glow. Inside, at our dinky little table, Nadia was trying to stay positive, just like she always did, trying to see the good in the world and in other people, even when all signs pointed to other conclusions.

I recognized that little moment because it was one I'd seen in myself, too. Sure, it might have looked a little different, but I had done the same thing – with coworkers, friends and family who were driving me nuts and I couldn't do a thing about it. When Nadia breathed in and closed her mouth; when she looked away and breathed out through her nose; breathed in again through her mouth, turned her head and changed the subject, she didn't have to

explain to me what she was feeling. I had felt it, too, in my own ways.

Nadia didn't have to say a word. Her experience was written in her breath and her body. There it was – breath, drawing into the body, ready to be spewed out all over the place in frustration and rage. The injustice of a world that can't face the enemy within and therefore creates an enemy without. The rage of dealing with people so insecure that the only world they can tolerate is one in which they drag the rest of us down until we all feel as miserable as they do.

There it was – breath, drawn in but quickly clamped down, boiling beneath the surface. The prophetic voice that was not being permitted to speak. The word of truth whose price is almost more than we can bear. The accumulated vitriol of a thousand sins overlooked before, now turning over to become a thousand *and one* grievances that shall now go unchallenged.

There it was – the breath leaking out through the nose while the head turned away, unable to speak the truth but unable to tolerate withholding it. The hypocrisy we cannot stop and that will not cease. The lies and distortions that refuse to be silenced and gain traction the more shocking they get. The contradictions of a God-made world gone mad somehow. The tension headache in the temples rising once again, refusing to go away, no matter how many pills you consume.

There it was – a second breath in through the mouth, this one full of forced sunshine and manufactured rainbows. This silver-lining breath, that takes a cloud of destruction and insistently looks for the good in it. The subject-changing breath of delusion, the one that would make the problem go away by ignoring it. The smile-faking, eye-clearing breath, that puts a lid on the rage and the cry for justice, no matter how valid they might be. The breath that came with the tiniest little shake of the head and shoulders, so barely perceptible that most folks unconsciously ignored it altogether. The breath that preceded a turn of the head, and

returned my friend Nadia back to the conversation, ready to take on a lighter topic.

“Did you enjoy the chicken?”

“Hasn’t the weather been nice lately?”

Anything, really, to not have to stand and stare at the injustices of the world. Anything, so long as she didn’t have to see the madness and distorted thinking in so many of her fellow Muslims. Anything that would take her away from having to consider indefensible acts of violence, which only led to more of the same. Anything, to take her away from the discomforting tensions working themselves out in her own spirit.

III. Nadia’s life as one long jihad

While Nadia was able to see the corruption of the word *jihad* at a distance, she knew the greater, inner concept of a spiritual *jihad* on an intimate level. In many ways, her whole life seemed to be lived at a crossroads of colliding realities at war with each other. Her whole life, it seemed, had been one long personal *jihad*. Her family went back to Morocco, where she had told me that her Berber ancestors had fought invading Arabic-speaking armies. Her family had left North Africa for Europe, where she was treated as a non-westerner by the ethnic Europeans (even though she’d been born on “their” soil). With no jobs available in her “home” country, she made her way to the United States. Her European peers were often able to find good jobs in Americas, but she wound up struggling as an immigrant worker in a hotel.

She had finally found her way in the business world of the United States, as she transitioned into life in property management. But the hard work and long hours came at a price to her faith. For years, she had struggled to find a mosque in Los Angeles that she could call home. She struggled living the life of a faithful Muslim on her own, and she longed for community. But how could she participate in a community that would demand that she change her attire, that would condemn her for having married a Christian (and

then divorced him), that would force her into a gender identity that the community affirmed but she could not tolerate? And this would be just the beginning of the irreconcilable differences she would face between herself and the imams at most mosques.

And so she lived at a multiplicity of forks in the road that she could not take, in a world where she was neither African nor European, neither European nor American, neither secular nor Muslim. She was all of these things, and yet she often felt as if she was none of them.

IV. Sitting across the table

Looking back, I think my friend was, in many ways, a living embodiment of the current conflict between the Secular West and Fundamentalist Islam. I read occasionally about Muslims in the Middle East who want to embrace secular democracy but feel that they do so at the loss of their identity. I hear stories on the radio about the experiences of American and European Muslims, as they struggle to find their way in a society that neither fully rejects nor fully embraces them. I look into the eyes of the Somali woman who scans my items at Target, and amid the beeping of purchases and the subtle motion of her headscarf, I find myself wanting to let her know that I, for one, think that she is welcome in America and that I am glad that she is here.

I wanted to say similar things to Nadia, too, that night at the Persian restaurant. In that breath she took, and the look away, in that pause I wanted to say something reassuring to her.

“Look, I know that the U.S. has invaded Iraq and I’m sorry,” I wanted to say. “I know that we’ve invaded Afghanistan. I know that Iran might be next, and a War on Terror might arguably be a defense for perpetual war by America against anyone.

But I wanted to say something deeper. I wanted to tell her, “I know what it feels like to have your belief system robbed by extremists because it’s happening to me, too – not just as an

American, but as a Christian. I see the inner war going on within you because it's the same war happening within me.”

I wanted to tell Nadia that I'd watched as fundamentalists co-opted the language of my faith and subverted it. I wanted to tell her how I'd stood by, feeling helpless, watching in horror as the language of the Prince of Peace, of *my* deliverer, had been turned into excuses for endless war, endless greed, and endless corruption.

I wanted to tell my Muslim friend that even as I read Christian scripture I could feel my heart breaking. When Jesus said to us that the lilies of the field didn't have to worry and neither should we, all I could think sometimes was “who shouldn't I be worried in such treacherous and violent times as these?” When God promised us through the prophet Isaiah that we would be restored, how could I believe my own scriptures when I looked around to a world overflowing with foreclosures, insurmountable debt, and impossible health care costs? How could I stand to be an American Christian when the twin lights of justice and liberty seemed to be dimming on these shores?

As I sat there in that Persian restaurant, as my friend Nadia looked away, I wanted to reach out and let her know “it's okay.” But as I sat there, with a mouthful of rice, what could I say? What can you say to someone, when you're both powerless to stop others from corrupting the good name of your faith? What can you say, when the words of sacred scripture seem rosy and impossible in an era so fraught with peril as the one we call ours? What can you say, when you both already know that while some wars may be just, the only war that is truly sacred is the struggle within your own soul? And what can you say, when you know that no matter how loud you shout this truth from the rooftops, that the mass media and the popular culture and the powers that be will steamroll right over you, if they even pay attention at all?

V. Leaving the restaurant

My brain was on fire with thoughts like these as I sat there with a mouthful of food from the next nation America might well invade. It was one of those experiences where your brain gets so overloaded that it can't do anything. I swallowed the rice, chicken, and cherries and reached for some water. As I did, Nadia turned back to our conversation and we began to make some small talk. She complained about the service, and we both laughed at some stupid joke. She insisted on picking up the tab, since coming to this dumb restaurant had been her idea. We stood to leave, scooching our wooden chairs on the floor (and probably scuffing it). We snaked through the restaurant, squeezing through the tiny little spaces between the chairs, and made our way to the door. We walked out to a warm evening, the smell of tobacco lingering in the air from the hookas. I didn't know if the tobacco came from Kentucky, North Africa, or where, but it smelled good just the same. I'd quit smoking years ago, but I still liked the smell of the stuff.

As we headed our separate ways that night, I don't know if our conversation was of any help to Nadia. I don't know if a bad meal in a cramped Iranian restaurant helped her ease some of the tensions at war within her. I don't know what I would have said to her if my mind hadn't been on overload.

But I do know this – I know that amid the wars with others at the office, amid the devastation of a pseudo-holy war engulfing our planet, amid the greater spiritual wars we all have to fight when we stare deeply and honestly into our own souls, amid all this ... that at least it's good to have a friend sitting across the table. It's good to have a friend – however old or new, however similar or different to you – it's good to have a friend breathing the same air, fighting their own inner wars, and still able to be there with you.

Whatever fights we have to face in this life, we don't have to fight them alone because we have friends to be there with us as we struggle. Even when war and illness and heartbreak take our

friends and loved ones from us, we still have a friend in God, who speaks to us in some strange ways, even sometimes speaking through the words of someone from half a world away.

As I thought back about this night, I began to wonder: Maybe my friend's breath over dinner wasn't about deflection and ignoring a problem after all. Maybe, when Nadia took that last breath in and returned to the conversation, maybe she wasn't ignoring the issues. Maybe, in that look away, she faced the violence and misunderstanding of our times and she still managed to see the bigger picture. Maybe, in that little moment, she remembered that friendship is the only thing that can keep us together in a world gone mad. Maybe she could see past the insanity and propaganda and distortions by extremists in her faith, to the faithful and providential God spoken of in scriptures like our texts for this morning. Maybe she, a Muslim woman, understood the words of Isaiah and Jesus in that moment better than I did.

Maybe that motion – the breath in and the stop; the look away and the breath out; the breath in and the change of subject – wasn't a denial but an engagement. What if that was her way of fighting her own *jihad*, of refusing to be dragged into a fight with her own spiritual demons. Maybe this was Nadia's way of fighting her own holy war, of struggling within herself. And if it was ... then maybe I could learn from that.

AMEN.