

Dr. Moustafa Mould, Ex-Jew, USA

(part 1 of 5)



An odyssey is a long, wandering journey. The word comes from Odysseus (in Latin, Ulysses) a hero of the Homeric epic poem, The Odyssey. His journey home took ten years and was fraught with many mishaps, detours, dangers and adventures. In retrospect, my road to Islam – my journey home- seems like an odyssey. As I look back over my life, from my early childhood up until I finally made *shahadah*[\[1\]](#), a journey of almost 40 years, it seems that there were many signs, many turning points, many incidents, some significant, some trivial, that were all preparing me for and pointing the way to Islam.

I grew up in Boston. It was very much a Catholic city, mostly Irish and Italian, with small but significant communities of blacks, Jews, Chinese, Greeks, Armenians and Christians Arabs, and in those days especially, each group had its own neighborhood. There were lots of Greek and Syrian restaurants, and I grew up loving Greek salad, *shish kebob*, *lahm mishwi*, *kibbi*, grape leaves, humus, anything with lamb, etc.

My family were mostly working-class, conservative Jews. My grandparents had fled the anti-Semitism and pogroms of czarist Russia around 1903. They and their families had found work in the sweatshops of the garment district, a few were in craft skills, and they were quite active in their labor unions. I was to become the first in my family to get a university degree. Our home was not strictly kosher, but we would never dream of eating pork. All the holidays and fasts were observed, and for years I went to the synagogue every Saturday and holiday with my father and uncle.

The synagogue we belonged to was conservative, close to orthodox but modernist: it was very traditional, but women were not totally segregated. I began “*Madrasah*” (Hebrew school) at age six. It was 1948, which saw the birth of the state of Israel, and Zionist propaganda filled the atmosphere, as did conversations

and sermons about the Nazis and concentration camps, and there were many recent immigrant refugee survivors.

At that time there was still a lot of anti-Semitism in the U.S., especially in the South and the Midwest, but also in Boston. The Greeks, Syrians and Italians were fine, but the Boston Irish were a big problem, dating back to my parents' generation in WWI and the 1920s. During my childhood I was often chased, spat on, insulted and beaten. They even held me down and pulled my pants down - in addition to the humiliation they wanted to see what a circumcision looked like.

My Hebrew teachers were two Israeli brothers, who were orthodox, and veterans of the 1948 war. From them I learned modern Hebrew and absorbed a lot of Zionist ideology along with the religious teachings. I became more religious and an avid Zionist. I believed that Jews needed their own country in case of another Hitler - those Irish kids were doing nothing to allay my fears and I did not feel "at home" in America. I decided I would go and spend my life on a kibbutz (communal farm).

My father was a musician and a cantor (prayer leader). He had a beautiful tenor voice, preferred the more traditional, rather oriental, melodies, and chanted the prayers with lots of *huzn* (sorrow) (when I learned that word recently I began to wonder if it might be related to Hebrew *hazan* = 'cantor'). In our synagogue, the Torah reader used a very oriental sounding tajwid which I loved listening to. Believe it or not, I recently heard a friend reciting from the Quran and it sounded almost identical.

One thing that stands out clearly in my memory, even now during salah, is that in the Jewish prayers there are regular references to prostration (*sujud*). In fact, it is a custom in the more orthodox synagogues that during Yom Kippur, the holiest fast day and the equivalent of 'Ashurah', the cantor, on behalf of the congregation, actually makes *sujud*, while still chanting. This is no mean feat, and my father, with his powerful voice, did it extremely well. I remember thinking then that it would be really nice if we all actually did prostrate, instead of just bowing as a symbolic *sujud*.

Around the age of eight or nine, I chanced to discover a radio station that broadcast programs of the local ethnic communities. I began to listen to the Yiddish, Greek and Armenian ones, and especially to the Arabic Hour. I fell in love with the music and the sound of the language. Using the Hebrew I knew, I tried to understand the news and figure out the sound correspondences; I noticed the differences between *hamzah* and 'ayn, *kh* and *h*, *k* and *q*, distinctions which modern Hebrew has lost. This greatly improved my Hebrew spelling and I won prizes in Hebrew class. I also remember helping my friends cheat during spelling tests by repeating the words under my breath in an "Arabic" accent.

By High School, I had discovered the Boston Public Library and its record section: besides classical, I discovered ethnic folk music from all over the world, but I especially gravitated to the Middle Eastern: Arabic, Turkish, Persian, then Indian-Pakistani. I learned to identify various regional styles, instruments and rhythms. I most loved the *'oud*, and I taught myself to play the dumbeg and accompany the recordings. Once, a group of Yemeni Jews came to Boston from Israel to perform folk songs and dances. I was fascinated by their appearance, costumes and music. They even pronounced Hebrew like me during a spelling test.

I mention all these little things because there is an undeniable cultural component to Islam: the language, the melodies of *adhan* and Quran, social interactions and other features, which are really quite exotic and strange to the average Westerner, including westernized Jews, but which, by the time I encountered them years later in a different context, were already very familiar and pleasant to me, even to the point of nostalgia, and which helped make Islam easier for me to accept and follow. More on that later.

My best friend in high school was also a strong influence on me. He read a lot of philosophy, poetry and religious literature. I didn't care much for the first two, but I did read some of the religious writings, Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist – and the Quran. I noticed that its stories were quite similar to the Bible stories, but I felt it was anti-Jewish. I was quite impressed, though, by its depiction of Jesus as a prophet, not just a rabbi. I accepted that, and that became my answer to my Catholic classmates when they would ask me what I believed about Jesus. They seemed not too displeased by that.

Footnotes:

[1] *Shahadah*, the Islamic testimonial of faith, i.e. “I testify that there is no god but God, and I testify that Muhammad is the messenger of God.”

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I also attended an advanced “*Madrasah*”, studying Jewish history, Hebrew, Torah, and added Aramaic and Talmud (Jewish fiqh); though the languages were still my chief interest. Also around that time, age fifteen, I lost my faith, my belief in God. Earlier, I'd concluded that if God commands us to do certain things, how can I not do them; so I tried to be more orthodox. Then, one day I found myself saying, if God says to do all this I must; but what if there is no God? Do I believe in God? I really don't know, maybe not, I guess not. And if God doesn't exist, I don't need to be doing all this stuff. And I stopped. You can well imagine how upset my father was.

Many people, particularly Roman Catholics and fundamentalist Protestants who grow up in a harsh religious environment, full of the threat of Hellfire and damnation, beaten by the nuns at school and made to feel guilty about things that are merely a part of *fitrah* (nature) – like their bodies - are happy to get out of religion and in fact become very anti-religious, and feel freed as if from a prison! My feeling was not like that; I felt sad, more like I'd suffered a loss, but there was nothing I could do; I knew it would be comforting to believe, but I couldn't. Throughout the 60's and 70's I occasionally got these gnawing feelings and yearnings.

As Jeffrey Lang said in his book about his conversion to Islam, there is an emptiness and a loneliness that an atheist feels, which people of faith cannot understand. The world is absurd, an accident. Science has, or will have, all the answers, but life has no real meaning or significance. Death is final. You can have influence and an impact on the world through your children; you can do well, be remembered in the history books for hundreds, even thousands of years; when the sun dies mankind may colonize other star systems, maybe even other galaxies. But ultimately, even if it takes 15 Billion years, the universe itself will die, or collapse into a black hole or whatever, and the end is absolute nothingness, the only thing that is infinite is a void. Life, then, is meaningless and death frightening. Truth and morality can become relative, which may lead to moral confusion, hedonism, and worse. But instead of the contempt for religious people that many atheists claim to feel, I respected them, and often envied them for the security, the certainty, the comfort they experienced.

I went overnight from almost orthodox to an atheist, though I still loved Jewish languages, culture, music, food and history. I was an "ethnic" Jew, and still a Zionist. Zionism was still largely a political philosophy, not so much a religious one. In fact, at that time there was still significant opposition to Zionism among many of the orthodox. The current religious, messianic type Zionism really didn't develop until 1967 – 1973 when Israel seized Jerusalem. I also decided I wanted to be a historical linguist specializing in Semitic languages; but then the universities I chose didn't accept me, and the one that did didn't offer Arabic, or even linguistics.

At my university in the early 60's, I came into contact with a wider variety of people. For the first time I knew a large numbers of Protestants, Afro-Americans, and foreign students who were Muslims. I was no longer encountering anti-Semitism, and I was beginning to enjoy and appreciate the diversity of America and my exposure to the international students. By the end of my sophomore year I was eating bacon and pork chops; at the same time I helped organize and was the president of the campus chapter of the Student Zionist Organization. I was the New England vice president in my senior year.

Many of us were politically left-wing, coming from working class families whose spectrum ranged from liberal democrat to communist. We were pro-labor and the American Civil Liberties Union, anti-McCarty, Nixon, the House Un-American Activities Committee. We revered Franklin D. Roosevelt, Hubert Humphrey and Adlai Stevenson. We were into labor Zionism and the kibbutzim. One thing I want to emphasize, because of the profound effect it had on me years later: at that time most Jews were still socialists or liberal democrats, many were still working class, not as successful as they are now. I clearly remember right-wing Herut party, their expansionist ideology and the terrorist activities in the 40's. We considered them fanatics and lunatics.

I took a seminar on the Middle East. At nineteen I thought I knew everything. My professor was Syrian, and I think he was a Muslim. I was going to teach him a few things. He was remarkably patient and tolerant with me, considering his obvious anti-Zionist, anti-Israel position. His criticisms of my papers were objective and mild, mainly that they were too one sided. I began to pay more attention to the other side, and I realized how much propaganda I'd absorbed and how much information I had ignored. I didn't get a very good grade, but I learned a great deal. It was Professor Haddad who made it seem sensible to me that one could be secular and religious at the same time.

At the same time, I was becoming more and more involved in the civil rights and anti-Vietnam war movements. I joined the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the NAACP, and participated in sit-ins at lunch counters. I helped found our campus chapter of the then mildly radical Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). I majored in government, taking several courses in constitutional law and international relations. I went to Washington, D.C. in August, 1963 to take part in the "March on Washington" and was standing about 60 feet from Dr. King when he made that wonderful speech.

I'd lost my faith at 15 and by 22 I'd lost Zionism. I still had my ethnic heritage, though I'd begun to feel uncomfortable with the clannishness of many Jews. I felt like a normal American fighting for American causes. I prepared to be a social studies teacher, but the job market was not good. After two years of substituting, and a temporary position at my old high school, I joined the Peace Corps, for the adventure and idealism improved my job prospects later – and to avoid being drafted and sent to Vietnam. I was selected to go to Uganda, East Africa.

I was extremely happy in that beautiful country, living where the Nile flows out of Lake Victoria, teaching students who wanted to learn in a society where teachers were respected. I was learning new languages and cultures. I developed a taste for African and Indian-Pakistani cuisine. Since there wasn't much else to do in a small, up-country town, I began going to Indian movies. I particularly liked Mohammed Rafi, the famous playback singers, especially his qawalis; he

reminded me of my father's cantorial music. I also enjoyed the Islamic, Omani Arab ambience I found on the coast: Mombasa, Dar es-Salam, Zanzibar. It was the first time not in a Hollywood (or Bombay) movie that I heard the *Adhan* (the call to prayer in Islam). Even in the movies its plaintive melodies always sent a thrill through my body. I was learning two African languages, Swahili and Luganda. Swahili was a very easy one for me; over half its vocabulary is from Arabic and practically the same as Hebrew. But Swahili is a Bantu language, and I was fascinated by the similarities and differences between Swahili and Luganda. I made up my mind: here was my last chance to do what I'd always wanted – linguistics – but now with Bantu instead of Semitic languages. I applied to graduate school.

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I returned home through the Middle East and Europe but I made a point of stopping in Israel. It was 1969. I was no longer a Zionist, but even so, I was surprised at how disappointed I was. I know that part of it was the culture shock of leaving a small, up-country African town, people and a job that I loved; still, I was surprised by the brusqueness and arrogance of the Israelis I met – much like the American stereotype of the French. From an archaeological and historical perspective it was a good experience, but I couldn't get over how alienated I felt from the culture and from the people who were supposed to be my people.

I refused on principle to visit the West Bank – that was before they started building settlements – except for East Jerusalem; I couldn't resist that. Standing at the wall of Solomon's temple, the Dome of the Rock and Al-Aqsa gave me an intense feeling I could not describe at the time. I can describe it now: I was sensing a feeling of holiness; it's no wonder the Islamic name is Al-Quds. But it upset me a great deal to see first-hand the discrimination and second-class status of the Palestinians, even the citizens. I had grown up in an American subculture where Jews had always been in the forefront of civil rights, labor and civil liberties struggles. To me, what I found in Israel wasn't Jewish.

The next ten years, '69 – '79, I spent in Los Angeles. I had missed 1968, one of the most important and turbulent years in modern American history. Though not surprised, I was very disheartened upon my return to the U.S. Blacks were separating from Whites by choice; SDS had become a bunch of raving Maoists, free speech was degenerating into filthy speech. I couldn't be political again, except for an occasional anti-war or anti-Nixon demonstration. I was both attracted to and repelled by the hedonism of 70s California. I was tempted to indulge and half-heartedly did so, but - thank God for my *fitrah* and my good Jewish upbringing – I didn't go very far; I mostly grew my hair and beard long. I was too absorbed in my studies, getting my doctorate, teaching, getting married then divorced, and looking for a decent academic position.

Two things during that decade are relevant to this story. Briefly, the Likud government in Israel, the building of settlements and the brutal treatment of the Palestinians, not to mention its alliance with South Africa, revolted and infuriated me, and turned me from a non-Zionist to a vocal anti-Zionist. Even worse to me was the knee-jerk support of the American Jewish community, which I'd thought would oppose Likud, at least quietly. Didn't we all agree just a few years before that Begin and his ilk were lunatics?!

Many of the settlers interviewed on the TV news were obviously American Jews. How could they have grown up in this country with these American - and Jewish - values, live through the civil rights revolution, and go do what they were doing there? There was more Jewish opposition in Israel than there was in the U.S. I felt betrayed, ashamed, disgusted. There were, of course - and are - other Jews who felt as I did, mainly those on the left, but only a few spoke out. Notable were I.F. Stone, a radical journalist and one of my heroes, and Noam Chomski, whose political writings on the Vietnam war and Palestine were as revolutionary as his theory of linguistics.

In 1979, recently divorced, unable to land a tenure-track position, and missing Africa, I returned as an assistant professor of linguistics at the University of Nairobi. My father had passed away just a couple of months before I was to leave. I became friends with several faculty members, particularly my department chairman and a history professor, both Muslims from Mombasa, and the Arabic professor, my Sudanese next-door neighbor. I often ate lunch in the faculty dining room with them, and out of respect for them (and embarrassment, because I knew they knew I was a Jew) I never ate pork when I was with them. Before long I stopped eating pork completely. We often discussed the Middle East, Islam and Judaism, and I was pleasantly surprised to see that they could be anti-Israel without being anti-Jewish; they were surprised that I could be a Jew and anti-Israel.

Having more time on my hand than I'd enjoyed in a long time, I decided to catch up on my ever-growing reading list. I re-read the Bible: the Old Testament to clarify some confusion about chronology in ancient history, I also read the New Testament because I never had. I also re-read the Quran. I knew nothing then of the early Islamic history. *Sirah* or *Hadith*, but I appreciated it more this time. I got that reaction again, though; why does it have to be so critical of the Jews; but, my memory recently refreshed, I recalled that the Torah itself and the rest of the Old Testament were equally critical, if not more so, than the Quran. But didn't the Jews finally learn their lesson and truly become the People of the Book when they were expelled from Israel and Jerusalem the second time, and when the rabbis, synagogues and prayers replaced the priests, temple and sacrifices? What was it, then, about the Jews of Madinah; they were clearly reprehensible but they sounded so different from us European Jews, even from the Sephardi Jews of the time of

the Caliphs; had they, like the Ethiopian and Chinese Jews, lacked the Talmud? I'm still curious about that. Anyway, that insight was later to prove to be a barrier removed.

Someone wise once said that if your faith is weak, just pretend to have faith, and that will strengthen it. Africans, whether Christian, Muslim or Pagan, are spiritual people. To be an atheist is incomprehensible and ridiculous to them. Knowing this, I never said I was an atheist when questioned - as I constantly was- about my religion. I would reply that of course I believed in God, one God, but not in any particular religion. I was almost true, or at least what I wanted to believe if I could. I cannot say that I had a sudden flash of inspiration, like Paul on the road to Damascus, or a near-death experience (I did have two, but without religious effect). It seems to me that, just by saying it and pretending it, it gradually came back to me.

I'd become a deist, like another hero of mine, Thomas Jefferson. Maybe I would join the Unitarian Church, a popular group, especially in New England, which accepts Jesus as a prophet, and which includes many socially conscious, formerly Jewish and Trinitarian Christian, liberal intellectuals.

Another contributing factor was my joining at that time the Nairobi symphony orchestra/chorus. It was an amateur group but they were excellent. I'd gone with some friends to their Easter concert to hear them perform the Mozart Requiem – music for a funeral mass. That music, intensely religious, was gorgeous, sublime awe-inspiring and inspirational. It wasn't only the beauty of the music, though it was a major part, but the message – glorifying God, speaking of death, resurrection, the final Judgment and eternal life – moved me to tears. The next day I went and signed up to sing in the chorus.

For the next three years I sang other masterpieces: masses, requiems, oratorios – Beethoven, Brahms, Bach, Verdi. It is all Christian, and some of it of course makes reference to Jesus as divine, but those words had no effect on me; I was just helping make beautiful music. But the parts that spoke of God did touch me deeply and helped me gradually regain my faith and belief in Him. Of course today I would not sing such things as “I know that my redeemer liveth,”

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Then I fell in love! She was Somali, intelligent, witty, charming, and a young widow with two handsome young sons. Her English was very limited and my Somali was non-existent, but we could communicate quite easily in Swahili. We discussed marriage, but there were a few practical problems.

I knew I could not stay much longer at the University of Nairobi; they were trying to Africanize it as quickly as possible, and to them I was just another white

foreigner. Before I got much older I needed a new job, probably a new career, maybe with the State Department or a non-profit agency. From her point of view the obstacle was simply that I was not a Muslim. I had mistakenly thought that any Muslim could marry one of the People of the Book; she set me straight on that very quickly; men yes, women, no!

She was telling me about Islam, and I'd learned some things from my colleagues and others. I already believed in the One God who was the Creator of the universe and all that is in it. I already believed in the Islamic concepts of *tawhid* and *shirk* and I knew the fallacy of believing in anything like astrology or palmistry. I'd long believed that Jesus was one of the prophets and I believed that Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, was a prophet and a messenger, and it had long ceased to be relevant to me that Muhammad was not a Jewish prophet.

I'd stopped eating pork; I didn't gamble, I rarely drank anything besides a glass of wine with an occasional gourmet dinner. I was, since my Peace Corps days, already more comfortable with African and Islamic notions of modesty, child rearing, etc., than with the "sexual revolution", and the me-ism and the phenomena of disintegrating families that were on the rise in the '70s and '80s in America. There didn't seem to be much to prevent me from becoming a Muslim. I was so close, so what in 1983, was the problem?

In fact there were two. First, there was the matter of my identity and my heritage. I imagine that it is not so traumatic for a Christian to change from one religion to another. If a German Catholic became a Lutheran, or even a Jew or Muslim, he remains a German. I certainly felt like an American first and a Jew second – I could never consider myself Russian. But in America, nation of immigrants, even the most acculturated attach some importance to their families' national or ethnic origins. Even though I had no desire to deal with Jews as Jews or as a community, I was reluctant to lose that identity.

The second obstacle was my family. Though not orthodox, most were strongly traditional, all pro-Israel, some were avid Zionists; many considered Arabs as enemies, and I expected they would also consider Muslims as enemies. I feared they would disown me as crazy or even traitorous. Worst of all, because I still loved them, they would be hurt.

First things first: I left that problem up in the air, and when my contract expired I did not renew it but returned to the States hoping to find another job, preferably back in East Africa. It was terribly hard. I had no home, no income, not even an interview suit. I invested in a wool suit, three ties and a winter coat – it was my first winter in twenty years – got books on how to write a resume and a SF171, and stayed with a friend in Washington, trying all the government agencies, consulting firms and PVOs that had anything to do with Africa, until my

money ran out. I had to return to Boston and stay with my sister, where I had food and shelter, but it was far from where the jobs might be. In addition, I was going through a severe case of culture shock. So there I was: broke, in the winter, in culture shock on top of a mid-life crisis, in love – and on anti-depressants.

I can joke now, but the pain and fear were unbearable then. For the first time in my adult life I began to pray. I prayed often and hard. I vowed that, if I could get back to Africa and marry my beloved, I would declare my submission to Allah and become a Muslim.

I got a really awful temporary job in a warehouse that at least paid for food, bus fares and dry cleaning, then a better, but embarrassing one as a receptionist in the counseling office at a local college. I could see that the four yuppie psychologists figured me for some 42-year-old loser, and I pretty much agreed with them. Out of embarrassment I didn't tell anything about myself, but when the phone wasn't ringing off the hook with students panicking over mid-terms, I was reading job notices and typing applications letters. I found that a government agency was hiring ESL teachers for Egypt - close enough - and I applied immediately. A week later another agency I'd applied to six months earlier invited me to D.C. for interviews.

As soon as I got to Washington I called about the ESL jobs to see if I could get an interview but the jobs were already filled! Nonetheless, I asked to meet with them anyways, just in case something came up later. I got the interview and it was there that I was told, "By the way, there is one position opening soon, but it's in Somalia."

"Somalia!" I nearly shouted, "That's wonderful!"

"Is it?" she asked incredulously.

"Sure, I'd love to go there. I'm already familiar with the culture and the religion," I said aloud, but thinking to myself how it's only an hour from Mogadishu to Nairobi, and how maybe I'd get to meet my future family in-laws. I told her my references, all of whom she knew personally. She would call them, and as far as she was concerned if I wanted the job I could probably have it.

I finished up my interviews at the other agency. They even showed me the cubicle in the windowless office where I would probably be working, and I returned to Boston, elated. I might even have a choice, praise God. But what a choice it was: a one year renewable contract in a hot, dusty – but African – post near the Indian Ocean, or a career civil service job with a pension plan in a windowless office in northern Virginia.

Two weeks later, she called to offer me the job of English program director in Mogadishu saying that I would have 48 hours to think it over. Everyone said it was a no-brainer; I should take the career job with pension in Washington,

otherwise I'd be back at square one in a year or two. I argued that I was an Africanist, the experience would help me and I'd make good contacts. I accepted the job and started to get my shots. A couple of weeks later the other agency sent me a brief note, with no explanation, informing me I did not get the windowless job.

Alhamdulillah, I could so easily have ended up with neither, but Allah had guided me to the right decision. I was employed and probably about to get married. I gave my notice at the college, and on the last day I typed a letter to the psychologists informing them that I was leaving to take up a position as a project director at the United States Embassy in Somalia, signed M. Mould, Ph.D.

Of course I had to stop off in Nairobi for a few days on my way to Mogadishu where I had a tearful reunion with the Somali sister. I tried to make some future plans but the problem was that I'd been hired as a bachelor, which meant no family benefits or housing. Besides this, I had no idea what Somalia or my job would be like or how long I would be there. I thought I could visit often, and there was always the phone. As well, she could come to visit her family, whom she hadn't seen since childhood.

The job was interesting, a little teaching, but mostly administration and management, and dealing with embassy officials. Most of my own students were senior government officials and a few of them became good friends. Outside of work was a whole different story. The culture and atmosphere in urban Somalia was more Middle Eastern than African. During my seven years in Uganda and Kenya I knew the languages and the people were open and friendly and I never had trouble adjusting or getting around; I'd always felt completely at home. Mogadishu gave me a culture shock. I didn't know the language, no one knew Swahili and educated Somalis knew Italian, not English. All the signs were in Somali. The worst thing was the communications. Home phones were overcrowded; the post office was sweltering hot. The only service that was efficient was the telegraph service. The mail was totally unreliable except for the diplomatic pouch. It was at times next to impossible to contact Nairobi.

Don't get me wrong. I was quite happy there, enjoying the sights and smells, the Italian and Somali food, my views of the ocean, which was within walking distance of my house and my office, discovering a new culture. I was living downtown, in one of the older sections, behind the Italian embassy, and I was awakened early morning by a beautiful adhan from the loudspeaker of a nearby mosque. We worked a Muslim schedule: Sunday – Thursday, 7 – 3. On Fridays I would walk around and often found myself outside a little mosque behind the American Embassy, and while myrrh and frankincense drifted from the doorways in the alleys and I would stop and listen to the sounds of *Jumu'ah*.

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The first thing I noticed was the murmuring of many voices as men read from the Quran while waiting for the Imam (leader of the congregation) to give the *khutbah*. I was instantly transported back in my mind to my old synagogue and the identical susurrus of old men reading from the Psalms (*Zabur*) at the start of morning prayers. It gave me a comforting feeling of nostalgia. A little while later, walking back the other way, I would hear the Imam reciting a surah. It sounded much like the Torah readings I'd enjoyed on Saturday mornings, again comforting and nostalgic. Not that it made me want to return to any synagogue; rather, it made Islam feel more comfortable and familiar to me.

I'm a linguist, and had been a specialist in field research. I found a book on learning the Somali language and I hired myself a tutor, who was a better friend than a teacher. I quickly learned the greetings, common nouns, and verbs, kinship terms, numbers and telling time. Some of the vocabulary, borrowed from Arabic, was just like Swahili and Hebrew. Somali is also very distantly related to Semitic languages. The grammar was something else, though, really hard to figure out, and as I got busier and more tired at work, our lessons turned more to conversations about culture, politics and religion. He was knowledgeable enough to distinguish between genuine Islam and some prevalent aspects of indigenous, pre-Islamic culture and superstition that had bothered me.

Before long, he offered to bring a sheikh to my home so that I could profess the *shahada*. Despite everything, I still felt hesitant, thinking of my family. But they were ten thousand miles away and. I was living comfortably in a Muslim society. I had good friends and colleagues, and it was clear to me that much of their goodness was due to Islam. I asked him to bring the sheikh and he did. He questioned me about my beliefs, and I told him I'd been a Jew, not a Christian (no problems with the trinity) and that I'd long ago given up pork, alcohol, gambling and *zina*, and after he was convinced that I understood what I was about to say and knew the five pillars, I declared the *shahadah*. My fiancée had suggested the name Mustafa, which I liked very much.

After all the hesitation and procrastination I felt enormous relief, and a restored sense of belonging that I'd missed more than I'd realized. All my Somali friends were of course delighted and very supportive. They began calling me *seedi* ('brother-in-law'). As soon as I could get away I bought some gold jewelry and flew to Nairobi. To get married I had to go to the office of the chief *qadi* and declare the *shahadah* again before some witnesses, in order to get an official certificate of conversion, there being no such thing in Somalia.

We went to the *qadi* and made our *nikah*. A couple of days later I had to fly back to Mogadishu to resume my work. Less than a year later, at 43, I was overjoyed and blessed by God to become the father of a wonderful Muslim baby

boy. I flew to Nairobi, and after a brief discussion we agreed on my wife's suggestion for a name. Now I even had a *kunya* (nick name); I was Abu Khalid, and he was named after the great Companion, Khalid Ibn Al-Walid, may Allah be pleased with him.

You are probably wondering if I told my family about my converting to Islam, and the answer is, not for quite some time. Of course I told my family about my marriage and they were neither surprised nor upset.

I was a middle-aged man who ought to know what he was doing, and they were mainly happy for the sake of my happiness. When Khalid was born they were positively delighted and were most eager to meet him and his mother. When Khalid was a little over a year old, I went to Boston on my vacation and brought my wife and son with me. The two boys, Ali and Yusuf, were away at a Muslim boarding school in north-eastern Kenya.

The reception was as warm and loving as anyone could wish for and we had a great visit. There's no question that a baby, especially a grandson, has a most salutary and beneficial effect on people. My wife had brought little gifts for my mother, sister and aunts, and they all had little gifts for her. I suppose they all assumed, as I had once done, that Muslim can marry a Jew or Christian. They knew my wife and our sons were Muslims that Khalid was being raised as a Muslim, and they had no problem with that. They knew I hadn't been a practicing Jew for nearly thirty years, and I'd married a non-Jew before. I'd decided that if they asked I wouldn't lie, and if they didn't I'd just wait for a more opportune time – some other time. A few years ago they finally asked me and I told them. I cannot say they were pleased, but neither were they surprised, angry or cold to me, and we still have warm, loving relationships.

Another year, another contract went by and then I lost my job. Like the new Pharaoh "who knew not Joseph", a new director came, who saw no value in the English programs and decided to end them. I kind of saw it coming and had applied for a similar job in Yemen, so I didn't fight it very hard, but in the end the job in *San'a* fell through, and, as my family had predicted, I was back to square one – well, not quite.

In 1988, leaving my family in Nairobi, I returned to the States alone and jobless. It was again very tough (winter, too) but this time I had some savings, new skills and a stronger resume, I knew better how to job-hunt; I knew my way around Washington and had a few contacts. I still had the suit. Best of all, I had my faith instead of anti-depressants. I quickly got a couple of part-time teaching jobs and a job in a men's store. The teaching jobs dried up, so I sold suits full-time for over three years, always looking for a better job, but finally – it took two years – I managed to bring my family over and we did our best, trusting in God.

Then, four years ago, a Muslim neighbor told us about a new Islamic institute that had recently opened, where they were looking for an English teacher. I immediately called, made an appointment and met the director. By the grace of God I was hired to teach some of the staff and to do some editorial work. Ironically, I am now in a cubicle in a windowless office in northern Virginia, but what a difference! I am in an Islamic environment, surrounded and inspired by good Muslim brothers, many of them excellent scholars and all of whom I love and respect very much, and whom I learn from daily. And what is my job? To read books on Islam, to edit manuscripts on Islam, to write about what I read. In essence, I am being paid to study Quran, *Hadith*, *aqidah*, *Fiqh*, *Sirah*, Islamic history and Arabic. I thank and praise God every day for leading me to Islam and for showering me with all these blessings. *Alhamdulillah Rabbil-alamin.*