

HAJJ STORIES

DARK CLOUDS LIFTING

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'I am generally always a very positive person,' he told me. He was a fellow doctor, a few years younger than me, and was on his first Hajj. We were in my makeshift consulting room in an upmarket hotel in Makkah with Hajj still a few weeks away. I had been accompanying Hujjaas as a medical officer for about ten years at that time. He had heard about my work and came to offer to help wherever he could. He was travelling alone and indicated that he had been a doctor for about twenty years and had plenty of experience with pilgrims from his part of the world. He had performed Umrah on a few occasions previously. As we chatted, he reminded me of the old saying of 'there are none so blind as those that do not want to see.' He spoke in a monotone, he avoided eye contact, he was slouching. He was clearly very depressed.

'I just needed to wake up,'

I had just seen my last morning session patient and indicated to him that we can walk down to the Haram for the mid-day prayers. I was extremely grateful to the hotel management who offered me the use of a full suite equipped with a bathroom to use as a consulting room. We had an arrangement that hotel staff would also be seen and treated by me. This resulted in a win-win situation for all. I had a great space to work from, the hotel had a full complement of staff for their busiest period, and the staff were well enough to work and earn the bonuses offered during this time. We performed Wudhu in the suite and started walking to the Haram. He was married before but got divorced shortly thereafter. He had no children but had an extensive family structure who he admitted he had been interacting with much less frequently than before.

As we walked, joining hundreds of thousands trying to squeeze into the holiest Mosque in Islam, he told me about his flourishing medical practice. Helping and healing others was what kept him going. Helping himself or letting him be helped was never a consideration. He was the only doctor in his town, and he was the first and only port of call, whether it was a newborn baby struggling to breathe or a hundred-year-old suffering from advanced dementia. Though there was a small state hospital in a nearby larger town, poor staff attitude and poor resources led to mistrust in it and a place to go to as a last resort only. He knew about virtually everyone's medical issues and at times had to counsel about personal and family issues and was part of the mosque committee which also grappled with many social problems. Just before we started our prayers, I asked him who he spoke to when he needed to. He did not respond.

We went for lunch after we finished our prayers. I

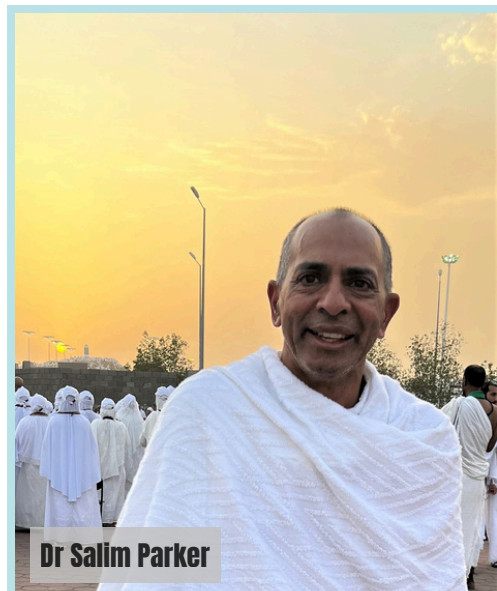
tried to steer to conversation in a particular direction, relating how I encouraged all travellers to take vaccines in order to protect them against certain diseases. This comes from someone with a phobia for needles! There are plenty of other examples, such as a pulmonologist who strongly advises all his patients to take the influenza vaccine when he never took it himself, or the cardiologist who sternly commands his patients to stop smoking whilst personally puffing away thirty poison pills daily. It was evident that he had close friends, but they seemed to all have medical and emotional issues and were reliant on him. They considered him to go to person when there were problems. He was the literal apex occupier, with no support available when he needed it. 'Do you think that I am suffering from burnout?' he asked.

We know that medical professionals can be the worst of patients. There is more often a denial of susceptibility, not so much an aura of invincibility. Even if the signs are clear, like a loss of weight and a night cough and sweating in a high tuberculosis setting, it would need a colleague, friend or family member to gently hint at the possibility of an infection. I knew him for only a few hours and had to assess how to answer. Being overtly frank may have caused him to shy away, whilst beating around the bush would not have helped him. Hajj was approaching and to obtain the maximum benefit from the most important journey in the life of a Muslim optimal physical and mental health was crucial. I was aware that he had some respect for me and would most likely take note of my remarks. 'You are severely depressed,' I said.

His response surprised me. 'I probably needed



Physical wellness does not guarantee mental health



Dr Salim Parker

someone to throw a bucket of ice-cold water over me,' he said. It was time for my afternoon clinic. He offered to assist. 'I am an experienced doctor,' he indicated modestly. I thanked him for his offer but advised him to return to the Haram and reflect on his life whilst looking at the Kaaba and beseeching guidance from his Creator. We planned to meet that evening to perform a Tawaaf together and we indeed managed that. Afterwards we sat on the top floor of the Haram overlooking the Kaaba. He poured his heart out about his dissolved marriage, his inability to deal with what he perceived to be failures and him dreading getting out of bed every morning. 'If there were not so many dependent on me, I would not leave my house at all,' he remarked.

There was a psychiatrist on Hajj whom I knew well and I suggested a consultation with him. He gently refused. 'I just needed to wake up,' he said. We spoke about different options, about different medications, psychotherapy and supportive measures. 'Depression can be managed just like diabetes and asthma,' I said. 'I have tons of depressed and anxious patients. I am going to apply my mind to myself for once,' he said. I protested that an external unbiased professional would be best. He burst out laughing and flatteringly indicated that his interactions with me would yield more positive results than the sum of all others. The plan was for him to see me every few days but he landed up coming to the consulting rooms daily to assist. 'Helping others is also helping myself,' he told me.

A combination of regular Thikr, frequent Tawaafs which doubled as exercise, regular sleep and healing others led to the evolution of a completely different person within a week. I joked with him that he was becoming manic, the opposite of the person I met initially. The first day of Hajj came and it was extremely hectic for me with a number of very sick people needing constant attention. I did not sleep at all that evening and by the next morning, on the plains of Arafat, I was surviving on my annual adrenaline surge. 'Doc, I slept well last night. Please rest, I'll attend to any medical issues,' he offered. 'I am fine, I am used to this,' I protested. 'You are going to collapse soon. You may not see it but I can.' He paused for a moment. 'I think we have role reversal here!' he laughed.

I slept for three hours and woke up just before the time of Wuqoof. 'I am ready to face the world and reach out to my Creator,' I told him after thanking him. 'We both are,' he replied. Labaik!