

# Hajj Stories

## Who we really are

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### Dr Salim Parker

‘Demons live deep inside the earth’s crust, masters of our temptations and lust,’ I heard someone say. The voice sounded vaguely familiar; the words were definitely contained in a poem I wrote whilst at high school. ‘You must have been really bored as a youngster to remember such poor prose,’ I snapped back before embracing him. We were in Makkah a few weeks before Hajj was to commence and have not seen each other for more than fifteen years. We were not even what can be termed friends. In fact, we met probably less than ten times during our entire lives but we somehow connected the very first time we met decades ago when we met at some random book gathering as teenagers. We were not even at the same school. ‘I want to be a writer one day,’ I mumbled when he asked me what I planned to do with my life.

I meekly showed him the poem which contained the lines he now quoted in our hotel close to the Haram. ‘I recall how you endlessly and deliberately regurgitated those lines!’ I said. ‘I think that deflated all my literary ambitions. Now I am here as a doctor in the Holy Land seeing to the health of pilgrims. What hap-

pened to your culinary intentions of becoming a world-renowned chef?’ I quipped. ‘That is squarely your fault,’ he replied. ‘You said my offerings were, well, just eatable,’ he added. ‘But you offered me toasted sandwiches, and twice on top of it all, and you expected me to rave about it?’ I protested. All I said that it tasted exactly the same as I make it. Okay, I did add that it was the only thing that I can make myself and if I can do it, anyone can,’ I sniggered.

We burst out laughing and started reminiscing about our few interactions. I do not even know if he was married and never bothered asking him. Somehow our conversations were just about the two of us and I dare say that we could bare our souls with no pretensions or layered intentions. He was a well-respected medical specialist now and we met a few times at conferences, both as students and as qualified professionals, where we would seek out each other’s company and simply spend hours piercing each other’s lives. On one such occasion as students, we realised that we both knew the lyrics of a stupendous number of songs. When we spontaneously tried to magically convert

these words to melody, we realised that we were insulting even our own eardrums and that we should never contemplate in any other art form other than our chosen careers.

Now, much older but both concurring, definitely not wiser, we pondered on where life has

group I was accompanying resided in basic apartments and I had my hands full seeing to their medical needs. We only met once before Hajj started for a meal and even that was shortened when I was called away to an emergency. ‘Please call me anytime if you need my

reluctantly called him. He was there within a few minutes. ‘I do not want to take you away from your prayers,’ I mumbled as I explained the situation to him. ‘Did you not once tell me that the reward of serving those in need is similar to those of praying?’ he replied.

## “Let the wings of the angels envelop us here at this time of Wuqoof”

whirled us to. ‘I still try dabbling in writing,’ I confessed as the two of us walked from the hotel to the Haram one evening. ‘In fact, when my daughter was asked at kindergarten what I do, she innocently said that her dad was a writer who made no money out of it and so has to work as a doctor. I enjoy my work though and cannot see myself doing anything else. It has brought me to Makkah and Madinah on so many occasions. I am truly blessed, Alhamdulillah. Maybe my memoirs one day will generate a few rands. And some day your amazing sauces and recipes will be a hit once social media becomes aware of your hidden talents’ I said. He burst out laughing. ‘My cooking skills are confined to the occasional braai,’ he added.

‘In fact, it was when some family members and I were experimenting with different braai sauces, which by the way I was formulating, that the topic of Hajj came up. Now that is one journey I never thought of and I vaguely recalled you mentioning it years ago. So, see now, you from Cape Town and me from the northern part of South Africa now irritating each other in the city considered the heart of our religion!’ he joked. He told me of his very large and well-established specialist practice, his multiple businesses as well as of his charity drives. He even thought of opening a restaurant but decided against it as he would probably have interfered too much with the food preparation part of it! ‘I have a good life. It keeps me busy, but I had to fulfil my obligation to my Creator,’ he said.

We performed a Tawaaf and pledged to keep in touch, again. He was travelling with a different group and stayed at one of the most expensive hotels. The

assistance,’ he offered. It was his first Hajj and I did not want to burden him if it was not needed. Till then we had no cases that would have required his specialist skills. Through the years I have managed to formulate systems where we do involve doctors who are on their first Hajj only if absolutely necessary. As fate would destine it, I could write about the recipe he had to cook up to arrest a potentially complicated case.

He went through my medical kit, mixed a few things, applied his concoction to some swabs and inserted it into the affected nostril. He also asked the patient to stop certain medications for a few days. The bleeding stopped within a few minutes. ‘What broth did you use?’ I wickedly asked. We both burst out laughing. ‘Do you know that we seem to be relatively competent in what we do. We are who we



Standing in front of the Kaba’a let you be your real self

The day of Arafat was extremely hot and I had to see a number of patients suffering from the effects of the heat. I had one elderly gentleman who presented with a severe nosebleed. He was on multiple medications which probably aggravated the condition and no matter what I did, I simply could not stop the continuous streaming from his nose. I indicated that I had to take him to hospital. He started crying. He was travelling on his own and was daunted at the thought of being separated from those now familiar to him. My colleague was a specialist in this field and I

really are here on Arafat. So no literary or gastronomic ideas,’ my friend said.

‘Demons live deep inside the earth’s crust. They have now turned to dust,’ I replied. ‘Let the wings of the angels envelop us here at this time of Wuqoof,’ was his response. We stood in silence with our hand outstretched towards the heavens from where we prayed that Allah’s mercy would descend to all of us.

Labaik!

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