By Margaret Placentra Johnston

Chapter 2: Reason...or Blind Faith? *(The story of Abu Ali)*

I was born a Muslim and spent about the first fifty years of my life in faithful practice of all that my religion entailed. I worked tirelessly to promote Muslim values as a devout, active and prominent member of my religious community. I conscientiously taught my children to believe all the tenets of their faith, to say their prayers and to become devout Muslims themselves. Interactions with my family, my wife, my brothers and sisters were all tied into the practice of our faith. The feeling of belonging to a unified group with homogenous values brought me security and an identity I could bank on.

As the Muslim faith had taught me, I took for granted that there are moral absolutes, unchanging standards of good and evil, dictated by God. Adhering to this framework of absolute moral rules allows Muslims to lead lives as good, decent human beings and is considered crucial in keeping them from becoming corrupt and sinful. Islam teaches that without these absolute standards, people will tend to drown in a sea of moral relativism where "anything goes." These rules of Islam brought me comfort and a type of security that I greatly needed at the time.

In addition, by not questioning the tenets of my religion, I enjoyed the feeling of certainty that I had the "right faith." By continuing participation in the Islam community, I could be sure I was "saved." Now being "saved" in the Muslim mind is quite a huge deal if it is Hell you are being saved from. Hell is described very graphically in the Qur'an (alternately spelled Koran) as a place of eternal torture where "skin will be burnt off then replaced by more skin to burn again. Boiling fluid will be poured through the skull and fruit in the shape of the heads of devils will shred the intestines." The fear of Hell in Islam is enormous. Even if one has a metaphorical understanding of the Qur'an, it is extremely hard

to put a benign spin on such passages. The fear of eternal damnation is not something any Muslim can easily shake off. Obviously, fear of this fate serves as a huge motivating factor for holding to the Muslim faith.

But September 11, 2001 triggered a turning point in my life. Suddenly I found I had to face the conflict between my religion and the way Muslims were being viewed by much of the non-Muslim world. Was our image as unpardonable aggressors of our own making, or was the West at fault for provoking the situation?

At first I tried to suppress these thoughts and reacted to criticism of Islam with denial, anger and blame. I denied there was anything wrong, felt hypersensitive to any criticism and blamed the West for creating and exacerbating problems. But eventually I had to accept that Muslims must take responsibility for the problems we faced. Since I, and so many Muslims I know, are peaceful and good, it pained me to face the fact that my own people had planned and carried out the horrible events in New York on 9/11. Still I could not accept that the Islam religion itself was to blame: it was the way Islam was being interpreted by some of its own followers that was the problem. I started arguing among my Muslim friends for a reinterpretation and reform of our traditional views. But instead of easing my conscience, this seemed only to highlight the futility and dishonesty of the views many insisted upon upholding.

This dilemma of the Muslim relationship to the rest of the world then caused me to begin questioning other things about my religion—things that in the past I had taken for granted. Little by little, doubts began creeping in about some of our beliefs. I tried to tell myself that although my rational mind found it difficult to believe certain things in Islam, there must be explanations beyond my capacity to understand and that I should be content to trust that "God knows best." But these efforts were in vain. Slowly, over time, my formerly unshakable faith began to waver. Serious doubts about the validity of Islam in general began to set in.

Certainly I had nothing to lose and everything to gain by "holding fast to the rope of Allah." My whole family, my community and in fact the life I had built for myself depended upon my remaining a believer. Moreover, without the divinely ordained moral absolutes Islam provided, I would lose my yardstick for determining right from wrong. Without those comforting boundaries, I would be at risk of moral confusion and my behavior choices could become slowly corrupted over time.

But eventually, I allowed myself to notice that despite the divinely ordained absolute standards of right and wrong, Muslims do differ on some moral opinions such as whether it was right or wrong to slaughter thousands of innocent people in the World Trade Center on 9/11. At the same time, I noticed most people of all different faiths do agree on some general principles of behavior. It is not the threat of hell that causes good behavior in people. Most principles of goodness can be arrived at without the assistance of God. Just about everyone agrees that it is wrong to murder, steal or commit adultery. I began to realize that my ethical behavior did not come from the rules of my religion. These musings helped me begin to realize that I am equipped with a solid moral compass within my own conscience. I was able to safely make my own moral decisions without the need for pre-set rules laid out by Islam.

For a while after this realization I still went through all the motions of being a "good" Muslim. I fervently hoped that one day my faith would return. But eventually, I found I could no longer make myself believe the tenets of my birth religion. The futility of pretending to be a good Muslim became apparent; one can only pretend for so long. I saw that it was not possible to "choose" belief as the easier alternative. It dawned upon me that no God of any sort would want someone to "pretend" to believe in something falsely.

No matter how painful the effects of leaving Islam, I could not live a lie. When I could no longer stand the discrepancy between my beliefs and those of my religion, I found myself forced to move away from my job, my family and my community. I had been well-known in that community and what I feared most was that someone would seek retribution against my children. I started a new life all over in a new town. Here at least there was great relief that I no longer needed to live a double life, had no need to publicly express beliefs that in private I no longer held.

In stepping away from Islam, I knew I was becoming something other than a Muslim. Finally I was free to be myself though I wasn't sure who that was. I wasn't sure what my life meant anymore or how I should behave. Having lost the religious label that was a huge part of me for all of my life, I went through a period of groping for an identity. I had no idea who I was in the process of becoming, yet I had to allow myself to live in the truth.