

The Answer

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** Unfinished Rough Draft **

“Why did you convert?”... “How did it happen?”...

These resonating questions have been posed to me perhaps hundreds of times since that unforgettable decision I made in the summer of 1994. Why and how would a typical Caucasian, Catholic, nineteen-year-old American convert to such a “strange and mysterious” religion as Islam. These inquiries are all the more pertinent considering that this young man was born and raised in the West during the later part of the 20th century, in a world that is increasingly more hostile to and abusive of the sacred.

The Islamic tradition, which I ascertained at a young age, has been so maligned and misrepresented in the media these days that it can be deemed almost inconceivable for anyone to convert to the faith at all—let alone a typical American kid who himself shared many of the same stereotypes and gave ear to the widespread misinformation that is commonly propagated. Nevertheless, God has a plan, and most of us are oblivious to such. I sure wasn’t aware of it. The following is the story of a lost soul’s journey back to its home...

I was raised in a decent and religiously-conscious Catholic family. My parents always wanted (and still do) the best in life for me. During my early years they made sure I attended a private Catholic school and I would go to church weekly with them, and at times, even twice a week—once on Friday during school, and again on Sunday with them. I always believed there was a God of some sort, but any further understanding was most assuredly cloudy. One thing for me was clear though: Believing that God was more than one deity, or more than one entity, was not something that I could fathom, nor was it something that felt natural to me. Regardless of what I was being taught in school and at Church concerning the belief in the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; three persons, somehow all forming one God—I could never deem the notion to be valid.

Despite issues with certain aspects of my inherited creed, my life’s course seemed to entail the normal passions and dreams of a typical youth my age. During my seventh grade year of Catholic school I got my first guitar. It was Christmas time and my parents made their 12-year-old boy’s wish come true (or was it Santa Claus?). Music quickly became an essential and serious part of my daily life and was soon to form the core of my very existence. The first time that I actually handled my newly acquired treasure (which I was later to consider a piece of junk compared to guitars that I purchased some time down the road) I was only able to pretend that I could play and that I was some sort of rock star. On the stage of my bedroom floor, standing in front of my mirror, just as I had previously done with my mom’s tennis racket, I motioned with my hands and fingers as if I knew what I was doing. Air-guitar at its finest! I couldn’t play a lick, but the determination swelled inside of me and I was certain that one day I would be on MTV, hailed as a famous musician, respected and loved by all. I wanted to have the dream right now, but I needed to learn how to play first!

I immediately signed up for guitar lessons at a local music store and started on the path to fulfillment of my dreams of stardom. However, I became agitated very soon after this—I realized how much harder it was to actually play like a professional,

rather than just pretend to be one in front of your mirror. I guess the music videos made it look too easy. Perhaps they made professional performance appear easier than reality. *How did Kirk Hammet (Metallica), Steve Vai, Joe Satriani, Eric Johnson, Eric Clapton, and all the others do it?*, I asked myself. Apparently this was to take a little longer than I expected.

It was a setback, yes, but the determination to succeed continued to boil within me. About a year later, in the eighth grade, I clearly began to show a talent for music. At that point I was practicing almost every day, for hours on end, several times a day. At any given moment I could be found listening to music, practicing my guitar, air-drumming (a new skill which I had acquired), or watching my favorite bands on MTV—desperately trying to figure out what it was that they were doing to make such incredible sounds. It was a true addiction; I was obsessed. Music filled my soul in a way that nothing else could at the time. I craved more though, and I thought music was the ultimate answer...

Towards the end of that school year there was the infamous eighth grade annual school dance. It was sort of like a going-away present for being good little Catholic kids up to the time of graduation. It was here that I played my first “concert”—a unique and truly indescribable moment in my life, and one that I will never forget. I brought my electric guitar in a gig bag (as I couldn’t afford a hard-shell case at the time), a tiny little amp, my shoulder strap, an instrument cable, and a pick. The school had news of my performance, apparently, as there was a flat platform with a ramp leading up to it posited in front of the main stage, kind of like a mini-catwalk like you see in those modeling shows. Everyone (except the nuns and the teachers of course) gathered around in anticipation. I had never done this before, and in fact, I hadn’t even learned how to play standing up yet! So, sitting down, I began to strum the first chords of my performance and was suddenly surrounded with cheers and screams. That experience convinced me that I could and would be somebody famous one day, although I knew it would take a lot of work. From that night on I strived even more diligently to attain my dreams of stardom. Isn’t it funny, though, how things don’t always go according to your plans?

In June of that year I finally graduated from Catholic grade school, but I had already started to show a serious disinterest in Catholicism and in organized religion in general. I guess one could say it reached the level of an aversion, but possibly not that bad. By this point my parents were practically dragging me to church on Sundays. For this reason, my parents let me choose if I wanted to go to a public, non-religious high school or to a Catholic one. I took the first option. I was very nervous that first day in the public school system. I didn’t know what to expect. No uniform, no tie. No religion class, priests, or nuns. Was it safe there? Would I be able to recognize all the “bad” people I had heard about for so many years in Catholic school? Might I become one myself? Who was to know?

My musical career advanced greatly during my high school years and I was in and out of several somewhat talented bands. The basement in my parent’s house was always reserved as the “band practice” room, where we would meet once, twice, or even three times a week to practice old songs and come up with new ones. By this time I had also picked up the ability to sing and to play on an actual drum set (an upgrade from the air-drumming skills I previously acquired). One could say that I had somewhat of a knack for anything musical, although I still regard my voice as “not all that”. Having deficiencies is good at times; it helps one to be humble—an ever-increasingly hard-to-find virtue these days.

When the music was on, the world seemed to fade away into oblivion. This state was even more pronounced when I actually made the music myself. Playing guitar with the other guys in the band was far more intense than just listening to music being performed by someone else. It was the outlet for my soul. It was the only way

that I had to express my deepest feelings and emotions. It was as if the guitar voiced and translated the screaming of my inner being into a tangible sound vibe that all those around, especially me, could hear and feel. I possessed a longing for something—an inchoate yearning for more. But more of *what* was the question...

During my freshman year at a local university, I was invited by some friends to attend a party. Little did I know it was to be the very place where the course of my existence in the cosmos was to be dramatically altered forever. After I arrived at the party I found myself to be the only non-Latino attendee there. I felt awkward—not because I didn't like people of different cultures, but simply because I felt like I didn't fit in. I felt like I was putting on a front.

Sitting alone in the corner of that basement room at the party, I reflected on my state and upon my situation. When I looked around, everything seemed as though it was moving in slow motion. I observed people dancing, heard voices laughing—but I wasn't laughing. I was just sitting. *Thinking*. Thinking about what I was going to do with myself. About what direction I wanted to take in my life. How much longer was I going to put on a show for others? When would I find what I really desired?

I gazed out across the room as if waiting for someone or something to appear and take me away from my misery. At that very moment, I spotted a pair of large, black boots descending on the stairwell with an elegant pace. A long, beige trench coat followed and the figure emerged. Although I didn't know his name, his was a face and a demeanor that was not to be forgotten. It was the African-American guy from the local music store where I used to buy tapes from! I immediately jumped up and excitedly approached him, albeit awkwardly interrupting the conversation he was having with a friend, but given my state of mind at the time, I didn't pay much attention to that fact. I needed someone to share my feelings with, and it had to be now. I promptly introduced myself and he responded by saying his name was Aaron. There was clearly something special about him. At that instant (and this is something that I will never be able to explain), I had a immense feeling that something very unique and important was going to happen to me through my relationship with this individual.

We found a place to sit together and we got down to talking. The subject almost instantly gravitated to music, as it always would with me in those days. I found out that he had a band, and amazingly, they were in need of a new guitarist. I had been playing guitar for about six years at that point and I had developed great skill and agility. I was ready to permanently settle into a band I felt comfortable with. After a few meetings with the guys, and deliberation and discussion amongst themselves, I was officially in the band!

Aaron Sellars was the lead singer of MotionGrind, an interestingly unique group (especially in the early 90's) that combined the musical styles of rock, metal, progressive/alternative, funk, hip-hop and rap. There were three other members in the band besides Aaron—Mike, the drummer, Rick, the second guitarist, and John, the bassist. Aaron was an African-American man of average height with a slightly large build. His hair was jet black, woven tightly into small and tightly wound 5-inch braids. He also came from a somewhat religiously-conscious Christian family. At the time though, unbeknownst to me, he was experiencing a period of deep spiritual reawakening, and was engaged in a passionate search for truth and reality. I did not know why, but for some reason he always seemed mysterious to me. Ever since that night we met at the party, he held a special place in my heart that no one else ever has, or ever will. The music that we made together with the rest of the guys in the band was the best music I had ever heard or experienced. It was from the soul. Again, I thought I had found the answer...

Several months later an opportunity arose for me to go on tour with a local band of one of my friends (Jason Miller of "Godhead". Always thought that was a

peculiarly interesting name for a band, and if you're interested to know, they have since made it to the top, all the way to MTV itself!). On that tour I guess you could say I had a rude awakening to the realities of tour-band life. I quickly found out that the path of music, in this particular way, might not be the best of paths for me to travel. I became disgusted by the lifestyle that I witnessed living on the road. It's true what they say about groupies, "dirty deeds", and drugs, and that reality really got on my nerves at times. Was this what I really wanted? Where was I going with this? Is this how I want to live?

Fortunately for me, there had not been any official contract between the band and myself, and I wasn't even really being paid either. The whole purpose behind my participation was to get experience, see the world, and to get to know people on the "inside" of the music business. I guess you could say it was an understood condition that I would complete my job with them, but I didn't. I abruptly left to come back home before I was supposed to. They were upset, but I had to do it for my soul.

Being essentially broke, and completely alone, my only way back home was to take an Amtrak train from Seattle, Washington all the way over to Washington, D.C. That three-day ride was one of the most painful experiences of my life. Talk about some back and neck pain! After arriving home safely, MotionGrind and I eagerly returned to our music and continued to pave the way to our own stardom. For Aaron, it was definitely never a matter of money or popularity for popularity's sake. It was about the message, the vibe. If the message was understood by even a few people, the mission was accomplished, and even if the only person that "got it" was himself or myself, the mission was still accomplished. Aaron and I always got along really well together, but there just seemed to be some type of unknown barrier between us—an indescribable and unexplainable type of wall. Nothing negative, just a wall. I always viewed him as being on the better side of the wall than me. At the time, I was never able to pinpoint it exactly. It just *was* that way. Then, one day, it all became clear...

We were engaged in band practice that day—all five of us were present. We were rehearsing for an upcoming club appearance. After finishing a couple of songs we started to play one of our favorite original tunes called *Straight Up Blues*. Aaron firmly clenched the microphone in his hand as he sang and Mike was pounding on the drums behind us. John was slapping on his bass and Rick and I were strumming away on our guitars. As Aaron sang this time, I heard and saw in him something that I had never witnessed before...

He sang, with passionate and heartfelt emotion:

*Another busy day
I can't find time to pray*

*I've been awake too long
Temptation pulls me strong*

*My soul is sick and starved
My tombstone is being carved*

~

*Sin is my surrounding
My spirit needs some grounding*

*I know sometimes I stumble
But I don't wanna crumble*

*My heartache can't be ignored!
And I'm reaching for my Lord!*

As he screamed the last two lines of the song he collapsed to the ground, convulsing and bursting into tears. I didn't know what to do. I almost broke everything in the room as I thrashed on my guitar with a passion that I had never seen emanate from myself before. The whole band vibed off Aaron and the ripples of intensity spread throughout the ever-increasing field of energy that enveloped us like tidal waves of power. As the lions that were caged in our chests roared and broke free, the first wall in the barrier between Aaron and I was now shattered...

Needless to say, our relationship dramatically changed after that moment. I finally understood that the longing and desire that I had before was really for my Creator—not music, not material possessions (a new CD or a new car), or even a different form or style within the realm of music. My problem was primarily and essentially one of the soul. I felt lost and found at the same time. Where was I to go now?

I began to discuss religion and spirituality with Aaron on a higher and higher level as the days went by. At times we would take late night walks through the various neighborhoods where we lived, occasionally spending time in open fields and in the deep woods. We would look with awe at the moon and at the stars. "Who created all this, and why?" we would ask each other. We used to read, think, reflect, and talk a lot during the weeks that followed. It was a time of spiritual ascent, a time of awakening.

One evening we were talking together in my back yard, on the deck that my father and uncle built. The breeze was strong, but peaceful, that particular evening. We were talking about God and spirituality, as usual. While he was talking with me I was looking up into the trees, watching the leaves flutter with the blowing of the wind. It was then that the second and final wall that separated us was broken. I don't know what it was, or how it happened (and at the risk of sounding extremely cliché), but at that moment I realized that God was the answer to all my problems. He felt so near, so real. I finally understood what was up with Aaron. He was looking for God too, and now I was ready to join him in his search. We became a team.

We continued to read, reflect, and to share religious and spiritual books with each other. But now we were on a similar level. I didn't feel that there was a wall between us anymore. He felt the same way. One day, after reading some books on Native American spirituality, both of modern and ancient times, we decided that we wanted to go and "find God" and live on a Native American Indian reservation in order to learn the ways and practices of their tradition. We felt that they were a people truly connected with the Creator, and with the Earth, in a way that most other groups and religious factions couldn't even begin to claim. I was all ready to quit the university and Aaron was ready to leave his job. We had a mission now; a spiritual journey to take, and we were together.

When I mentioned these grandiose ideas to my father he calmly said to me a statement that will stick with me for the rest of my life: "Son, ya know, you don't have to do all that to find God. If you're truly sincere, you can find God in your own bedroom!" Although I brushed that statement aside at the time, it was to eventually hit me so hard that it was one of the major causes of my coming to Islam (thanks Dad!). If I would have gone through with my original plans to go out to a Native American Indian reservation, there's no telling where I would be right now. I shared this statement with Aaron the next time I saw him and we eventually decided to stay home, but the journey still continued...

Aaron and I were at my house one day, still a sad bunch, talking about the state of our souls and what we were going to do about it. But then, out of nowhere, Aaron

mentioned something that completely astonished me. In the midst of one of our usual discussions he threw at me a pertinent question that deeply perplexed me: “Have you ever heard about Islam?”

I even remember where in my house he asked me the question, where I was standing, and exactly how I felt... “Islam!? What is Islam?” I responded. He then went on to inform me of some of the things that he had read or heard about here and there. He told me the basic beliefs and traditions that Muslims around the world consider to be part and parcel of their way of life. He told me of the belief in a transcendent God, categorically unlike His creation; a God of mercy, compassion, and justice; a God closer to us than our own selves, but yet not of this physical world. He went on to say that Muslims also believed in all the Prophets from the time of Adam, and in all the books that were revealed to them (albeit in their original forms). In particular, he mentioned Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, as well as a few other well-known prophets of ancient times. I could not believe it!

Although I was shocked and quite confused, I actually had a good feeling about things at that moment. But soon afterwards I grew somewhat skeptical. I had learned many years ago to be careful about trusting just anyone, especially not a strange and foreign group of people with a different religion of unknown origin. I trusted Aaron, but that was not the point, as he was merely transmitting what he had learnt.

“What’s the catch? What’s the bottom line?” I asked. He said, “Well, they believe that there is a final revelation called the Quran which was revealed for the guidance of all humanity, not one particular people, through the prophetic mission of God’s last messenger, Muhammad.” Ah ha! Here was the catch: another prophet after Jesus and another revelation after the Bible. This needed some investigation.

Within a day or so I had a copy of the translation of the meanings of the Quran in my hands. Sometime back Aaron had received one as a gift from a Muslim friend of his. Now he had passed it on to me. I was so excited to get the chance to sit down with this book and examine it for myself. I truly believed that a religion’s own holy book could best represent its system of belief and the way of life of its adherents, and although I genuinely respected and acknowledged the need for properly guided and balanced commentary, at the time, that was exactly what I was trying to avoid: other people’s interpretations (even if possibly valid)! I wanted to find out for myself.

I wasn’t really interested in what the Muslims were doing either; I was primarily interested in what God and the Prophet Muhammad said and did, and nothing else. The first thing that I did was to look in the index for any anything that pertained to Jesus or his mother Mary. I told myself that if I found anything that defamed either one of them I was going to close the book, forget all about Islam, and continue on my journey for spirituality and divine truth.

The first thing that really caught my attention was the topical entry concerning the crucifixion of Jesus. I read the following verse:

“They say in boast, ‘We killed the Messiah, Jesus, the son of Mary—the Messenger of God.’ But they killed him not, and crucified him not; rather, it was made to appear to them as such. And those who differ therein are full of doubts. They have no sure knowledge and follow nothing but conjecture, for assuredly, they killed him not. Instead, God raised him up unto Himself. And God is All-Powerful, Wise”

[Quran 4:157-58]

I closed the book in shock. I couldn’t accept what I just read, but yet, I couldn’t reject it. How was I supposed to know what really happened? How *could* I know? I was in a state of limbo. As I put down the book, with almost shaking hands, I prayed

to God to show me the way unto Him. It was then that I remembered several scholarly works that I had previously read that dealt with this very issue. Was it actually Jesus who was crucified, or was it someone else? What actually happened? Who were the eyewitnesses, if any? Who wrote the accounts that we now have? Were they eyewitnesses? If not, where did they get their information from?

It was all coming back to me now; I had read that several religious scholars, both within and without the Christian faith, strongly felt that the crucifixion of Jesus was either not actually a historical fact (as one Muslim author, whom I read later on, called to our attention: the word crucifixion itself is pronounced *cruci-fiction*), or that someone else was crucified in his place (such as Judas). I read that verse of the Quran again and I began to think that there was something special about this book, the Quran; the divinely inspired “recitation” (which is the meaning of “Quran” in Arabic). Could this book be the answer to the inchoate yearning of my soul?

Aaron and I decided to visit the local mosque that was about fifteen minutes away from my house. After we arrived, we ended up meeting a very kind and soft man, a Palestinian immigrant (now an American citizen) who came to America many years ago to work for the propagation and better understanding of Islam in the West. We sat down with him in his office and we had a lively discussion for about an hour. At the end of what turned out to be a very civil dialogue, Aaron was convinced that Islam was the way he wanted to go. He accepted the faith on the spot and I was witness to the event.

Within seconds, and before I even had a chance to recover from what just transpired, the man turned to me and said, “And what about you, would you like to accept the faith?” “Uh, me?” I began, “Honestly, I really need to read and research more about the Arab peoples and the history of the faith...” *Blah, blah, blah*, is what I think when I look back on those moments. I just said whatever I could to get the pressure and attention off of me. It was a big decision, a life-changing choice, and I was not the only one that it would affect, so I did what I could to buy more time, although I felt that I would soon be back to do as Aaron had done.

The casual meeting came to a close and before we got up the warm and gentle Palestinian man turned to me again and said in the kindest and most gentle tone, “I don’t mean to be rude, but I would really like to ask you something. I just want to understand.” I conceded and said that he should feel free to ask me whatever was on his mind. But I was most definitely not prepared for what he was about to say: “I just want to ask you a simple question, and I hope you don’t mind. Why do you wear those earrings? What is their purpose?” You know what my answer was? Nothing. I looked him in the eyes, shook my head, smiled, and said, slowly, “Honestly, I don’t know.”

Now home and pensively staring at myself in the mirror: Why am I wearing these things? Is it just for show, or to be “cool”? Do they have a purpose, or am I just wearing them for the heck of it? I had a true “who are you” moment. I gazed at myself in the mirror, as if looking into my soul, into the essence of what it means to be truly human. What if I could peer into the core of my being, free of all external forms, who would I be then? It wasn’t about the earrings any more, I got what I thought to be the point of the man’s question.

I kept researching the Quran and I read it with deep concentration and reflection almost daily. To my complete and utter surprise I found nothing that struck a negative chord with me. On the contrary everything that I read was a confirmation or clarification of many things that I already believed. I just saw the Quran as an extension and improvement to my faith, not as a challenge to it. I constantly prayed to God to guide me to that which was pleasing to Him. I didn’t care where God’s guidance and pleasure was—in Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Native American Spirituality, and so on—I just wanted tranquility and peace. I wanted to completely

fill the void in my soul, that overwhelming desire to be near to His presence that all of us have, even though it may be dormant, and or, crusted over with material distractions.

About a month after Aaron converted to Islam we decided to make another visit to the mosque together. Miraculously, we ran into the kind, Palestinian man again and we sat down in his office and had another candid talk. This time the focus was on me. I talked with him and I asked any and all of the remaining questions that I had about the Islamic faith, about its practical application, and its vision for and of life. Everything was crystal-clear. I had no doubt that Islam was the only way for me. But I felt extremely hesitant because I was afraid of what my friends and family would say and think. I didn't want people to think I was a "terrorist," "extremist," or "fundamentalist," as the media stereotypically portrays, or that I was some kind of new-age weirdo or something.

I immediately left all those thoughts behind and made my decision for God and for His pleasure alone, not because of what people would think of me. I accepted Islam: "*I bear witness that none has the right to be worshipped but Allah (the One God), and I bear witness that Muhammad is His Final Messenger.*" I was now a Muslim, which literally means, one who surrenders himself to the Creator, thereby obtaining peace.

I was home.

I found the answer.

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