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TRUST BENEFITS OF BEING AN OUTSIDER IN THE ARABIAN PENINSULA

Abu Dawood

Abu Dawood, along with his wife and children, has lived and ministered among Gulf Arab Muslims for over sixteen years. He teaches at a higher education institution and serves on a team that seeks to befriend Muslims, minister to those seeking God, disciple believers, and, by God's grace, establish indigenous churches.

Learning Arabic, studying Islam, interviewing nationals and living among the people for 17 years has greatly helped me better understand the citizens of the Arabian Peninsula (AP). However, it has also given me a deep understanding that I will never be a member of their culture and society. I am an outsider and guest living among them. I am not alone, as the number of nationals is often exceeded by Westerners, Pakistanis, Filipinos, Indians and others from Asia. Even so, this status of being an outsider to the national culture has a unique trust advantage through which the Gospel may be communicated.

I enjoy Arabic proverbs and one well known proverb is: *My brother and I against my cousin and I and my cousin against the foreigner*

(أنا وأخي ضد ابن عمي وأنا وابن عمي ضد الغريب)

This proverb highlights the levels of societal bonds and responsibility within Arab culture. The foreigner is last and considered an outsider. However, this proverb relates to alliances in response to honour and perceived attacks against the family and society, respectively. It does not address the issue of personal trust. In other words, if family honour is at stake, brothers support one another to ensure the family name remains respected. If the honour of the tribe is in question, the cousin is involved and if a disrespectful cartoon appears in a western newspaper, the entire society unites!

Honour is the respect shown by the greater relational community. Shame also occurs in relationship and is a mechanism for community discipline. If no one knows about a particular societal offense, there is no shame. Ask a male Muslim if he is fasting during the month of Ramadan, and the answer will always be 'yes,' as it is a great shame to not fast. Similarly, I once saw a Muslim colleague enter a

members-only snooker club. The next day when I mentioned that I saw him at the club, he quickly denied the observation as he didn't play snooker. I asked he if was certain about the club, because I also recognized his car in the lot, but he assured me that he had never been there. Sometime later, I discovered that the club was actually a front for a national-only bar and so my colleague was actually truthful in the fact of not playing snooker. To admit membership of the club would be shameful in my presence.

Unfortunately, life is full of shame and regret. Dissolved marriages, poor choices, bad deeds of family members, and not measuring up to the expectations of others become a heavy burden to bear. In the USA, a troubled soul seeks professional counselling for solace and healing. Dr. Larry Crabb, a Christian psychologist, noticed that an increasing number of believers were utilizing his services and wrote in his book *Connecting* [1], 'WE HAVE MADE A TERRIBLE MISTAKE! For most of this century we have wrongly defined soul wounds as psychological disorders and delegated their treatment to trained specialists. Damaged psyches aren't the problem. The problem is disconnected souls. What we need is connection! What we need is a healing community!'³¹ In other words, healing of regret comes when

God works through his people to touch the life of another, which, in fact, is one aspect of the church. Specifically, *Connecting* is the strengthening, relational bond between two believers that allows each to speak into the life of the other for mutual growth and healing. God-enabled grace is extended by each in order to expose the wound and begin the healing. Fear of shame weakens the relational bond and leaves the person in their miserable state.

In terms of evangelism, the Gospel message best flows through the relational bonds of trust. Keith E. Swartley, the editor of the *Encountering the World of Islam* (EWI) compendium [2], notes that people rarely change because of logical argument alone. As a point of illustration, EWI includes a testimony of Fouad Masri who shared how instead of arguing about the validity of the Bible, he invited his new friend Khalid for a soft drink. Masri then shared a personal testimony of the work of God in his life to change a heart of hate to redeemed heart of peace. In response, Khalid shared, 'I have been reading the Qur'an but I have not found any cure for sin', and later requested a copy of the New Testament. Masri then notes that logical argument would have continued as such, but buying a Coke and switching the conversation to a natural, personal testimony had much better results.³²

Even so, as the previous parable implies, the strength of the relational bond is correlated to the blood ties of the person. A neighbour once told my wife that it is best to have large families so the children will not have need of friends from outside the family. Similarly, cousin marriage is encouraged as it far better than marrying a stranger who is not of the same 'family team' whose loyalties are

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unsure during family conflict. Even so, there are issues not discussed with family members, relatives, and the greater tribe, for fear of shame. But not discussing the topic does not bring healing. Instead, the issue festers, affects the person's psychological state and manifests in various behaviours.

There is another less known proverb in the AP: *Eat at a Jew's place but sleep at a Christian's place* (يتغدي عند اليهودي وينام عند المسيحي). This proverb addresses the issue of trust with regard to foreigners outside of society. In particular, the proverb highlights the fact that for security, a Christian is the best option... but be warned of the food on offer, as it may not be *balaal* (permissible by Islam).

In his book, *Arabian Sands* [3], Wilfred Thesiger is trusted and entrusted with a group of young Omani men who become his guides and confidants in the AP. Though Ibn London, as he is named by his friends, dresses, eats, speaks and travels with these Bedu for several lengthy trips, he is never considered a true member of the tribe and is often corrected for his social faux pas and ignorance of life in the desert. In the sacred areas of Nizwa, Thesiger was required to ride a camel for fear that hostiles would recognize his foreign foot prints and gait. Though an outsider, Thesiger was entrusted with family information and shameful, personal details, such as circumcision and being sold as a slave after caught stealing camels.³³

Today's cities of the AP see very little of camels, but my wife and I have similar experiences to that of Thesiger. Language abilities and cultural knowledge help build the relationship and, once established, becomes a conduit of trust. *I have a boyfriend, my husband is impotent, I need to get married because I masturbate excessively, and my brother is physically abusive* are a selection of intimate, personal information shared with us over the years because, as outsiders to the family and society, there is little risk of shame. This same cultural mechanism extends to the classroom where foreign male instructors openly converse with female students, which is generally considered a shameful act in any other venue.

As foreign agents of change and in recognition of this cultural opportunity, the goal is to not merely discuss personal issues but move on to the ultimate solution to shame: the empowering, redeeming, restoring work of the Gospel. Talk therapy has its benefits, but alone it does not help a self-centred, heart of stone. The Gospel points to the Source of all joy, happiness, forgiveness, and healing, so as our friend shares of regret and shame, our personal testimony and experience with God must also be incorporated to highlight the possibility of peace, hope, and honour. In other words, talking about problems may help relieve some of the stress in a person's life as painkillers help relieve symptoms of a disease, but the Gospel is the cure. And without the cure, the friend will continue to suffer. This fact is our encouragement for boldness in stating the truth.

Um Rashid first experienced trust in foreign Christians through the birth of her child. The pregnancy and birth had complications but the ministry of the Christian healthcare workers greatly encouraged her. Through the years, her trust

enabled her to read the Bible and begin to learn the truth of the Gospel; though the societal propaganda was that Christians were dirty, changed the Bible and practiced unspeakable secret rituals. Sometime later, Um Rashid visited our home and shared with my wife how that was first time she ever visited a westerner's home due to fear. Before that, Christians had always visited in her home. As the trust grew, Um Rashid began sporadically studying the Bible and in lesson, hugged the Bible and exclaimed, "I love this book!" Even so, Um Rashid privately shared how she feared the reaction of her family and neighbours, if she chose to follow Jesus. Her trust in foreigners led her to the Gospel, but her fear of family and society immobilizes her faith.

Beyond evangelism, this phenomenal trust of foreigners extends to discipleship. One of the challenges for new believers is the inability to trust another believer of a Muslim background (BMB), which undermines church planting efforts. Though the BMB may not trust another BMB, he will trust a foreign Christian, for many of the same reasons previously mentioned. Specifically, the foreign Christian presents no threat of exposure to family and the greater society. Thus, in order to extend trust, some AWM missionaries in North Africa strove not to only meet in one-on-one relationships with new believers. Instead, triads of the western missionary, new believer and seasoned believer meet together to study, pray, and experience a trusting relationship with a member of the BMB's own society. In other words the perennial huge challenge of lack of trust between BMBs in the fellowship was substantially overcome when the believers applied the lessons in trust, learned from being in an open and vulnerable mutual relationship with the worker, to the fellowship of BMBs whom they would not normally have trusted. This endeavour led to a significant move forward in the development of the BMB group into a strong church.

The cultural outsider in the AP is often trusted with personal details considered shameful, if known by the family and society. It may be that the national citizen feels free to share such details due to an assumption that most westerners and foreigners are likewise immoral. Therefore, the extended trust of the national citizen connects well with the personal testimony of Christian to witness of the reality and power of God's work to forgive, heal, restore, guide and honour His followers.

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31 Larry Crabb, *Connecting*, Thomas Nelson Inc, 1997

32 Keith Swartley, *Encountering the World of Islam*, Authentic Publishing, 2005, p. 327

33 Wilfred Thesiger, *Arabian Sands*, Penguin Classics, 2008

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