

Excerpts from
Signs on the Horizons:
Meetings with Men of Knowledge and
Illumination

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Ambassador Extraordinaire and Plenipotentiary

IN THE POPULAR MIND love is usually linked with romance and sex. I never imagined that the first person I would fall madly in love with would be a short, flamboyant, erudite, bespectacled, snaggle-toothed black man from Zanzibar who spilled things, wore long coats over a sarong, spoke in rich Edwardian English, had an infectious laugh and walked with a cane. It was through him I understood the meaning of the declaration of the Companions of the Prophet Mohamed, peace and blessings be upon him, “May my mother and father be sacrificed for you!” I never understood how anyone could say that about their parents until I met Sayyid Omar Abdullah.

From the moment I laid eyes on him I fell in love with him. I can say that I loved him more than anyone else in my life. He taught me the meaning of love and its reciprocity. He knew I loved him and I knew he loved me. My heart surged when I knew I would see him. I missed him terribly when he was away. I thought about him constantly. I enjoyed every moment I had with him. He was a kind of *uberfather* for me. He was my best friend. I felt safe knowing he was in the world. When he died, I was desolate, overcome with a sense of profound loss from which I have never fully recovered.

As I came to know him I discovered that I was not the only one who had fallen in love with him. Once we were walking together on the streets of old Jeddah in Saudi Arabia, and someone approached us. He came up to Sayyid Omar and cried out in Arabic, “*Ya Habib!* (*Habib* is an

honorific the people of Hadramaut in South Yemen—*Hadaram*—bestow upon their spiritual elders) I love you!” Then he asked, “Why do I love you, Habib?” Sayyid Omar lowered his eyes, smiling, and shook his head modestly. “A gift from my Lord,” he shrugged. I witnessed this kind of exchange many times. The great Sufi and Proof of Islam, Imam Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali wrote that one of the marks of honor bestowed upon the people who have attained knowledge on the path to God is that they are beloved of all creatures. Sayyid Omar elicited love wherever he went.

When I first met him he was serving as ‘Ambassador Extraordinaire and Plenipotentiary’ from Comoros Islands, which, I think meant that he was the little island nation’s only ambassador. He travelled the world on behalf of Comoros and, through his charisma, managed to bring the country many millions of dollars in foreign aid, particularly from the Gulf countries, where he was especially beloved.

Beneath his diplomatic cover he was one of the greatest living African educators and beneath his educational cover, he was a Sufi saint. While on one of his diplomatic missions, he came to learn of a young group of Sufi acolytes living in London and he came to pay us a visit.

He was a force of nature and took our group by storm. He savored knowledge as if he was feasting at a table groaning with delicacies. Indeed, he often said that Sufism was about taste. “Without tasting the sweetness of *dhikr* and knowledge it is very difficult to continue on the Path.” There was no subject off limits. He laughed easily. His laughter was infectious, his sense of humor contagious. His knowledge of the path was encyclopedic. I had never heard anyone deliver classical Sufi doctrine in English with such clarity and depth of insight and with such boisterous good humor. The atmosphere was charged in his presence. He exuded an intense joy of life. He loved people. He came with his close companion Sayyid Hadi Al-Haddar. The two of them sat cross-legged on the floor with us and spoke of Sufi doctrine and practice. Sayyid Hadi, who was an ecstatic, solemnly announced to the group, “I congratulate myself for being among you.” Sayyid Omar balanced sobriety and intoxication, and combined his magnetism with a rich eloquence. He galvanized his listeners with insights, anecdotes and wisdom sayings. As he spoke his embroidered cap (*kufia*) would begin slipping farther and farther to the back of his head. Just before it fell off altogether Sayyid Omar would rescue it and slide it up back to the top of his smooth head and continue talking.

When the time for prayer came I leapt at the chance to help him make his ritual ablutions. I filled a pitcher and poured water for him in my upstairs room. He invoked a blessing on me. While we were having tea after dinner Sayyid Omar addressed me. He asked me where I was from. I had been an actor in Hollywood before I entered the path. I had been in the theater since I was a small child. I thought that the only thing I wanted in life was to be a great performer. I left what looked to be a promising career, suddenly and, for my family and friends, dramatically. I joined a Sufi order and never looked back, or so I imagined. I told him I was from America. He asked me what state I was from. I answered that I was from California. He then grinned and burst out suddenly with, “So you left *Hollywood* and came *here!*” I turned beet red. He had nailed me. The whole assembly exploded into laughter. My friends all knew my past. I realized that I was carrying this mythology around with me about having been an actor in Hollywood and left it all for the Path. In one funny and embarrassing (for me at least) moment, he put that pretention to rest.

This was the first time I had ever interacted with someone possessed of spiritual insight, or *firasah*, although I had always been fascinated by this capacity, which is a combination of innate ability enhanced by intense invocation. The Prophet Mohamed, peace and blessings be upon him, said, “Fear the insight (*firasah*) of the believer, for he sees with the Light of God.”

On another occasion Sayyid Omar suddenly appeared at the *zawiya*. It was an afternoon. I was sitting with a friend of mine who had just returned from many months in Palestine under the tutelage of a Sufi shaykh who had put him under an incredibly intense regime of invocation that had left him in a highly strung state. He had returned to England and was at loose ends.

There were only two of us alone in the *minzah* when Sayyid Omar appeared. He strode into the *zawiya* and, without pause or ceremony, sat directly in front of my friend, greeting him and asking his name. “Abdul Latif”, my friend replied. “Well Abdul Latif, I must warn you, you mustn’t try to go too fast.” Abdul Latif listened, nonplussed. Sayyid Omar continued, gravely but gently, “Because if you go too fast you might lose your balance.” Abdul Latif was speechless. He’d just received a rather alarming admonition from an exotic older gentleman he’d never laid eyes on. He stared back, dumbstruck. Sayyid Omar looked him

in the eyes and said, “You know what I mean,” then casually added, “What do you do? Do you cook?” Stunned, my friend nodded, stammering, “Uh, yes, I... I cook at The Buttery at the John Slade Art School in East London.” This was Sayyid Omar’s way of letting him know that he wasn’t just whistling Dixie; that he could see into his heart. He then said again for emphasis, “Don’t try to go too fast. Take things slowly and you will be fine.” My friend took his advice and has kept on the path up to now, never losing his balance.

I witnessed this kind of exchange numerous times and was fascinated by these flashes of insight he seemed suddenly and without warning to blurt out. When I mentioned this, he said innocently, “Do I really?” He explained that things just came to him suddenly and he was impelled to say something. It was intuitive rather than cognitive. He dismissed this faculty as of little importance.



Sayyid Omar was the most eloquent living interpreter of classical Sufi doctrine in the English language and he was a tremendous conversationalist. Yet he never left a gathering without repeating the Prophet’s invocation: *Subhanaka Allahumma wa bi Hamdika Wash-hadu an la ilaha illa anta astaghfiruka wa atoobu ilayk*. (“Glory be to You O God, and Praise to You and I witness that there is no god but You. I ask your forgiveness and I turn to you.”) Of this invocation the Prophet, peace be upon him, said: “Whosoever is sitting in a company and indulges in much idle talk, but before rising says..., his talk shall be forgiven.” I found this to be one of his most impressive qualities. He never forgot that he was in the presence of God. For 30 years I have tried to follow his example, but I still find it a struggle to retain the awareness of God to remember this simple invocation after engaging in conversation.

If he had a consistent message it was one of tolerance, for human frailty, for other beliefs, for weakness and wrong action in others. He once said, “You have to be very careful about defining someone as an unbeliever (*kafir*). A *kafir* is someone who has received the Message, *understood* it and then rejected it. Most non-Muslims have not received the Message, fewer still understand it. Even many Muslims haven’t received and understood the Message.”

We were sitting together once and he said, “If you read the Qur’an with great care, you will understand that most people go to Paradise.” He gave everybody a way in. We once sent him to America on a speaking

tour, which was very successful. After one of his talks, a young American woman came up to him and said, “I love what you said and I think I should become a Muslim but, you see, I’m a stripper.” Without missing a beat Sayyid Omar grinned and said, “Well, don’t let that stop you.” She said happily, “Yes, I’ll become a Muslim and then I know I’ll give it up.” He didn’t admonish her for what she was doing, but encouraged her to something better.

He once said, “Westerners have the greatest capacity to accept and follow the Path in our time because they have no preconceptions, they understand the value of time and they use their intellect. The only thing they have going against them is that they have built up bad habits.” I found this to be true. While it was easy for me to comprehend and accept Sufi doctrine and practice the discipline (*suluk*), I felt weighed down by deeply ingrained impulses from my misspent youth. Habib Omar and I were travelling through the Gulf together. I was away from my wife and, after a time, started to be troubled by lust (*shahwa*). Over dinner one evening I asked him if, as a young man living in Europe, he was ever overcome by feelings of lust, hoping he would give me some advice as to how to deal with this distraction. He looked up and said without hesitation, “No.” His upbringing had protected him.

Still, he had incredible empathy for ordinary people. A young Comorian working in Jeddah who knew Sayyid Omar told me that when he gave discourse in Moroni, all the cafés and bars would empty out and throngs of young people would flock to come to hear him speak. He was the spiritual equivalent of a rock star in East Africa.

On another occasion, when he was in London, the Imam of the Regent’s Park Mosque called him in a panic. He said, “We have a serious problem and we need your help. We don’t know what to do! Can you come with us?” They took Sayyid Omar to Harley Street to the office of a physician. He was an older man, in his late fifties. Habib sat down with him and said, “How can I help you?” The physician said, “Over the years I have treated many Muslims and, through them, have come to love and respect Islam and I believe it is true and I believe I should become a Muslim.” Sayyid Omar said, “That is very good. So what’s the problem?” The Imam looked to Sayyid Omar as if to say, “Just wait until you hear this.” The physician responded, “Well, I know that a Muslim is expected to pray five times a day. But I am old and set in my ways and I am very busy with my practice. In all honesty I can’t guarantee that I will be

able to keep to the five prayers.” Sayyid Omar said, “Go on.” The physician continued, “Also, I know that one is expected to fast the month of Ramadan. I simply can’t perform the fast.” The Imam looked to Sayyid Omar as if to say, “You see what I mean?” Sayyid Omar said, “Is there anything else?” The good doctor said, “Yes. For the last 30 years every evening I have a glass of sherry. I know this is frivolous and I know that Muslims are not permitted to drink but I honestly don’t think I can give up my glass of sherry in the evening. I’m sorry.” Sayyid Omar said, “Is there anything else?” The doctor said, “No, I think that’s about it. What do you advise?” Sayyid Omar said, “There are many Muslims who fail to perform the five prayers and who don’t fast the month of Ramadan and there are many Muslims who drink alcohol and there have been since the time of the Prophet Mohamed, peace and blessings be upon him. These are men and women who were born as Muslims, who believe in Islam and who are accepted as Muslims so my advice is to accept Islam and do the best that you can. You are welcome in Islam.” The good doctor became a Muslim.

In Sufi literature, in the *diwans* of the saints, in circles of knowledge, there is much talk of very advanced spiritual states, of annihilation in God (*fanafillah*), of subsistence in God (*baqabillah*), of exalted stations (*maqamat*) and illuminations. I felt that much of this was lost on me. When I was young I never imagined that I could possibly attain these spiritual heights. So I asked Sayyid Omar why it was that we are encouraged to desire knowledge that seems to be out of reach for most people. He replied that God is so immensely generous that He gives His servants everything that they ask for, even if only at the moment of death. He would relate the saying of his shaykh regarding the acquisition of spiritual knowledge: “The later, the better.”

The Nubian Beside the Tomb

I LANDED IN CAIRO in the summer of 1976 and immediately tried to get a visa to Saudi Arabia. The Saudi Consulate General was, and as of this writing, still is located in Garden City in a huge, run-down complex of buildings. At the time, which was the early years of Saudi Arabia’s oil boom, the Embassy was besieged by thousands of visa applicants trying to get into the Kingdom for work or to perform the *Hajj* or *Umrab*.

The heat was oppressive. Crowds surged at the entrance, pushing to get inside the compound. Egyptian police in ill-fitting white uniforms

and black berets beat the seething mob back with belts. The heat, the smell of sweating humanity and fumes from the surrounding streets was suffocating. When I finally managed to get through the gates there were incredibly long lines out in the courtyard leading to windows where visa applicants were meant to leave their documents. I was stuck in an interminable queue, which never seemed to get shorter because of new applicants continually cutting in line.

Rather than risk an altercation, I had to resign myself to wait patiently at the back of a long, glacially slow line. Patience is not a virtue I have in large supply but I was stuck without an option. I decided that the only way to make the best of a bad situation was to use the time performing invocation (*dhikru'llah*) and decided to repeat a long form of the Prayer on the Prophet (*Al-Salat 'ala an-Nabi*) 1,000 times. I stood in line for about three hours, sweat streaming down my face, trying not to breathe in the nauseating vapors, damping down my annoyance when yet another queue jumper pushed into the line in front of me, reciting the prayer on the Prophet over and over and over again.

By the time I reached the front of the line, I'd repeated the *dhikr* 990 times and, needless to say, my frustrations and annoyances had gradually been displaced by the repetition of this calming invocation. I deposited my papers at the window and gratefully escaped the Saudi Consulate compound, hailing a taxi to take me to Sayyida Zaynab, the great mosque that encompasses the tomb of the granddaughter of the Prophet Mohamed, may God be pleased with her and may God bless him and give him peace. In the taxi I completed my 1,000th prayer on the Prophet. I paid the driver, got out and entered the Mosque. As I approached the precincts of the tomb of Sayyida Zaynab, an old Nubian *dervish* in a long white shirt and colored turban, sitting beside the tomb, head bowed in invocation, looked up as if he sensed something. He spotted me. His eyes brightened as if he recognized me. He cried out: "*Allah! Allah!*" His hands came up and he pulled them over and over wildly from me toward himself, as if he was trying desperately to gather something unseen from me into his heart. His face was incandescent. I nodded to him. He beamed ecstatically. He then returned to his invocation.

About a week later I entered Sayyida Zaynab again. I had not been performing the prayer on the Prophet or any other form of invocation as intensively as I had that day in the Saudi Consulate. I spotted the Nubian *dervish* and tried to catch his eye. I walked over and sat beside him in

front of the tomb. I assumed we had a bond from the week before. He ignored me. When I finally did manage to catch his attention, he looked at me without a glimmer of recognition and returned to his invocations. Whatever he had seen the previous week, it certainly wasn't me. I suspect that he had seen the prayer on the Prophet. But God knows best.

All Night Long

SUFI ABDALLAH cut a striking figure. He was a tall, handsome, powerfully built Pathan with an easy swagger, thick salt and pepper beard, a rakish smile and piercing eyes. It was said he worked sixteen hours a day—two consecutive shifts—as a shop foreman in a Birmingham factory. It was also said that he rarely slept, although I had trouble believing this. He led a Naqshbandi Sufi order in Birmingham.

The Naqshbandiyya trace their lineage directly back to our Master Abu Bakr Al-Siddiq, may God be well pleased with him, and their practice, reflecting the quiescence of their spiritual father, was inward and silent. It has been said that the Naqshbandiyya preserved Islam throughout the Central Asian republics during the repressively atheistic Soviet period because their spiritual practice could be carried out in silence, invisibly, without a trace.

The Naqshbandis of Birmingham were anything but invisible. They were a flamboyant, vigorous bunch, mostly working class Pakistani emigrants who congregated with a wonderful sense of processional solidarity behind their towering, energetic leader, arriving at gatherings like the *Eid* prayers by the busload, brandishing banners and flags and carrying trays groaning with Pakistani food. They were far and away the most organized group of Sufis in Britain.

I was always impressed by Sufi Abdallah and the men around him but wondered whether theirs was a case of style over substance. I had my chance to find out when a few friends and I were invited to attend a night of *dhikr* in London. We gathered at a modest brick row house in a working class neighborhood after sunset. We had tea and talked casually until the night prayer, after which a delicious Pakistani supper was served on tablecloths spread across the floor of the room we had gathered in. This seemed more like a social gathering and I began to think my suspicions about these Naqshbandiyya were justified.

For us a meal after the night prayer usually signaled the end of an evening. These men, I discovered, were just getting started. A large circle

was formed and the invocation began. The practice of the Naqshbandiyya revolved around the silent invocation of *La ilaha illa 'llah*—“No god but God”—on the breath and with a rhythmic movement of the head down on the “*La*” and the “*illa*” and in a circular motion accompanied by a visualization of light. Although silent, it is an incredibly powerful practice.

Sufi Abdallah led the assembly with single-minded intensity. The practice began slowly and accelerated gradually in unison until the group breathed as a single body, lost in remembrance. Time passed. We were swept away in this luminous circular breath. Time flowed. The invocation ended. It was dawn.

We prayed the dawn prayer and the assembly broke up. I staggered out into the early morning air, ready to collapse. Sufi Abdallah walked out with me. On the working class street he looked down at me with a twinkle in his eye and a chuckle and gave me a pat on the back with his large hand, as if to say, “Nice try”. He shook my hand with an iron grip. Unruffled, he was ready to head back to Birmingham to start his first shift. As we parted ways in the cold morning light, I realized that I had just experienced a case of substance over style.

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