

Remembering Mufti Naeem

Sometimes you are so busy with life you don't think much of where it all started, how you became who you are, the journeys you took and the people who helped you along them. And then something happens which forces you to pause. Only then you remember there were people who played a major role in shaping you to the person you are today, in turning your dreams which you thought would remain dreams forever into a reality.

I'm remembering now.

I was just one of his thousands of students. Not one of the best, not even close to accomplished. I'll admit I wasn't even someone who was considerate enough to keep much contact, keep him updated, despite how much he had advised us to. As the years went by, the relationship, even memories, faded away.

And yet I haven't been able to focus on anything else all week long. Not surprising of course considering the influence he had and the role he played in enabling me to study. It's surprising, rather, how I took his presence granted for all of these years.

I wasn't sure whether I'd share this initially. I was writing this to sort my own mind and thoughts. Then I remembered he would tell us that he hoped we'd remember him with goodness all our lives and share his words when we teach in the future, the same way he'd always quote his own teachers and mention them by name when he taught. A legacy through 'ilm. Sadaqah jariyah. That is all he ever worked for.

Apart from the final year Bukhari class, I didn't have much direct encounter with him but my entire stay in Pakistan was due to him and under his care. It was his invitation, his hospitality what brought me there so everything about my stay in Pakistan is intrinsically linked to him and his family.

When I went to Pakistan to study back in 2006, there were few, if any, quality Alimiyyah programs in America for girls. I chose Pakistan because I had family there. But, really, I

chose it because of his school. There are many seminaries in Pakistan but it was only his that really accommodated foreigners.

He would go out of his way to encourage and allow foreign students in and accommodated every request or need along the way. Although he had many other responsibilities, foreign students were his personal guests. He understood that traveling so far and studying in a land where everything was different was a big adjustment and sacrifice, so he did his best to make it easier. He also understood the stakes here; if these students could successfully study and go back to their lands, the benefit they could have in their communities was critical.

This treatment wasn't just for western students. This is how he treated every student who came from afar. Students from Thailand and Sri Lanka, Tanzania and Tajikistan, Russia and Fiji; students from remote villages in Sindh and Baluchistan and other parts of Pakistan all called his madrasa their home. And that's one of the biggest things that sets him apart.

As Mufti Rafi said, "His service to foreign students can never be forgotten. There is no similar example in any other madrasa."

When I last visited Pakistan two years ago, a classmate of mine and now a teacher at the madrasa for the past decade asked me "We don't get many students from America anymore the way we used to before. Why? You guys aren't encouraging kids to study anymore?"

It dawned upon me then that his dream to spread this knowledge worldwide had already begun to be realized. I told her there were now so many programs and schools and teachers in America that students didn't need to go abroad the way they did before.

Thousands of his students, male and female, are teaching across the world. He'd proudly tell us of his students starting madrasas in remote villages in Baluchistan and Sindh. "These girls are educating their entire villages and communities, people didn't even know how to say the Kalima before. People come from miles away to learn from our students."

It is this that really gave him joy and fulfillment.

At a time when the political climate in Pakistan made it difficult for foreign students, he took responsibility for all of them. He promised them he would take care of them. He fought for

their right to study. He built relationships with ambassadors of other countries. He opened his doors to both foreigners and anyone else who wanted to see what a madrasa is like. He invited the media to come and see a madrasa from the inside, to show them that far from being places of extremism and violence, they were places of learning and teaching sacred knowledge. He so earnestly believed that madrasas could and should exist in the modern world, and he knew it wouldn't be possible without building links with the outside world, something that many madrasas were hesitant to do then.

His efforts and attitude enabled so many to come and study the words of Allah and the Prophet ﷺ. Even those who didn't attend his institute benefited from his presence, knowing that he was there to stand up for them if anything was to happen. He didn't discriminate when it came to helping others. Any foreign student of any institute was welcome at his place.

There are so many stories of entire families traveling to Pakistan to study at his seminary. And many more of them entrusting their children to him completely. He fulfilled that trust.

There was a girl in my class from Tanzania. When she was about 9 her uncle came to Pakistan for Tabligh, and upon visiting the seminary he was impressed with the opportunities here for girls. Mufti Naeem invited him to send his children, and he went back and brought four of his daughters and nieces to study. The girls grew up there. They first memorized the Qur'an, then started the alim course. He came back eight years later at the graduation ceremony of the oldest girl and decided to take all the girls back because the separation had been too long. He brought home with him four hafizas of the Qur'an, one who had completed the alima course, and another who had nearly completed it. Her uncle's plan was that the oldest girls would tutor the rest in their studies and then they'd all teach together in their city in Tanzania. We had laughed then at the idea of her and her cousin teaching the younger cousins books like Mishkat, but we missed the bigger point, that this was how knowledge is shared and spreads.

There was another girl in my class from Sri Lanka. Her entire family moved to Pakistan and both parents and all three siblings enrolled. They first memorized the Qur'an, and then completed the course before returning to Sri Lanka.

These are just some of the hundreds of stories of people studying at his seminary, who otherwise wouldn't have that chance, and then going back to benefit others. This was his constant emphasis. Study and teach those who don't have access. Always be involved in

teaching, he told us in one of our final lessons. Even if you have no formal teaching opportunity, just invite people to your home to learn.

His concern for girls' Islamic education in particular is especially noteworthy. Of course there are many seminaries and institutes of Islamic knowledge for girls in Pakistan, and many people who support them. But he was one of the influential people who was an outspoken proponent from the beginning and truly believed in the potential. He was also one of the few who accommodated female foreign students, especially those who were there without family.

Before I went to Pakistan to study, my father consulted other scholars. Some discouraged him. Doing an Alima course isn't that important they said, especially with all the difficulties and risks of going far from home. It's not fard to study the deen at that level. Karachi was going through a very unstable period back then so they did have a point. We also inquired with other girls madrasas in Karachi, that were closer to where my extended family lived (Jami a Binoria was in the outskirts of Karachi). But they all said they don't allow girls over the age of 13 and they don't encourage Americans to attend.

Mufti Naeem, rahimahullah, was the only one who really encouraged it. He's the one who understood the value and need, who was willing to take responsibility for it all, despite the risks. He's the one who kept inviting my father, and reassured him everything will be taken care of, that there would be nothing to worry about. He accommodated all our requests and needs, to the point of welcoming my grandmother into the madrasa community and allowing her to spend her day there whenever she liked. He assured us that my only worry should be to study. Everything else will be taken care of.

While many other girls madrasas in Pakistan suffice with the standardized curriculum for girls, which back then (it has since changed a bit) was an abridged version of the regular curriculum and especially subpar when it came to subjects like Arabic, Jamia Binoria had its own curriculum, which included a very strong Arabic curriculum. Many other teachers including my late teacher, the principal of the girls division, Maulana Masood Baig rahimahullah, had a role in this but it was also something Mufti Naeem would take pride in and mention. It's something I took for granted initially and only much later did I learn that most madrasas in Pakistan, and perhaps even worldwide do not have a strong Arabic program

for girls, which makes it very difficult for them to pursue independent research and further studies after graduation.

Jamia Binoria was also one of the few madrasas in Pakistan then that had an ifta (mufti) course for women. In my final year, at least once a week he'd encourage us to enroll in it the next year. He'd tell us how important doing takhassus fil ifta was, how if he was to have it his way he would make ifta a requirement for all students, how much there is a need for female mufti(a)s, how there are already thousands of male Muftis, but they can never replace the role of a female one can have.

He'd talk about how proud he was of all the female ifta students, how every time he looks at their work he's so impressed. "They're better than our male students," he'd say. "Don't let anyone tell you you can't become a mufti. If a woman can become a surgeon or engineer why can't she become a mufti?"

As a teacher he was always encouraging, appreciative of the smallest of achievements, ready to praise and make du'a for his students. The term "mushfiq" is what everyone is using to describe him, because that is what he was. Loving, caring, encouraging.

In Pakistan, teachers don't really praise students; the tendency (both in schools/colleges and madrasas) is to put students down. And yes, too much praise can be dangerous but a little bit encouragement and uplifting is needed. He wouldn't withhold this.

There was a curtain in our classroom, separating the male teachers from the students. This was the standard system of all girls madrasas in Pakistan, preserving religious guidance and cultural sensitivities regarding modesty and hijab while still enabling students to communicate with and build a positive relationship with male teachers. Hadith classes usually involve a student reading the Arabic text, with the teacher interrupting every now and then to explain. He would make it a point to ask the name of the person who read and praise them and make du'a for them.

It's these little things that would encourage us all to work harder to succeed. He would often call my father and keep him updated and congratulate him on mine and my sister's progress. Knowing that despite being in charge of 5000+ students and a host of other responsibilities, he was personally invested in our success always helped drive us to work hard.

He taught Bukhari with passion, you could sense the love for the Prophet ﷺ in his words. The Bukhari class was more than just facts and technical explanation, there was always a practical lesson. He strongly emphasized that knowledge must lead to action and he always made his classes reflect that. He would say, my goal is to teach you in a way you'll never forget, that you still hear my voice when you read these hadiths the way that I hear my teacher's voice when I read them, and that you carry these lessons with you lifelong the way my teachers enabled me to.

Now I hear his voice, not just in those hadiths but in every hadith or ayah I read. Everything has a connection with him for it is in his madrasa that I studied everything. It is in his madrasa, and through him, that Allah allowed the doors of knowledge to be opened for me, and for that I am forever indebted.

Hospitality is another word that defines him. Anyone that has visited him can testify to his boundless hospitality. This is something he practiced with both words and actions. It's something he strived to build in his students and family too. I remember him going off on a tangent once in Bukhari. In a hadith in Kitab al-Nikah the topic of guests came. He talked about how guests are a blessing, how we should always honor guests, how we should never complain about guests. "Many people complain about the work involved in hosting. They complain when they have family that constantly visits. Guests are a blessing from Allah. When you go to your homes remember this. Don't ever complain about guests."

I've always remembered this when someone is coming over.

My friend tells me that after his passing, as people crowded his house for ta'ziah for his family, something that of course was more challenging and complicated with covid, his wife mentioned, "He would always tell us to honor guests. So what can I possibly do now?"

Thankfully others intervened and told people that it is best to show sympathy by genuinely doing what's best for grieving family, which in these circumstances means not visiting so as not to afflict them with more worries and difficulties.

His hospitality meant that the doors of madrasa were always open to those who needed help. Beyond hospitality, he took care of those around him. Orphans, widows, converts to Islam. The madrasa was a shelter for so many who didn't have a shelter. There would always be some girls sheltering there. He'd take care of their expenses and education and even get them married when they were ready if needed.

Once, he was hosting the wedding of a convert girl. This girl had spent quite some time at madrasa so everyone was excited. Obviously it wasn't logistically possible to invite all of the students to the wedding but my classmates decided to try to get an invite anyway. When he came in to teach Bukhari the day before the wedding, they broached the subject of the upcoming event, knowing he would be excited to talk about it. He took the bait and started talking about the wedding plans and arrangements. "But we aren't invited," they said.

"You aren't? Why didn't anyone invite you? I am inviting you all. You all can come as my special guests." He replied.

His wife wasn't too pleased with us, "You have no shame in asking for an invitation, in taking advantage of the softheartedness of your teacher like that?"

But that's how he was. Always rushing to take care of everyone around him. Solving problems, fixing things.

No problem was too small for him to address personally. He told us once about a former student who lives abroad who called him and asked if he could add photos of the girls' campus to the website. The website had photos of the boys campus but not the girls. She missed the madrasa and wanted to see it again. He had photos taken and put up right away.

That's the type of person he was. People would go to him for anything big or small and he'd oblige.

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I remember when his own father passed away, he came a day later to teach his class. We asked about his father and he broke into tears. He shared the story of his father, the last moments, highlighting how his father was continuously reciting Qur'an till the end.

It is people like him who bring barakah to institutions, he said. Madrasas run through spirituality, not through money. Make dua this institution continues to run. He was worried about fulfilling his responsibilities after his father passed. He cited that with the passing of each scholar, degeneration follows.

Now we've lost another link to the previous generation.

He was a simple man. Whatever he did he did for the institution, for all madaris, for the deen. No personal benefit or enjoyment. No fun vacations. No days off. Just working for the people. He didn't care what people thought. It wasn't glamorous work. Being under the spotlight meant there would always be people out there to criticize. But that didn't bother him. He just went out of his way to serve the people, to do things that nobody else was doing, that many didn't even see the point of doing.

Mentioning him won't be complete without also mentioning his family, especially his wife. If he was the father figure of all students, his wife was/is the mother, especially of the girls. They were a team. She'd be with him on many of his travels. She was also the head in charge of the girls school, his representative at madrasa. Always looking out for the girls affairs, always ready to address issues that needed care, always extending hospitality. She took care of the girls as if they were her own daughters, especially those who had no family nearby. Because of her active involvement with the madrasa, he also was always an integral part of it, always accessible, always concerned about the girls. The madrasa was a family effort, and his entire family served it day in and day out.

May Allah always protect her and allow her to continue.

Although one the most defining thing about him is his service to others, which he spent his life doing, it never came in the way of worshipping Allah. He was a man who was always reciting the Qur'an, following the footsteps of his own father. A man who never left tahajjud. A man who always finished a recitation of the Qur'an in taraweeh independently every year.

A man who always prayed in congregation. Even on his last day, though he was feeling unwell the whole day, he prayed at the masjid. He came home from Maghrib, rested for a while, felt more unwell. They took him to the hospital and he passed away on the way, before Isha.

Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi rajioon.

It is examples of my teachers like him and others which have given me energy to carry on teaching even when life is busy and balancing everything is difficult. Remembering their advices, their constant urging that teaching is a right that knowledge upon us, has always reminded me that it is not optional, that it is not a favor we do upon anyone, but rather an honor and trust Allah has given us.

What I feel now is a renewed purpose to continue this work and to internalize all the lessons from his own life.

I learn from him that the road less traveled may be difficult to take, but it is a necessary road to take to cause lasting good, that sometimes the most benefit is in doing things that others are not doing.

I learn from him what it means to be the people about whom Allah says, “La yakhafun fillahi lawmata laim.” They do not fear the blame of the blamers. I learn that it is only Allah who we should work to please, because it is to Allah we will return, and as long as we are sincere and on the right path, there is no need to worry about what others say.

I learn from him to think beyond my own benefit, but rather for the benefit of those around me, and to think beyond the needs of the present, but rather the needs of the future generations as well.

I learn from him that you should dream big and work hard but that small efforts should never be underestimated. It is small efforts that grow into big things, that help fulfill those big dreams. No dream is too big if Allah’s help is with us, no action too small for Allah’s reward.

I learn from him what it means to be a hafidh of the Qur'an, that it's more than just memorizing the words, but rather it means to fill one's life with the Qur'an, to regularly and always recite it, and to understand and implement it.

I learn from him that no matter how busy a person may be, it is always possible to have time for the Qur'an if a person wills it. The ability to recite the Qur'an is an issue of devotion and priorities, not an issue of the availability of time.

I learn from him that our character and our dealings with people speak much louder than any other words, that a student is more likely to remember and feel inspired by a kind word than a long lecture.

I learn from him what it means to be hospitable and generous with ones time and that this is the first step of dawah and teaching. I learn what it means to serve others for the sake of Allah, that by lowering ourselves in front of others for the sake of Allah we are only raised in rank by Allah.

But most of all I learn that knowledge increases and multiplies as it is shared. I learn that the benefit of knowledge is not limited to the teacher and student but rather it flows to the entire community. I see from his example how just one person of knowledge can have the ability to change the life of hundreds of thousands, if Allah so wills it. And I learn that the legacy of sacred knowledge is the most valuable legacy to leave.

May Allah accept his efforts, overlook his shortcomings, raise him to the highest levels of Jannah, and increase his sadaqah jariyah.