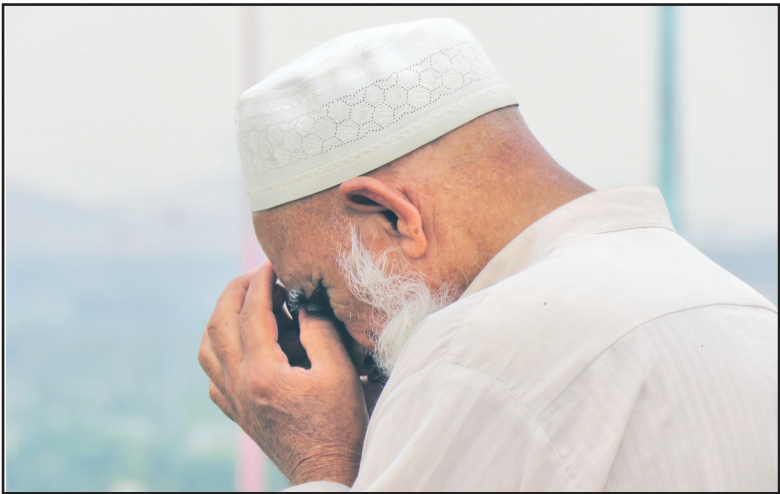


The circle of life



With him was his seventy-five-year-old father, relatively frail but in high spirits, writes DR SALIM PARKER.



When on Arafah, we cannot thank our Creator enough for the honour and blessings He has bestowed upon us. Part of our duah is for our family, especially our parents, whether alive or departed. To be on Arafah with our parents is an honour and a blessing for which we will not be able to thank our Creator enough. Photo SALIM PARKER

I LOOKED at the photo. It was a black and white one, looking faded as you would expect a fifty-year-old, frequently exposed to the elements polaroid to be. Yet, its texture was pristine, a tribute to the loving nature with which it had been handled and looked after.

It was being shown to me by a fifty-three-year-old gentleman who had come to consult me for a medical problem. With him was his seventy-five-year-old father, relatively frail but in high spirits. The father could fend for himself most of the time but the effects of age had led him to require assistance when he had to walk more than a short distance.

We were in Makkah, about two weeks before Hajj was due to commence, and I tried to merge what I was seeing in the photo-

graph with the two gentlemen who were seated in front of me. All I could do was smile and be amazed, and consider how privileged and blessed I was to be a part of it.

I could see a young man in ihraam standing on Arafah with Jabal Rahmah in the background. On his right shoulder was perched a young, cute, smiling and glowing, about three-year-old boy in the most basic of makeshift linen ihraams.

The whites looked slightly yellowish due to the age of the photograph, and the background of the uniform masses of pilgrims was a complex mixture of different hues of grey. 'That is my Dad standing on Arafah, holding me on his shoulder,' he said.

His father smiled. 'I used to hold his hand as a toddler as he



There are very few of us who have the honour of standing on Arafah with our parents. To have the honour of being there a second time with one or both of our parents is a blessing for which we will be eternally grateful. Photo SALIM PARKER

had difficulty walking, initially. I taught him to walk but he still struggled as a three-year-old so I carried him for long distances, even on Arafah. And it was my greatest moment, me and my son at the time of Wuqoof standing proud and yet humbled during the greatest journey of our lives,' the father said.

'I do not recall anything about that moment,' the son said. 'Yet I know everything about it. My late mother used to fondly reminisce about how she, my father and myself embarked on that journey five decades ago.'

'We travelled by boat for a few weeks and I was quite sick for a while. They just made duah, firmly believing that our Creator was with us with every hurdle, every wave that our journey needed to face. Alhamdulillah, I overcame the illness and reached Arafah with them.'

'My mother constantly recounted the journey to me since my childhood and she vividly described virtually every step that I took. It was her wish that we should undertake this journey together again one day. I started saving in my twenties already to retrace the journey, to bring smiles to their hearts again and for me to honour them like they honoured me,' he continued.

But it was not to be. First, there were unforeseen financial calamities. His business, which had been flourishing, was fleeced by an unscrupulous partner and it took him a while to get back on his feet. He started saving again for the trip but then a more serious challenge emerged in the form of illness.

His mother, so much his and his father's strength and inspiration, fell ill. A long and protracted course of treatment followed. All the time, his mother reminded him of their wonderful trip and that he should still undertake it one day. 'I may not be there for it but you

must go as it is still obligatory on you,' she reminded him.

He pledged that he would indeed take his parents very soon. However Allah, the Ultimate Planner, decreed otherwise. His mother's condition deteriorated and soon she was too sick to travel. Allah finally recalled her but not before she made her son promise that he would perform his Hajj as soon as possible.

He could probably have gone earlier had he travelled alone. However, he had always decided to take his parents along and he had saved enough after a few years to take his wife and father along. 'Don't worry if I don't stand with you on Arafah, my heart and duahs are always with you,' he recalled his mother telling him.

I looked at this father and son and visualised the circle of life. His father, so strong and standing like the spirited Muslim warrior fifty years ago while caring for his young son, was now frail, and to some extent dependent on the very same person.

In true Islamic spirit and duty, the son had responded with affection and love. This circle of life, which commenced more than half a century ago, was slowly and inexorably completing its revolution. For me, the most significant part was that its apex and epicentre was going to be on Arafah.

'I have one wish,' the son said. 'I want to put my father on my shoulder when I stand on Arafah.'

His father burst out laughing. 'What if I fall? What if you are not strong enough to lift me never mind hold me onto your shoulder? You might mess up my ihraam!' he mocked.

'I want to have a picture taken of that event and then put the two pictures taken fifty years apart next to each other for my children and the future generations to see,' the son said.

'Allah will see and know when

we are on Arafah,' the father replied.

I tended to their medical issues and then reassured them of their health. The son was diabetic and had other medical problems. 'Will we be fine for Arafah?' the father asked me.

'We all will be on Arafah, Insha Allah,' I replied. 'Whether you will be able to put your father on your shoulder, Allah will decide about,' I smiled at the son.

I did not see them during the five days of Hajj. I looked for them and saw many incidents that reminded me of them. Because of the restrictions on the number of pilgrims, children were few and far between but there were a few fathers raising their sons above them on Arafah.

One young one, already elevated way above his father, reached his hands high up, as if aspiring to a world way, way ahead. There were others who were pushing their elders in wheelchairs, feeding those unable to lift a spoon, and providing shade, solace and soul to their older dependents.

I met them two days after Hajj. 'So did you manage to lift your Dad onto your shoulder?' I asked the son.

He smiled. 'No, I did not,' he replied. 'But we did manage something much, much more rewarding. My father cannot stand for long periods. But on Arafah, I could support him with my hands to stand for a very long time and together we could make duah for as long as possible. At one stage we both knew that my mother was with us.'

He had tears in his eyes. So did I. His circle of completing the shoulder elevation had not been achieved. The much bigger circle of fulfilling family dreams, wishes and aspirations had been completed for them by the Ultimate Decider of our fate.