

Hajj Stories

Looking Far Ahead

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Dr Salim Parker

He was partially sighted. Yet his vision for Hajj was crystal clear and focused. I was walking alongside him during a fitness session preparing pilgrims for the rigours of Hajj. It was the first of about a three month regime. As we walked he related his life story and my amazement grew with every moment. He and his wife planned and saved for a number of years and they had done intensive research about the journey. They wanted to be prepared for any possible hurdle. Their financial hurdle has been overcome and they wanted to be physically prepared for the real confrontations of extreme heat, vehicle breakdowns and the stretches, especially during the five days of Hajj, where walking is inevitable. Our exercise programme has been designed to enable the pilgrims to face these demands. 'Which Hajj operator are you going to travel with?' I asked. 'Oh, we have not been accredited yet, so we cannot choose one,' he replied nonchalantly.

I tried to explain to him that the exercise programme was only for those who were going that year. 'Oh, we are going this year! I am confident of that. Allah has invited us and we are

definitely going,' he countered. I then noticed that he was sweating and walked unsteadily. 'Are you feeling sick?' I asked. He sat down. I felt his pulse and noticed that it was racing. His wife came to us and explained that he was a diabetic who uses insulin. She indicated that he indeed took his insulin as prescribed. 'What did he eat?' I asked as I hastily looked for my glucose machine. He had all the signs and symptoms of someone whose glucose levels were low. We were already giving him some sweets and carbonated cooldrinks. 'Nothing,' he replied. 'I was in such a hurry and excited to get here that I forgot to eat,' he added.

We were close to a shop and hurried to get him some high carbohydrate substances and within ten minutes he was feeling much better. By this time the rest of the group were advised to move along as I would stay with him. 'I am supercharged and ready to resume the walk!' he exclaimed. Of course I was having none of it. I arranged for my daughter who was in the immediate vicinity to fetch us with her car and she duly transported us back to the running club which was our

base. He apologised profusely for firstly slowing down the group initially and secondly for causing me to be separated from the rest. I reassured him that we factor in such possibilities and that the rest of the walkers were in the very capable hands of exceptionally experienced, alert and dedicated volunteer trainers. He was very well informed about his medical condition and it soon transpired that this episode was an anomaly brought about by his excitement. His wife arrived an hour later with the rest of the group and they left for their residence. At that time it did not dawn on me that they were not in fact accredited.

The training group was oversubscribed and we were worried that we would not be able to do justice to all attendees. All the trainers unselfishly volunteered their time after much discussion and deliberation, it was decided that only accredited pilgrims for the upcoming Hajj would be permitted to continue the exercise programme. This was communicated to all those who enrolled and this included our diabetic gentleman and his wife. At the start of the next training session we again announced that

exercise sage advice delivered by an Islamic scholar. I noticed a couple entering the hall, a bit late. It was them.

Just before the group set off for the walk, I approached them. As I explained the new exclusion rules to them with a rather sinking feeling, he just smiled. 'Don't worry Doc, we have been accredited. I told you we would be,' he said, as he proudly tried showing me the confirmatory sms he received on his

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mobile phone. I noticed that he struggled to operate his phone. He was eloquent and clearly tech savvy and I initially could not understand why he was struggling. I was initially standing on his left side but as he was holding his phone in his right hand, I moved to the right of him. He for some reason, after finding the message, directed the phone to his left. I was worried that his sugar levels were dropping again, but he showed no signs of it. It only dawned on me then that he was amazingly competent in masking his visual impairment.

more than fifty years, such as gently standing behind him and nudging him to either side of an obstruction in his walking path. 'I made sure that I ate before coming so that I won't trouble you again,' he said. I assured him that our participants are never a trouble to us. He apologised for being late and explained that the public transport that they use was unreliable. One of our fellow walkers overheard this and within minutes a

lift for them was organised. 'It seems that whatever we plan is falling into place, Allah is truly blessing us,' he said.

The following week the whole world was informed that Umrah was cancelled due to a novel coronavirus that seemed to have permeated its presence to every corner of the globe. 'It will not affect our Hajj, insha-Allah we will answer the call to stand on Arafat,' he told me. Barely a few weeks later South Africa was in lockdown and our walking programme had to be suspended. The entire globe was in a panic stricken state and inter-

national travel was non-existent. Every passing day brought along a more gloomy outlook. 'Hajj is still a few months away,' he smiled optimistically.

'Let's bathe in the sunshine,' he said as I was watching the dark clouds insidiously approaching from the distant horizon. I welcomed his approach. He was seeing possibilities, whilst others saw impediments. Perhaps we should all engage his way of looking ahead. Whilst some were planning to postpone their Hajj because the road ahead was poorly illuminated, he was focus-



The Haram may be empty but our hearts overflow with longing to be there.
(Artist: Nabila Abuljadayel)

regrettably we could only accommodate pilgrims who would definitely embark on the Holy Journey the same year. Not a single person left or approached the organisers and we assumed that the message had reached everyone. The group was attentively listening to some pre-

'I may not be able to see properly, but I am not blind,' he suddenly said. We started walking and I started learning. Learning how to direct and advise those who cannot see. There are common sense measures that seemed to have evaded me for

ing all rays, no matter how dim, to brighten the path. Let light shine onto all.

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