

HAJJ STORIES

ACTS THAT BOTHER

MARCH 2024

'There is something you are not telling me,' I said. We were sitting in my consulting room in Cape Town where I have just administered her Hajj vaccines. She was my patient for more than twenty years and I knew her and her family quite well. I confirmed each of her two pregnancies and have been the only doctor that her children have ever seen. She and her husband were very aware of my medical involvement during the Hajj season and would allude to it either before or after my journeys annually whenever they came to see me or if they accompanied their children. I was party to the time when they applied for Hajj accreditation and was, about eight years later, one of the first people they informed when they received the news that they will be going. They came for their travel consultations and her husband indicated that he had to leave as he had an urgent meeting to attend.

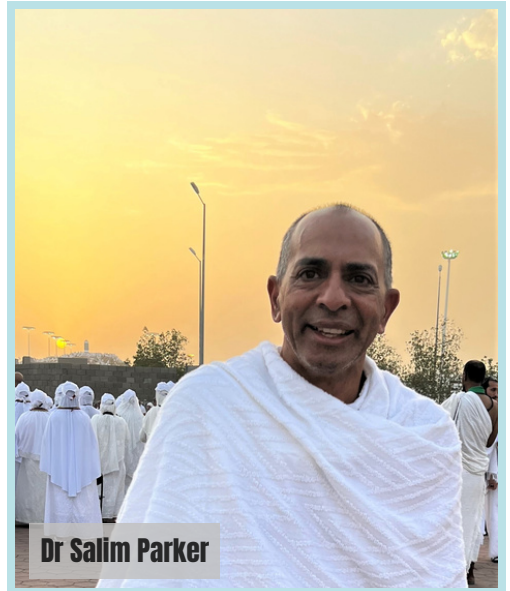
She had a traumatic upbringing and suffered from depression. She responded well to medication, but I always had the sense that she was holding back. I advised her to see a psychologist, but she indicated that she would feel uncomfortable speaking to anyone other than me. I told her that I was flattered by her confidence in me, but it felt that I had reached the ceiling of my ability to assist her. She tried to assure me that she was fine, that she was just worried about her children when she and her husband would be away for six weeks, and that she was nervous about the journey that they were going to undertake. She tried to sound confident and in control but deep down she was not well. 'Doc, you know me well, and you know that I have survived a serious car accident and a broken family as a teenager. I'll be fine,' she said.

They left a few weeks before I did for Saudi Arabia. Upon my arrival in Makkah they were of the first people to come greet me and even wanted to accompany me on my Umrah, which I declined as it is the one time that I have where I have uninterrupted time to be close to our Creator. I left the hotel after the last evening prayers. No mobile phone, no sick patients waiting, and no time limit. Just me in Ihram, the Kab'aa, walking between Safa and Marwaa, drinking ZamZam and being myself. Time stands still during the minor pilgrimage, and though the hours fly, every second is cherished. On my way back, about six hours later at about two in the morning, I first cut my hair as the last ritual and entered the hotel foyer. She was sitting there waiting for me, her husband fast asleep on an adjacent sofa.

'Sometimes it takes a little bit of courage to tackle our demons'

It was evident that she had been crying. 'I never asked for forgiveness from a university friend,' she said. 'I need to talk to Doc. I know it is late and you must be tired. Can I be your first patient tomorrow?' she virtually pleaded. The group had already put up a notice that my first session would be after breakfast which was about five hours away. I needed a few hours' sleep and then still set up the clinic before I would be ready for formal consultations. Her husband woke up and mumbled something about them being very sorry for delaying me getting some sleep. It appeared that they needed it more than me. I suggested that we meet for breakfast immediately after the morning prayers and they would thereafter assist me with unpacking all my medicines and equipment. The less than four hours sleep I had was of the best in my life.

I shared a table at breakfast after Fajr with them. 'I spread a false rumour about my best friend whilst at university. There was a boy who was seriously interested in her, and everyone expected them to get married. I do not know why I did it; I was not even remotely interested in this boy, but I lied to him about her. I told him that she had a relationship with someone else and he simply distanced himself from her. They both went their separate ways. Our relationship was never the same after that. Perhaps it was my guilt, I don't know. After she qualified, she moved to another city, and we never were in contact again. I thought it would never bother me but the last few months it has been occupying my mind,' she told me. I need to ask forgiveness before I go to Arafat,' she added. 'Call her right now,' I responded. 'Even if you do not get hold of her at least you would have made an earnest attempt,' I added.



Dr Salim Parker

Social media has its drawbacks but one of the undeniable benefits has been its ability to connect people. The friend's details were traced within twenty minutes. 'Call her,' I reiterated, even though she was extremely hesitant. Word of my arrival had been announced in my hajj group and I was informed that there were a number of sick people waiting for me. 'You do not have to assist me, you have a more urgent matter to attend to,' I told her and went off to my consulting rooms. The day was hectic and I did not see or hear from her for the rest of the day. That evening, after the last prayers, I was sitting on the roof of the Haram when my phone rang. She enquired about my location and after about ten minutes she and her husband joined me. The Haram was full but there is always space for a few more souls.

She just could not contain herself. 'I called her. It took me a while to indicate to her that I wanted to stand on Arafat forgiven by all humans I offended, and that I could then solely concentrate on beseeching my Creator to complete His mercy. She listened attentively and was silent for a while. Then she burst out crying. Crying and thanking me. Thanking me for separating her from a man who did not have the courage or respect to at least ask her about the rumour. Thanking me for the breakup, as she met a man later who respects, honours and loves her. She thanked me for how her life blossomed into her being a successful professional, a very happy mother and wife, and someone at peace with her Creator. She said that she was on Hajj a few years ago and truly stood at the time of Wuqoof with not an inch of resentment in her heart towards anyone,' she told me.

'She also spoke of being sick during Hajj and being treated by a certain doctor,' she added wickedly. I watched her face. Decades of internalized anguish was released within a few minutes. Sometimes it takes a little bit of courage to tackle our demons. At times it takes the most powerful of calls for us to start our journey to solace. Hajj is the ultimate journey, and the greatest magnet attracting us on our journey for forgiveness.



We want to descend from Arafat with all our transgressions forgiven.