Suhba Papers V:
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Ihsanic Gatherings: Implementing Spiritual Perfection in Community Gatherings.

In recent years the organizers and leaders of various learning institutions, spiritual organizations, and conferences have discovered an unintended byproduct of their efforts, namely that their gatherings and institutions have been transformed into social clubs. For example, some learning intensives, whose original intent was to spread authentic Islamic teachings became the perfect place to find a spouse, and thus became primarily matrimonial services and secondarily educational services for some. Naturally, those most frustrated with this phenomenon were those who had devoted their lives to learning and teaching, or organizing events around an important theme.

However, this phenomenon speaks to something of extreme importance to the American Muslim community, namely, the need for spiritually uplifting community in which people can balance their individual needs and perspectives with the dynamics of a diverse community. As mentioned in previous installments of the Suhba Papers, good company and finding spiritual comfort zones are paramount for many in finding the balance in their spiritual and social lives.

I believe, as mentioned in previous installments, that rather than trying to shape every mosque or community according to one's checklist of rights and wrongs, dos and don'ts, we need to have approaches to the phenomena of diversity within our community. I believe this can be found in balancing one's involvement in one's comfort zones (which may be necessary to create) with one's role in the greater community.

After spending over a year in upstate New York, I have observed one particular community deal with this quite well. Utica New York has been a gateway of sorts for refugee communities from all around the world. A few years ago, a number of Burmese families who had been living in refugee camps in Thailand for over a decade moved to Utica to start new lives. They are Christians, Buddhists, and Muslims, and have repopulated many of the houses of worship in the area. Many of the Burmese Muslims attend one of the local mosques in the area.

Some of the Burmese Muslims are Sufis, affiliated with various Tariqas (Sufi orders). Others are not. Some of the Sufis gather regularly throughout the month for gatherings of *dhikr* (remembrance of Allah). However, these same people join together with the rest of the Burmese Muslim community for celebrations and activities, and also join in with the larger Muslim community for daily, weekly, and holiday worship.

I believe the members of this particular Burmese Sufi community are a good model for the rest of the Muslim community in America as they balance their own comfort zones—

those related to Sufism, those related to Burmese culture, etc.—with the greater community. They don't try to convert the local mosque into their private clubhouse, driving away those who have been there for years (as some groups unfortunately have done in various mosques throughout the country), and they make special efforts to contribute to the greater community. In their interactions with the greater community, they strive to be respectful, to connect, to honor the efforts of those who have been so helpful to them and the rest of the community.

Once I witnessed a brother from the mosque and one of the brothers from the recently arrived Burmese Sufi community in a disagreement over a matter about which the scholars have disagreed for centuries. The local brother stated his opinion, and the Burmese brother with whom he was differing then basically said "we have studied the Qur'an and the hadith too, it's ok if we differ." Indeed, many of the Burmese brothers in this community have devoted years to studying in the Thai refugee camps, and prior to that in their home village in Burma. I was worried about this exchange at first, remembering similar exchanges early in my conversion experience in Boston, back in the late 1990s. But a year later, rather than the two groups splitting, the same local brother (whose opinion probably hasn't changed on that particular matter) was urging leaders of the Burmese community to become more involved in the leadership and management of the mosque. This is a testimony to respectfully agreeing to disagree and giving each other the space to create their own comfort zones and come together in communal space around the areas in which they agree.

It is a simple model. Create your spiritual and social comfort zones where you can do your thing without causing division and separation in the community, and bend over backwards to honor, respect, and connect with your fellow Muslims in the greater community. Make husnul khuluq (perfected and beautified character) the priority in your community interactions, and serve the greater community in any and every way you can. Respect the inherent differences in our communities, and learn the etiquette of disagreement as it relates to commanding the right and forbidding the wrong.

As mentioned in the previous installment of the Suhba Papers, I believe we should make the perfection of our character the central focus of our community interactions and activities, as perfection of character is a means to every good, be it spiritual upliftment, serving those in need, or political activism. When we make this our focus, and follow the simple model above, we are well on our way to creating win-win interactions within our diverse communities. And Allah alone gives success.

This series of articles has taken on a life of its own, but remains true to the original intention which was to reflect on the challenges of creating comfort zones wherein one finds authentic, accepting, and balanced practice, while still honoring the Qur'anic command for community unity.

There are roughly five steps towards the goal of forming connected, unified communities which I have sought to explore in these articles.

1. The first is to determine how we envision a sustainable model of pious living in our lives.
2. The second step is to look at how those around us contribute to that, negatively or positively.
3. The third step is to learn how to deal with those who, in varying degrees, fail to be 'those who pull us closer to Allah', namely to know the etiquette of disagreement with regard to commanding the right and forbidding the wrong.
4. The fourth step, tied to and in fact inseparable from step three is to look at what sort of company we are; are we contributing positively or negatively to community unity despite our intentions?
5. The fifth step is practical application at the community level. This final installment has sought to give a simple model, which when coupled with the advice in previous installments, supports the main goal of all this typing, namely the need for community emphasis on good character as a means of achieving community unity within our individual differences.