Suhba Papers IV:

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Good Character: A Qur'anic Imperative and Community Necessity.

"I was only sent to perfect good character"[1]

Good Character is the means to every good end. Whatever your goals are in life, good character is one of the indispensible provisions on your journey. If you are an activist, it attracts people to your cause. If you are a teacher, it creates a comfortable learning environment. If you are a doctor, it sets your patients at ease. If you are a bus driver, it makes your passengers' rides more enjoyable. When you combine Good Character with any good cause, it only enhances your possibilities for success.

Where communities fail, where group efforts disintegrate, where communication falls apart, one often finds the abandonment of the Qur'anic and Sunnaic injunctions to Good Character at the heart of the breakdown. This is not to say that there are not issues for which one should take a stand, or bad practices from which one should distance oneself, but rather, it is to say that so often division comes not from taking a principled stand or the avoidance of bad practices, but rather from bad manners, a robust and proud ego, and a lack of knowledge of the etiquette of commanding the right and forbidding the wrong in light of the legitimate scholarly disagreements within the Muslim community.

Keeping with the theme of the previous [*Suhba Papers*] installments, that of balancing the need for community unity with the need for finding one's spiritual comfort zones, the next installment follows up on the necessary components of making our communities spiritually uplifting despite our differences. Quite simply, these articles are trying to express that if we as a community knew how to properly command the good and forbid the bad, how to properly deal with disagreements over what is considered good or bad, how to be good company by emphasizing good character (husnul khuluq), and how to find our comfort zones without leaving or causing others to leave the greater community, the tragedy of community disintegration and disunity would largely disappear.

As I mentioned in a previous installment, in addition to looking at how the company one keeps affects their spiritual health, we also need to look at the company we are. The most recent installment of the Suhba Papers (Conflict Resolution: The Etiquette of Disagreement and Finding One's Comfort Zone) dealt with one of the tools for finding unity within our differences, namely, knowledge of why there are differences, and some guidelines for dealing with them, specifically with regard to commanding the good and forbidding the bad. Having discussed the importance of knowing the etiquette of disagreement, we now move on to a related topic, that of having Good Character. This next installment of the Suhba Papers is a suggestion, a dream perhaps, but based on a reality that many of us have probably experienced in varying degrees.

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[1] Attributed to the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) and narrated in the Muwatta' of Imam Malik and the Musnad of Imam Ahmad.

A New Jama'ah

I am proposing a new Jama'ah (collective/organization/brotherhood etc.) It's called the Good Character Jama'ah, anyone can join just by having or striving to attain good character. There are no fees, there are no newsletters, currently there is no Facebook group, and joining does not negate one's commitments to other organizations or orders.

When people want to get together to work for political and social causes, they often join or participate in the efforts of a Jama'ah established for those ends. When a person wants to achieve certain spiritual states, study and apply certain techniques for purifying their souls, and take on various spiritual practices, such as the recitation of various litanies, they often join a tariqa (spiritual order). When a person wants to surround themselves with likeminded people from their cultural tradition, they may join a cultural organization.

But when was the last time you heard of a movement, order, or organization that made getting along despite our differences their main goal? Some people think that educational activities (lectures, classes, books) should be the main goal that will achieve the renewal and improvement of the Muslim community. Others think that, while this form of education is important, being involved in political and social causes is the main goal that will fix all else. Others think that traveling, gathering together, and sharing and learning from each other is the most important means of raising the Muslim community from its current low state. Still others think that focusing on economics is the priority, and that all else will fall in line if Muslims return to proper Islamic financial practices. And some others think that meeting for dhikr (remembrance of Allah), spiritual lessons (mudhakara/tarbiya), and embarking on an organized and well-charted spiritual journey under the guidance of a Shaykh is the main priority.

Now, I have had experience, in varying degrees, with different groups in varying manifestations of the abovementioned methodologies. And in my personal opinion, from my experience, some of these approaches may be superior to others, while others may just be a matter of personal preference and what works for each individual. But I have also seen that, instead of being just comfort zones or the right thing for a given individual, many of the movements associated with the abovementioned focuses have had a negative, though unintended, byproduct, namely, community disunity.

What is often lacking in many—but not all—manifestations of these approaches is a collective focus on Good Character. If you are obsessed with politics, become obsessed with good character as a means of achieving your political goals. Did not the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) tell Muadh ibn Jabal to go to the people with Good Character when he went off to Yemen to teach Islam?[2] Did not the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) lay down strict etiquettes in all

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[2] See Malik's Muwatta, chapter on Good Character: Yahya related to me from Malik that Muadh ibn Jabal said, "The last advice the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, gave me when I put my foot in the stirrup was that he said, 'Make your character good for the people, Muadh ibn Jabal!' "

political arenas, from dealing with violent enemies to visiting heads of state? If you are obsessed with education and pedagogy, become obsessed with Good Character to help facilitate your learning and teaching. Are there not long lists of the proper etiquette of the teacher and the student in the works of our great scholars? If you are obsessed with traveling and gathering for da'wa, is not Good Character from among the best invitations to Islam? If you are obsessed with bringing your finances into line with the Shari'a, become obsessed with bringing your character in line with the Shari'a as well. And what is the point of all your spiritual litanies, claiming adherence to an ancient and respected method of spiritual purification, if your bad character chases people away from the gatherings of remembrance and learning?

The gist of this installment is quite simple. If you find yourself inclined towards a particular focus, be it education, da'wa, activism, or devotion, make Good Character a similar priority in your life. If you spend thousands of hours working to feed the poor, or organize classes for students of sacred knowledge, or traveling from mosque to mosque for education and good company, or working for the spread of Islamic financial instruments, or joining groups for dhikr and study, then put your focus equally on improving your character.

I believe, from experience, that bad character is a cause for failure in our communities and individual endeavors. I also believe, from experience, that Good Character is a means for success, a means for uniting Muslims, a means for earning the good pleasure of Allah. It may be mentioned in a khutba from time to time, taught in a class, discussed in group gathering, and so on, but how often does the need for Good Character rise in our consciousness to the level of priority that other things may? When I think of every good experience within the Muslim community that I have had as a Muslim, it has been in good company. When I think of every bad experience I have had, with any Jama'ah, order, organization, or mosque it has been rooted in the bad character of the people I was interacting with or my own (or both). We may need to seek our spiritual comfort zones amongst specific groups. We may need to seek our spiritual guidance and education amongst those of a specific perspective. But we can make our gatherings and interactions with the greater community of Muslims and society at large better by collectively focusing on improving our character and knowing how to address differences in opinion and practice.

Action Steps:

"…Allah does not change the condition of a people unless they change themselves…" (Qur'an 13:11)
The following are some general steps that we can take in our lives to move towards perfecting our character and improving our communities.
Study the Sirah: Learn about the character of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him), the best example of Good Character, through his interaction with family, friends, visitors, allies, and foes.

Make a list: Make a list of the bad character traits (lying, impatience, backbiting, anger for the sake of one's ego, boasting, etc.) Then make a list of good character traits (patience, truthfulness, having a good opinion of others, generosity, etc.)

Make a plan: Set realistic and attainable goals for ridding yourself of bad character traits that you listed and adorning yourself with good character traits that you listed. Your plan could be simple: "Today, I'll have a good opinion of everyone I meet, while remaining reasonably cautious so I don't end up buying a bridge in Brooklyn or a $3 Rolex". Or it could be complex: "For the next 40 days, I will avoid lying, backbiting, bragging, and all other sins of the tongue, and pay $5 to charity for each slip." In general, it is always best to consult scholars on how to go about perfecting one's character, to avoid making major errors that could end up having the opposite effect.

Find a buddy: Allah describes the believers who are not in loss with the passage of time as those who do good deed, and enjoin each other to truth and patience. (See Surat al-'Asr in the Qur'an). Find a buddy who will try make the same plan and efforts, and mutually remind and support each other in your efforts.

The next, and final installment in this series, is "Ihsanic Gatherings: Implementing Spiritual Perfection in Community Gatherings". In this final article, I will discuss possible ways in which we can implement Good Character and other aspects of spiritual perfection (Ihsan) into our community gatherings. If we collectively focus on Good Character and properly dealing with our differences, perhaps our communities and projects will flourish, united in Good Character if not in every belief and practice.