

Suhba Papers II: Community Unity and the Importance of Suhba (the company you keep).

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*In the Name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful
And hold fast, all of you together, to the rope of Allah, and do not separate. (Qur'an
3:103)*

I used to hang out at a laundromat in Cambridge, Massachusetts, near the café that I would frequent while studying and writing papers for college. The laundromat was owned by a couple of Moroccan brothers who had a place I could stop, drop, and pray during my study breaks. Sometimes I would drop in to study some Arabic with one of the owners as well. Their friends also would drop in to hang out sometimes; they would put some chairs in the back alley behind the building, and just hang out and chat. All in all it was an unlikely spot to find such a nice group.

I still remember the words of one of the guys who hung out there, who I had met a few years earlier at a local mosque which did not sufficiently fit the spiritual needs of either of us. “If you don’t have a jamma’ah (community/congregation), you start asking yourself ‘Why am I Muslim?’”.

Now, firm belief (Iman) rests on certainty in Allah’s existence and lordship, coupled with solid belief in the prophecy of the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him). The presence or absence of a community neither negates nor affirms these eternal truths. However, the quality of one’s faith can no doubt be affected by one’s surroundings, and therefore finding the right community that uplifts one’s faith is of the utmost importance. However, avoiding sectarianism and division within the larger community must also be considered. Finding one’s comfort zone in a community and avoiding divisiveness is a delicate balance.

In the first installment of this series entitled the Suhba papers, I mentioned that what motivates me to write is recognition of the need for unity within the American Muslim community and witnessing the tragedy of community disintegration in recent years. The main focus of these articles is the challenge posed by the need for an authentic and proper Islamic environment balanced with the need for a feeling of acceptance despite our own human failings. While on the one hand the disagreements regarding the definitions of ‘authentic’ and ‘proper’ are at the root of disunity, another often overlooked aspect is the way in which we deal with disagreement.

In this second installment of the Suhba Papers ([link to first article](#)), we will begin with a discussion of balancing the religious and social need for community unity and the importance of keeping (and being) spiritually uplifting company in light of differing perspectives and degrees of adherence.

We are told in the Qur'an: "And hold fast, all of you together, to the rope of Allah, and do not separate."¹ In a hadith narrated in Sunan al-Tirmidhi we are told that "the Hand of Allah is with the jama'ah (community)". These primary texts point us to the importance of community unity, staying together with the right people despite our differences.

Upon recognition of the need for unity, the first step in forming connected, unified communities is to determine how we envision a sustainable model of pious living in our lives. How do we envision ourselves as Muslims individually, within the family, at work or at school, in the Muslim community, and as part of American society.

Once we have a general idea of how we envision ourselves as Muslims, the next step is to look at how those around us contribute to that vision, negatively or positively. Having established the importance of community in Islam, we cannot just blindly run into any group of people and consider that we have fulfilled this necessity. Rather, community has considerations, including the consideration of how we affect and are affected by our community.

The Company You Keep

The scholars of Islam have noticed the importance of the company you keep, through experience and through studying the Qur'an and Sunnah. One scholar captured the Islamic teachings regarding community when he said:

Life has no sweetness, save the company of the *devout*²
It is they who are the true Sultans, nobles and princes.

His statement should call our attention to taking a good look at the people with whom we spend our time. Are they people who are better than us, who can pull us up, inspire us to be better Muslims and members of humanity? Or do they pull us down, and pressure us to leave the commands of Allah and fall into actions and states that deaden our hearts and lead us away from the pleasure and reward of Allah?

There are two categories of people in our lives, those that pull us towards Allah, and those that do not. Those that pull us towards Allah might merely inspire us passively by their state of being, or actively by inviting us to situations where we can better ourselves, such as study groups or social activist activities. They might offer the reminder we need to avoid what harms us spiritually, or they might just be a solid friend who lends an ear and offers solid advice. Those that do not pull us towards Allah could be of several types, merely neutral, taking us nowhere bad, but nowhere better either. Or they might be those who pull us down, inviting us to

¹ Qur'an 3:103.

² Moustafa Styer's translation, except I have replaced his translation the technical term *fuqara* as poor, with the word 'devout', for the sake of clarity in the context of this article. The term 'poor' does not denote actual financial destitution, rather, it means one who has abandoned attachments to worldly things and become rich in their attachment to Allah. This state cannot be achieved except through sincere devotion. See Moustafa Styer "Reflections of the Beloved".

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that which is spiritually harmful. They might also be those who could benefit from our presence and influence. It is not always clear who is who though, and the best course of action is not always apparent. It is obvious that we should increase our interaction with those who pull us towards Allah, but as for those who do not, the course of action is more varied.

At one point in my life, I realized that I had a group of friends who, as close as we were, were just not in a position to make the changes I had wanted to make in my life. I had been the sober guy when the rest were drunk, I had been the guy who paid the full price when the others switched the price tags. I had been in it but not of it, and had offered my sincere counsel, but eventually the need for a better life took over, and I decided to busy myself with righteous actions (*'amal al-salihah*), social activism, education, etc.

One of the best ways to deal with bad company that isn't ready to take a step towards the higher path of serving Allah, is to just busy yourself with good deeds and activities, until the bad company just grows bored with you or joins you. Rarely does anyone benefit from a person who criticizes his or her friends and then just withdraws from them.

Everyone's situation is different, and how to deal with the variety of people who are currently not pulling us closer to Allah varies considerably. Scholars should be consulted regarding how to properly balance the rights owed to friends and family with the rights owed to Allah, but in short, our goal is to be drawing nearer to Allah individually and as a community, and the company we keep impacts how successful we are in achieving this goal.

At another point in my life, I realized that there was a particular experience of Islam that was lacking in my life. While, as recent convert, there were many people inviting me to join their mosques, organizations, movements, and orders, I was struggling to find an environment that felt comfortable to me. Many of these groups were very beneficial to me on certain levels; I was learning about levels of generosity and selfless service that I had never experienced before. I was making good friends, and learning a good deal, but there were still answers and experiences that I was seeking which were not found amongst these various groups. While these people were not necessarily pulling me away from Allah, they were not pulling me towards Him in a manner that I felt I required.

So rather than quitting their company altogether, I began trying to produce the environments and experiences I was seeking, and then invited those who I had been hanging out with to join me. Through organizing events, classes, and even potluck gatherings with others who were looking for a similar balance, over several years, I began to find the comfort zone I was looking for. But it soon became clear that there were risks to this as well. The last thing I wanted to do was create yet another clique, yet soon some of the same things that I objected to in other organizations and movements were found present within the same circles in which I was now hanging out. I also discovered that, while I had found my proper mix of authentic practice and acceptance of human failings, this mix just didn't work for others.

I have learned through experience that the company that I kept had a profound effect on my spiritual health, but I have also discovered that beyond finding our comfort zones for our own

spiritual growth, we also need to look at how the natural human propensity to gather with likeminded people should be balanced with the Qur'anic imperative to stay united.

The Company You Are:

In addition to looking at the company we keep, we should also look at the company we are. When we are hanging out with those that we think draw us closer to Allah, are we having the same effect on them, or are we pulling them down? When we are required to interact with those who do not pull us closer to Allah, do we inspire them to change, or do we chase them away from the community?

One of the challenges to creating a welcoming and inclusive community, is the obligation on us to command the right and forbid the wrong. One thing that often chases one group away from the Mosque and the Muslim community in general is the criticism that comes from others who may be either more strict or lenient in their observance of the religion, or who may hold a different opinion about the permissibility or impermissibility of a given matter.

I have called our attention to looking at how the company we keep can affect us negatively or positively in our spiritual lives, and have suggested one proactive way of dealing with company that does not bring us closer to Allah (i.e. busying ourselves with positive actions to the extent that bad company grows bored with us, or joins us.) However, since there are differing degrees of practice, and since there are scholarly disagreements over the legal rulings³ for various actions, we need to be especially aware of how our seeking an environment that is conducive to our religious perspectives and spiritual goals affects those around us. Therefore, the next step in creating unified and spiritually uplifting communities for all is to learn how to deal with those who, in varying degrees, fail to be 'those who pull us closer to Allah'.

The next installment in the Suhba Papers will discuss the *adab* or etiquette of disagreement, which is tied to the etiquette of commanding the good and forbidding the evil. How we properly attempt to create environments that are, to our minds, properly Islamic, must be understood, if we are to avoid division and achieve the goal of community unity.

³ The legal rulings of Islamic law are generally that a thing is considered obligatory, recommended, neutral, disliked, or prohibited.