

Finding Meaning in a Meaningless World: An Existential Focus of Islamic Psychology

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Abstract. Existentialism is a school of philosophy which seeks to incorporate larger elements of transcendence, meaning, morality, spirituality and the uniqueness of being a human in psychological modalities (Wong, 2012). Similarly, an Islamic worldview affirms the unique role of humans as active agents (*khalifahs*) which construct meaning through collaboration with Allah. Currently there is an increasing rise of materialism, loneliness, narcissism, meaninglessness and other risk factors for mental health illness which can be operationalized as a need for transcendent connection on part of the modern human. An existential-Islamic model is synthesized using research from collective works in Liberation and Indigenous psychology to utilize answers to questions of suffering, evil, death, purposelessness, nihilism, loneliness and despair. An internalized spiritual approach with focus on communal healing and active engagement with self, others, the Divine and nature are posited as a viable solution to increase meaning in a seemingly random and chaotic world. The current chapter delves into coping mechanisms of religion including internal-external orientations to faith, systematic efforts in communal healing, tools to increase meaning during CO-VID (or other times of tragedy), death anxiety and transcendence, reformulating loneliness as meaningful aloneness (solitude) and instantiating purpose in life with cognitive, emotional, behavioral, cultural and spiritual adaptations.

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When we think about finding spiritual fulfillment; often our mind will wander to the picturesque. Surrounded by lush trees, in an enchanted temple, our bodies still and the environment being completely subservient to the feelings of bliss we hope to elicit. We pray, meditate and through this peaceful and calm ordeal, cultivate harmonious growth and introspection, find that inner being within us yearning to come out. We can dream about these fantasies but for most this is not the reality as we live it. Although we hope for moments of peace; often our day-to-day lives are stuck in the mundane, bland or downright headache inducing trial that is called life. How can we seek to stem this imbalance? The path to spirituality being ‘hindered’ by life’s obstacles; trauma, pain, loss, inconveniences and other ‘barriers’ to our spiritual path? What does the Islamic narrative have to say on tragedy, suffering and other forces of evil that dissuade many from even believing in a transcendent reality? Secondly, how does modern psychology approach suffering and trauma? What can be done from a practical standpoint to instantiate meaning in an often meaningless world?

Dealing with meaninglessness

All the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and the whole temple of man’s achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins”
- Bertrand Russell

Nihilism is conceptualized broadly as a philosophical school of thought founded by Frederick Nietzsche (1844-1900); although there are controversies and debates as to the fundamental assumptions that underlie a ‘nihilistic’ worldview. Psychologically, it is best understood as a mental state or complex affective condition in which one fails to find meaning in life (Riccardi, 2018). This cognitive-affective position naturally extends towards how we approach questions of morality and existence; for example, nihilists cite our *need* (in that we often believe there is a larger mechanism of order to patterns of ‘randomness’ in our lives and environments) to believe in objectively morality as an evolutionary mechanism which promotes social cohesion with little reason in of itself to adopt *any* one value or obligation over another (Krellenstein, 2017). This worldview is in stark contrast to an Islamic (and other religious) understanding of human behavior that supports the idea of moral realism in which transcendent, objective moral truths exist and operate as delineated from a higher authority. Psychologically, this has very important ramifications as individuals are motivated to maintain meaningful patterns and ideas of themselves and the world (Van Tongeren & Green, 2010). The Meaning Maintenance Model (MMM; Heine et al., 2006) highlights self-esteem, closure and certainty, affiliation and symbolic immortality as four concrete domains of searching for and preserving meaning. Although critics may disregard religion as a by-gone relic of our forefathers; the psychic reality of *needing* to combat existential insecurity and meaningless necessitates an overarching philosophical worldview (which religion and spirituality have shown to provide). As Woessner states “it is a cosmic perspective that renders human existence not only bearable but also profoundly meaningful; the universe is you, they seem to say, just as you, yourself, are the universe” (2017).

Salvadar Maddi states that nihilism is so common in our modern society that it isn’t even recognized as a problem anymore; our materialistic worldviews even fetishize such an approach

as ‘enlightened’ or ‘sophisticated’ (p. 451). Nietzsche’s proclamation that ‘God is dead’ was not a mark of approval as nihilists often laud it but rather a testimonial that western society in all of its technological modernity and innovation would lose the Judeo-Christian substrate that informed its members of who they were, what values to hold onto, the morality to guide their lives and the meaning/direction our lives ought to take (Roberts, 2007). What is less known is the full statement delivered by Nietzsche, “God is dead, but considering the state the species man is in, there will perhaps be caves, for ages yet, in which His shadow will be shown.” Man must submit; whether it is to his pleasures, his intellect, his wealth, his prestige, his state, his country, or his ego. The question is to what or whom does one submit to? For the Muslim, the certitude of God as an entity isn’t solely a theological or philosophical position, but an active reciprocal relationship in which meaning is found through active participation. As Ali al-Ridha states, “Religion is only submission. Faith is a level higher than submission. Piety is a level higher than faith, and certitude is a level higher than piety”. When asked ‘what are the signs of certitude?’, the Imam replied “Reliance on God, submitting to Him, being content with divine destiny and entrusting one’s affairs to God” (Mishkat ul-Anwar, Tabrasi, 2001).

Although the religious person is better guarded against meaninglessness; unconscious and implicit biases still linger in the psyche which may prevent an individual from taking meaningful action; questions such as why innocent people suffer or why evil is parceled out in such randomness are often the quiet whisperings of doubt that seep into the hearts and minds of religious and non-religious persons everywhere. These existential wonderments are rooted in-part by cognitive worldviews we have inherited from ancestral brains which often opt for short-cuts (schemas) at the behest of the ‘larger picture.’ In a famous study by Paul Slovic, it is documented that individuals have a preference for helping a single identified victim and will routinely ignore the plight of a group of victims (Slovik, 2007). Psychologically we are crippled by pseudoinefficacy, a phenomena in which we only make decisions if we perceive they will be effective. Slovic (2007) bridges these individual findings with broader implications; for example, military interventions that haphazardly produce unintended consequences can be attributed to pseudoinefficacy in which plausible lifesaving actions and strategic alternatives to war are seen as ‘indirect’, ‘late’ and ‘inadequate.’ Children who are suffering around the world that can be directly aided are subject to what our mood is at said time, our preconceived notions and judgmental biases on whether anything we do can even make a difference. More so, the systematic patterns which support war are projections of our own psychological ineptitude to look at ‘bigger picture’ alternatives. Hence, it is of little surprise we often vote-in politicians who seem confident at face-value but lack competence in *meaningfully* dealing with the consequences of their actions. As Abraham Lincoln so eloquently stated, “we are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory will swell when again touched, as surely they will be, by the *better angels of our nature*” (citation). What are these ‘better angels of our nature’ and how can they be summoned to willfully and meaningfully transform us into active agents of good in the face of evil?

But first; what are the consequences of living a meaningless existence? Learned helplessness has been found in both animal and human subjects; unsolvable problems and circumstances that we cannot control produce a variety of deficits including depression (Seligman, 1975). From a nihilist perspective, that is the end of the chapter. A world of meaninglessness that produces meaningless behaviors, a negative feedback loop of infinite chaos. But learned helplessness depends on large part of the causal attributions we associate with

uncontrollable events as they occur. The cycle is broke when we ask ourselves “why it happened?” This is called *attributional reformulation* and it has been found that explanatory styles to random negative events that are stable (“it will last forever”), global (“everything I did is in waste now”) and internal (“it’s all my fault” or “why did God choose me?”) are associated with learned helplessness that is more persistent, evident in a variety of environments/situations and with passive problem solving approaches (depression, anxiety, social isolation, avoidance) (Peterson, 2010). Conversely, attributional reformulation to positive events that are internal, stable and global are significantly negatively correlated with depression (i.e., depressed individuals blame bad things that happen on themselves and good things that happen on other things like luck or good fortune) (Curry & Craighead, 1990). This signifies that the first step towards finding meaning is enhancing one’s self-awareness and cognitive flexibility. A question such as why evil occurs may produce learned helplessness and existential doubt if there isn’t a sufficient level of natural curiosity to answer such a question in the first place. But as the Qur’an reminds us, “Indeed, your Lord is in observation. As for the man, when his Lord tries him and is generous to him, he says ‘my Lord has honored me.’ But when He tries him and restricts his provision, he says, ‘my Lord has humiliated me’. No! But you do not honor the orphan, and you do encourage one another to feed the poor, and you consume inheritance, devouring it altogether, and you love wealth with immense love.” (89: 14-20). Belief and action come hand-in-hand; through self-awareness and self-knowledge, we are better able to intrinsically motivate ourselves to help those in need and personally combat evil instead of mire in misery, doubt and pessimism.

The current upward trajectories of purposelessness, apathy, materialism, loneliness, social isolation, narcissism and other mental health symptomatology are by-products of a society that is suffering from a loss of transcendence where ‘spiritual problems ail the modern man’. As Jung (p. 200) makes it clear in answering these fundamental questions of metaphysical truth and meaning; we have to look to the ‘past’, to the seemingly antiquated worldviews which the modern intellectual only regards as historical but which signify to religious persons the Indigenous wisdom that govern our entire approach to existence. “Science does not go beyond the frontier of human life which surrounds the commonplace and matter-of-fact, the merely average and normal. They afford, after all, no answer to the question of spiritual suffering and its innermost meaning” (Jung, p. 225). These perturbations; from an existentialist perspective, are surface level manifestations of much deeper concerns (that at times exist at the subconscious or unconscious) concerning the spirit. As the 19th century Jesuit priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin so profoundly remarks, “*we are not human beings having a spiritual experience, we are spiritual beings have a human experience.*” What can do we to awaken the soul, which so often lies dormant?

What is Existentialism?

“Today’s psychotherapist can have at bottom hardly any other goal than to create a space within ourselves in which God’s voice can be heard” – Herman Hesse

Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) is often cited as the earliest philosopher to incorporate existential thought into his work; his conversion to Christianity via a relational approach to God came as a result of the failure of academics, thinkers and philosophers of his day to account for the full account of human experiences (Bretherton, 2012). Other famous existentialist

philosophers include Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), both of whom were highly critical of academic philosophers; Kierkegaard compared their intellectual musings to a man who builds magnificent palaces yet occupies a shack, as their worldviews did not translate to the suffering of the common man (Bretherton, 2012). As Woessner (2011) elaborates on the axiomatic core of existential philosophy in actively pursuing and constructing meaning; “philosophy is no anemic intellectual matter, it is a fundamental exploration of the very limits of our existential capabilities” (p. 138).

Rollo May (1909 – 1994) was amongst the first psychologists to incorporate existentialism into his practice; he conceptualized the core symptomology of ‘mental illness’ (through his work *the Meaning of Anxiety*, 1950) as by-products of our own meta-awareness of our mortality and sense of freedom (which can cripple us as we are *aware* we can do so much, yet live in the same monotonous and routine patterns), as well as Martin Heidegger (1889 – 1976) whose concept of *Dasein* or ‘being-there’ (elaborated in his seminal work *Being and Time*, 1927) expanded the task of a psychotherapist from merely seeking to reduce symptoms towards using the heightened self-awareness by the suffering individual (who is able to identify their symptoms and that they need help) as a conduit towards growth and finding their own meaning (Bretherton, 2012). This concept of *Dasein* also encompasses ‘transience’ in that we as humans ask ourselves ‘why is there something rather than nothing?’ because of *thrownness* or the fact that we are seemingly ‘thrown’ into existence. Although this can produce nihilistic attitudes and behaviors such as apathy, passiveness or self-destructiveness; Heidegger relayed that through ‘being-there’ (in the world and with ourselves), we each bear an innate responsibility to find authentic existence (Hornsby, 2012). Our *Daesin* (similar to Aristotle’s concept of the *Daimon* as spoke about in Chapter XXX) searches out amongst the world through interactions with the Earth (pursuing tasks, activities, careers), the sky (nature), divinities (God, immortality, transcendence) and other mortals (relationships) (called the “fourfold” by Heidegger; Woessner, 2011) to find authenticity amidst inauthenticity. Obstacles are not seen as erroneous mishaps through an existentialist framework, but rather givens of life which are pivotal in helping uncover authenticity. For example, Heidegger believed that angst and anxiety were primary instruments in recognizing authenticity as they made us “inescapably aware of, rendered naked to, the pressures of the ontological.” (Hornsby, 2012, p. 4).

Certain existentialists such as Kierkegaard and Heidegger affirmed the need for transcendence (either through a personal God or belief in something larger than oneself) but this idea was not shared amongst all existentialists; Jean-Paul Satre (1905 – 1980) rejected the notion of God as he believed we are not born with an innate nature (rather we are born *tabula rasa* or with a blank slate) but rather construct our own nature actively throughout our lives. In other words, existence precedes essence (i.e., we cannot have purity or God-consciousness as our natural states since those concepts are imbued into us later on). Therefore, the task of a psychotherapist according to Satre is to enable the patient to understand their own ‘radical freedom’ and “make of himself what he will” (Bretherton, 2012, p. 423). Satre even argued against a biological basis for emotions, as he believed we consciously or subconsciously altered emotions as a way to perceive the world. For example; the neurotic in adopting a pessimistic worldview did not suffer from neurological ailments or environmental deficits (lack of parental warmth), but actively constructed a threatening world through fear, paranoia, lack of risk and adventure, etc.

This concept is in stark contrast to the Islamic position as laid out by Ibn Sina's 'Floating Man Argument' in which self-awareness or our souls *intrinsically* exist apart from material reality (Alwishah, 2013). In *Al-Ta'liqat*, he expressed the idea through 3 steps:

- (a) "When the self exists, self-awareness exists with it.
- (b) "For the existence of the self is the awareness of itself, and these concepts are both inextricable."
- (c) "Our awareness of our selves is itself our existence." (Ibn-Sina, Bayt al-Hikma, 2002).

Although philosophically, there may be some discrepancies between how Islam seeks to answer fundamental questions of existence and what certain existentialists believe; psychologically, an existential framework allows for a broader utilization of ideals such as purpose, meaning, growth and spiritual-transactivation that align closer with religious worldviews (Wong, 2012).

Jamalzadeh and Tavassoli (2011) in relating Islamic concepts with western existentialism find that both affirm the unique phenomenon that it is to be a human. Islamically, humans are blessed with a divine soul and a God-seeking nature (*fitra*) which mean they have a special place in the universe as 'God's envoys' (*khalifahs*); they are also given a certain degree of free-will in that they can determine what to do with these pre-ordained gifts and are under no compulsion to believe in the Eternal. But the only clear path towards achieving perfection is instilling God-consciousness (*taqwa*) through submission, piety, knowledge, good deeds and virtue. Existentially, suffering and trauma are seen as positive approaches towards adversarial growth as well as unavoidable givens of life (Bretherton, 2012). The freedom to *choose* a response allows for openness of existence as it is solely up to us in how we relate to life, how we define ourselves, and how we understand our world. Both worldviews affirm the untapped human potential that comes as a consequence of intimately dealing with the deeper questions of existence and not shying away from topics such as death, mortality, transcendence and meaning. Both ideologies posit that these anxiety-producing issues are fundamental and the actual in-roads to reexamining who we are and what we believe which shapes our values and increases our sense of meaning. As Al-Ghazali states, "if Allah wants good for a believer, then he makes him aware of his deficiencies" (citation).

Now that we have established the problem (a nihilistic worldview and lack of existential-spiritual foundation to actively seek and construct meaning), and the consequences (current rise of materialism, loneliness, narcissism, lack of meaning, depression, etc.), we must broaden how current psychology can utilize a broader existentialist framework to meaningfully answer these fundamental questions of existence, as well as what tools our Indigenous wisdom can provide through hadiths, Qur'an,

Coping mechanisms of religion

"We are all members of the Godhead-that great God humanity", said one. Another: "I have a strong life drive now My whole life is reborn.... I have broken out of old pathways I can now sense other people's existence." Another: "I feel I love God now and wish to do something for others."

Would it surprise some that these statements are derived from individuals who survived would-be-suicides after leaping off the Golden Gate Bridge? (Yalom, 1980, p. 34) There is considerable research correlating Near Death Experiences (NDEs) with enhanced spirituality, clearer self-identity, greater concern for others, increased marital/interpersonal changes, reduction of materialistic concerns and pursuit of knowledge (Marnat & Summers 1998). A cross-comparison study between 47 individuals who had experienced an NDE (defined as a deep sense of calm, out-of-body experience, a life review, 'going down a tunnel where one meets others such as a deceased relative'; Groth-Marnat & Schumaker, 1989) and 27 individuals who experienced similar life-threatening incidents without an NDE. Results found that the former had greater self-reported patience, tolerance, understanding, reduction in death anxiety, strengthened belief in afterlife, increased self-worth, and greater appreciation of nature (Marnat & Summers, 1998). It is as St. Augustine said, "only in the face of death, is man's true self born."

The first tool we must instantiate into our spiritual kits is what coping mechanism we use to reformulate suffering. For example; negative religious coping; such as religious struggle, conflicts or doubts of God or stress induced by Islam, were found to be linked consistently and strongly with negative outcomes such as anger, alcohol use and depressed mood (Abu-Raiya, Pargament, Mahoney & Stein, 2008) in an international sample of 340 Muslims. Conversely, Muslims who adopted positive religious coping had more positive well-being (purpose in life, satisfaction in life, etc.) and lower reports of negative well-being (alcohol use and physical exercise).

Pargament (1997) defines religious coping as using religion to deal with life experiences; this involves a range of spiritual and religious-based emotional, cognitive, and interpersonal appraisals and responses. Lazarus (1993) who coined the term 'religious coping' relates that when a person's external or internal demands are exceeded beyond capacity; they may utilize cognitive or behavioral efforts and resources to manage those demands. One may turn to religion for meaning, guidance and support (positive religious coping) or involve themselves in a spiritual struggle such as doubt in God (Pargament, Smith, Koenig & Perez, 1998). One possible appraisal, as to how Muslims may deal with stressful events is understanding 'misfortunes' (including death) as God's way of testing one's patience and washing one's sins (Husain, 1998). Therefore, Muslims are encouraged to cope with stressful environmental situations and stimuli with fortitude, self-restraint and patience (Khan, Sultana & Watson, 2009).

There has been a substantial amount of research conducted on Muslim populations to better understand religious coping and well-being; Aflakseir and Coleman (2009) found that Iranian veterans from the Iran-Iraq war used positive religious coping methods which was positively tied to positive mental health status and negatively tied to PTSD symptoms. Studies have suggested that religious coping may contribute more fully to the mental health of individuals under stress than health condition, social support, perceived control and cognitive restructuring (Fry, 2000; Pargament, Koenig & Perez, 2000; McCullough et al, 2000).

In addition; Eapen and Reyesz (2003) found that 100% of children in the United Arab Emirates who had been diagnosed with serious forms of cancer reported relying on their Islamic beliefs to cope. Scholte et al. (2004) found that 98% of Afghanis in the Nangarhar province, half of whom who had experienced more than eight traumatic events within the past 10 years, reported using Allah or God as their main source of support 'when feeling sad, worried, or tense.' Hetsyani (2006) found that routine involvement in religious activities such as reading the Qur'an fostered emotional resiliency in 50 Muslim children who had survived the Indonesian tsunami of 2004. Errihani et al. (2008) surveyed 1,600 Muslim cancer patients in Morocco; 49%

described as ‘practicing believers’ and 51% as ‘non-practicing believers’. A significant portion of non-practicing believers reported feelings of fear and divine punishment and even sought to increase religious practices in an extreme manner such as fasting for prolonged periods. Practicing believers, on the other hand, had greater acceptance of their disease and reported feeling ‘pride’ in being selected by God for this test. Errihani et al. (2008) concluded “religion plays an important role in Muslim patients, whether practicing or not, in their adjustment to the psychological impact of the disease.” (p. 100).

Going forward; more collective efforts must be made to increase psychological and spiritual places of support that work in a synergistic manner for western Muslim populations. One example is that of Khalil Center...

What does all this mean practically? We know there is a mental health crisis worldwide and these trends are only rising with each generation. In seeking to ameliorate mental health discrepancies which exist at a societal level; we *need* a public health approach which helps equip individuals with a transcendent dimension to life. Although our spiritual traditions have known that connection to something larger than oneself is vital to existence, rates of agnosticism and atheism are far exceeding rates of organized religion in western nations (citation). Although current psychological research has finally ‘caught up’ to our ancient wisdoms in understanding the intrinsic worth of transcendent belief; something has been lost along the way. A generation of individuals cannot ameliorate what contemporary education has taught them on empirical tools to ascertain objective truth and metaphysical tools which more deeply concretize subjective *psychological* truth. We are put in a dichotomous battle between the two, when at their core, they seek to answer two fundamentally different questions. As Carl Jung states, “Scientific education is based in the main on statistical truths and abstract knowledge and therefore imparts an unrealistic, rational picture of the world, in which the individual, as a merely marginal phenomenon, plays no role. The individual, however, as an irrational datum, is the true and authentic carrier of reality, the concrete man as opposed to the unreal ideal or normal man to whom the scientific statements refer.” (1958, p. 7). Therefore, it is in the best interest of our society to embed transcendent concepts as viable tools to increase meaning and sacred connectedness. A ‘research to practice’ gap must be bridged in utilizing these evidenced-based concepts from a theoretical to a practical level to alleviate existential dread on part of the modern human and highlight that they are connected deeply to the ethereal tapestry of spirits, souls, rituals, myths and ideals which are current hallmarks of living in Indigenous societies, whether in the Islamic world or First Nations tribes.

The Role of Healing

Although religious coping is a viable tool to help enhance our psychological toolkits at an individual level, we must also recognize that we are embedded within a community and our psyches are inextricably tied with the members we share our societies with, as believers and non-believers. In the eloquent words of Imam Ali (A.S), “humans are either your brothers (or sisters) in faith, or your equals in humanity (citation)”. Healing is defined as ‘learning how one fits within the overall cosmology of the world’ with a shift towards collective approaches which endeavor to improve not only our own psychological well-being, but that of our society (Duran,

Firehammer, & Gonzalez, 2008, p. 293). Furthermore, there has been a call from POCI psychologists (People of Color and Indigenous Individuals) in moving away from ‘coping’ which focuses on ‘surviving’ with little emphasis on systematic change towards ‘healing’ which allows for critical consciousness, resistance against oppression and proactive tools centered on wellness at an individual level and justice at a communal level (French et al., 2020).

As Eduardo Duran (Native American psychologist, author of “Transforming the Soul Wound”) comments, “culture is part of the soul. As human beings; we are all part of a culture and not separate from it. When the soul or culture of some persons are oppressed, we are all oppressed and wounded in ways that require healing if we are to become liberated from such oppression” (p. 288). Liberation psychology is a school of thought which strongly calls for indigenous approaches to healing which move away from culturally biased Western helping theories towards in-person experiences (Duran et al., 2008). The school was founded by Ignacio Martin-Baro (1942-1989), a Jesuit and Salvadorian psychologist, who understood psychology as more than a need for personal happiness on part of an individual (framework of most psychological theories of the 1970s and 80s) but a holistic endeavor that would change the world through interconnectedness, justice, and systematic reform. Towards this, critics of western and mainstream psychology denote that most therapeutic models ‘help’ individuals by giving them tools to more comfortably conform and ‘fit-in’ with the status quo with little regard to the sociohistorical roots of oppression which prop up the society which contributes to their ills and miseries in the first place (Mohr 2019). As Rollo May states, “the opposite of courage is not cowardice, but conformity”.

The first step in healing our Muslim selves and our ummah is conscientization, a term shared from Latin American liberation processes, in which there is a radical shift in consciousness by tending to the soul wounds that communities share. Duran highlights the need for mental health professionals to delve into the sociohistorical context of clients mental health when working with Native American communities for better treatment which goes to the roots of psychological distress. Furthermore, Mohr (2019) in approaching Liberation psychology from an Islamic perspective uses *tawhid*, the unifying principle of the Oneness and uniqueness of God, to call for a shift from an individual focused understanding of one’s religious identity to a macrosystems-level focus which emphasizes human rights, inclusivity, environmental justice, and other culturally and socially-laden constructs which make-up the collective conscious of the Muslim community. At a professional level this means coming down from the ‘ivory tower’ (term used in academic settings in which social power is congregated by only a few administrators or researchers with minimal emphasis on community action and engagement) and integrating an emic-approach when working with Muslim clients which integrates individual, spiritual, social, political, ancestral and cultural factors. Many institutes such as the Khalil Center utilize this epistemological hybrid model in which ‘becoming enmeshed’ in the cultural worlds of patients with indigenous techniques are part of normal practice (Native and Islamic traditions both integrate stories such as hadiths and traditions from the Prophet, his companions and Ahlul-Bayt). At a patient level; treatment considerations can extend beyond the scope of precipitating and present factors. One example that is used by Duran in working with Native Americans is a genogram in which clients trace roots of trauma to suffering received by ancestors which shifts away from mental health illness as individual-focused symptomology towards patients understanding the socio-historical genesis of trauma (Duran et al., 2008).

I can write more on training considerations (i.e., how graduate programs can train students from an Indigenous approach).

Another tool we must embed in our conscious selves and souls in alleviating suffering, meaningless and despair is elevating our critical consciousness *away* from ourselves, so that what it means to be a human (and the despair that often comes with such a weighty question) is contextualized within a larger socio-historical context with mindful action and interconnectedness as ‘healing’ processes. Mohr (2019) uses the example of environmental justice highlighting the role that the Qur’an emphasizes as human beings as *khalifahs* (stewards) of the earth in which creation was bestowed to humanity with *ammanah* (trust). This necessitates active engagement with Mother Earth in which nurturing of our world is seen as an axiomatic factor which supports our well-being and flourishing, as well as our *ummahs*. More so, environmental degradation, destruction and greed are inextricably tied with mental health illness and drug addiction (citation). Research finds that individuals who are able to experience nature more fully (nature walks, cleaning the environment, visiting different parks/historical sites, introspecting on nature and life) have much better mental health and well-being (citation). Through a Liberation and Islamic psychology perspective; calls for systematic change in treating the environment humanely and proactively (as well as other issues of oppression and systematic change) are not neutral or indecisive issues by organizations which purport to stand for Islam, but ones which call for active collaboration, spearheading, innovation and organization. A hadith of the Holy Prophet which is used by Mohr (2019) as a framework for mental health and liberation psychology can also address existential concerns: “The Prophet (P.B.U.H) was asked ‘what is the best jihad?’, he responded, ‘a word of truth in front of a tyrannical ruler’” (p. 6). Although, positive coping strategies may decrease negative thinking patterns and make us better selves; this is not the end of the story. Coping may help us individually but healing is what will help us collectively. At a practical level, this means meaningful engagement with our community so that the trials and tribulations which are contextualized as individual-level ailments in the West are shared as collective responses with focus on healing as they are in collectivist and Indigenous societies. As the Qur’an states, “help one another in acts of piety and righteousness” (5: 2).

Special Focus: Healing amidst a Pandemic

As the current book is being written; CO-VID 19 is causing havoc at an individual, communal, country-wide and worldwide level. This event has caused an early rise (and expected to rise further) of mental health illness (citation). The pandemic was precipitated by an already deteriorating poor and middle-class crippled by financial, communal, and educational insecurities, and other macro-systems of oppression which supported malignant capitalist expenditures at the behest of basic human necessities. Further agitated by a ‘break down in our status quo’ (i.e., social isolation, highest rise of job insecurities since the Great Depression, etc); our psychological worldviews have not been able to contextualize suffering at such a broad and persistent level. Similar to rats in a cage which manifest symptoms of depression when there is minimal autonomy and mobility in their environment (a famous study found that rats that pushed a lever that they had previously associated with stopping minimal levels of shock but did not do so later; ‘gave up’ after a number of tries and laid motionless; Vollmayr & Henn (2011) write “if

a large proportion of the rats are helpless...they have no reason to perform the desired task and appear helpless”, p. 6). A situation that seemed unsurmountable has only pushed us closer to the existential edge of what it even means to be a human in modern society.

Autonomy and having the capability to move in one’s environment with active involvement are integral to our well-being. Even behavioral psychologists who use natural contingencies to understand human behavior know that ‘choice selection’ is a much more powerful intrinsic reinforcer than tangible rewards or social praise because it gives the person *options*. Amidst an emergency situation, that is something we sacrifice as we ‘move down’ our hierarchy of needs to focus on basic survival. But does sacrifice always mean ‘moving down’ from self-actualization? Although the hierarchy of needs is conceptualized as a pyramid in the West, we must remember that as Muslims we voluntarily give up basic necessities such as food and water (bottom rung of the pyramid) to strive for a higher purpose during Ramadan (top rung of the ladder). Perhaps instead of a pyramid, the journey of life is better symbolized as a circle. A recurring pattern of obstacles which at face-value seem like nuisances but are the actual pathways to spiritual growth.

In this current section, no ill intention is consciously made in minimalizing the real suffering and desperation that many are going through. Some of us have the privilege and comfort of the pandemic being only a minor contrivance, whereas for others it has been a literal life-and-death struggle. In both cases, we must see an opportunity; Heidegger remarks that it is only in the ‘breakdown of our usual machinery’ that we become aware of who we truly are and what anxieties were always lurking under the surface (Yalom, 1980, p. 171).

Anwar, Gani and Rahman (2020) in converging western definitions of spiritual intelligence with their Islamic counterparts include transcendence (*tanjih*), purpose of life (*maasid al-hayat*), patience (*sabr*) and forgiveness as integral facets which support an individual’s capability to meaningfully deal with questions of life. Whereas spirituality is heightened understanding of one’s spirit (or soul) which translates into better understanding of one’s spiritual attributes that lead to higher expressions of love, transparency and bliss, spiritual intelligence is the manifestation of this spirituality in our thoughts, approaches and behaviors. Anwar et al., (2020) remark that a ‘spiritually intelligent Muslim shows patience in all their activity in life’ citing a hadith from the Prophet (p.b.u.h) who narrates that God readily tests believers in times of difficulty. There is also a strong convergence between spiritual and emotional intelligence (Geula, 2004); the latter being the ability to monitor one’s own emotions and use them to guide one’s thinking and behaviors. Anwar et al., (2020) denote that this operationalization of EI highlights self-regulation. For a religiously observant person, this is the foundation of one’s spiritual development as one moves from a lower self concerned with base pleasures (*an nafs al-ammarah*) towards a tranquil self that is at peace with one’s firm faith in God and good actions (*nafs al mutma’innah*). Therefore, developing spiritual intelligence is a process in which there is an active dialogue between our spirits and minds and between our reasons and emotions. The individual observes their internal thoughts and feelings (mindfulness), cultivating empathy and increased awareness through spiritual practices and most importantly, embedding this into one’s intrapersonal and interpersonal environment.

These mechanisms of individual change serve as counterbalances to the conscious and unconscious biases which anchor the judgements, emotions and thoughts that placate and infest

our minds in a continual manner. Affective forecasting is a certain type of bias in which people vastly mispredict how positive or negative future events will impact their happiness and well-being. Wilson and Gilbert (2005) use the example of Aladdin to illustrate the cognitive fallacy behind this implicit bias; we believe ‘if only I found a genie that can make all my wishes come true I would be so much happier’. As you may or may not know from having watched the Disney film (or having read *Arabian Nights*); the moral of the story is that the very things we believe *ought* to happen to us are often the very things which are not in our best interests.

Malcolm Gladwell’s 2013 book *David & Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits & the Art of Battling Giants* uses the historical example of World War II to concretize how affective forecasting often clouds our judgement. In the fall of 1940 over a period of eight months, German bombers dropped tens of thousands of bombs killing almost 40,000 innocent civilians; psychiatric hospitals were built on the outskirts of London due to legitimate fear that this frenzy would lead to psychological trauma. In fact, the opposite occurred; as the German bombing persisted, British authorities observed a notable level of indifference on part of the English public. Children continued playing, shoppers went on bartering at the local markets and policemen continued directing traffic “in majestic boredom” (p. 130). Readers may be skeptical at this point; are we trying to minimize the real-life consequences of the pandemic and offering advice to defy social distancing mandates and ‘live life as usual’? Gladwell cites the work of psychiatrist J. T. MacCurdy who separates the effects of trauma into three groups; those who are directly impacted (killed), the ‘near misses’ or those close enough that a fear association is made (those whose loved ones have died during CO-VID or health workers would be at increased risk of trauma) and ‘remote misses’ or those that may be affected at a distant level but develop an indifferent (or to put it in a more positive manner *resilient*) attitude towards the trauma. The Germans believed that with all their warfare and continued onslaught; the spirit of the British would be broken and the war would turn in their favor. The exact opposite occurred and the rest we say is history. *

‘Desirable difficulty’ is a term that we must associate with continued spiritual growth. We *want* our lives to perfectly match the vision we fantasized for it at the beginning of the day, or week, or month or even decade. But where can growth come from if everything were that easy? Gladwell cites research collected that finds that a substantial percentage of famous biologists, poets, writers, U.S. presidents and British prime ministers lost at least one parent while they were young. He says “one of the reasons (that those from privileged upbringings fail to live up to early promises) is an excessive amount of psychological health... Gifted children and child prodigies seem most likely to emerge in highly supportive family conditions. In contrast, geniuses have a perverse tendency of growing up in more adverse conditions” (p. 142). We would never ever wish the death of a parent on anyone, but we must remember the words of our Prophet who cautioned the believer to reframe trials as opportunities to grow closer to God.

At an individual level, vast number of studies have found that we overestimate the intensity and duration of our emotional experiences to future events; Wilson and Gilbert (2015) cite individuals overestimating how unhappy they would be 2 months after a romantic relationship ended, college professors overestimating how unhappy they would be 5 years after being denied tenure and women overestimating how unhappy they would be after receiving unwanted results from a pregnancy as only a few examples. In the same way, the British authorities overestimated the persistent and enduring impact German bombing would have on the psychological health of

the public or how we repeatedly overestimate the effects of bad experiences as persistent and enduring cardinal traits on others (and ourselves). Yet, time and time again individuals prove they are able to bear the brunt of the damage and find meaningful growth as a result. Colombo et al., (2020) find that optimism and resilience are key moderators by which positively biased affective forecasting lead to successful management of stressors and higher levels of positive emotions. In a study of 91 college students, it was found that students holding positive estimations of the future had greater psychological well-being, more resilience and better optimism; “a positive attitude toward the future seems therefore to be an adaptive coping resource in highly stressful situations, allowing to maintain better levels of momentary affect despite the presence of intense stressors” (p. 8). Another key variable was flexibility; psychologically adept individuals are able to ‘pepper in’ doses of realistic pessimism when needed while retaining a mostly optimistic outlook.

In the face of a pandemic or any insurmountable large-scale traumatic event, we either rise up to the challenge or fall apart. There will be those who are directly impacted (hits), those who are close enough to trauma that may need a viable support network with embedded resources to help with their psychological health (near misses) and the rest of us; watching from our socially distant homes hoping that it all comes to an end (remote misses). The overwhelming majority who are not affected may not feel like they are directly involved in the crisis but it is the silent majority that is often the passive bystander that is needed to intervene for societal and spiritual growth. Or in the words of the existentialist Jean-Paul Satre ‘not to decide, is also to decide.’ We do not know what will come out at the other end of this pandemic (along with other major changes in our societal infrastructure including changes to policing, criminal justice and other forms of institutionalized prejudice that are under the microscope of the public), but if history has taught us anything, it is that we endure if we come together. Whether that is active involvement for change, political reform, or simply abiding by government mandates to wear a mask. Even such a simple conscientious gesture demonstrates for others we are members of the same community and extended members of the same human family.

*(side note: Sebastian Junger’s fascinating book *Tribes: on Homecoming & Belonging* also documents events in which psychological trauma was expected due to war, natural disaster or some other calamity and the exact opposite occurred. A famous example being New York City during 9/11 in which rates of individuals in psychiatric hospitals *decreased* significantly with New Yorkers coming together to support one another, a term known as ‘effervescence’ in which social cohesion forms a shared identity that can act as a social cure for the individual).

Locus of Control

“Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter; Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of man” (Ecclesiastes 12:13)

The biblical quote above illustrates the foundation that religious adherents (certainly of the Abrahamic faiths) seek to instantiate in themselves, so that any fortune or tragedy, is

recontextualized as part of a transcendent reality. Yet believers and nonbelievers alike are subjugated to the full force of chaos that comes with being a ‘tiny speck of dust in the universe’. We believe certain things *ought* to happen to us, but as life so painfully reminds us; nothing is guaranteed. I am reminded of Surah Alaq (chapter 96); “*No, but indeed, man transgresses because he sees himself self-sufficient.*”

We act as autonomous agents in our day-to-day lives, some more than others. There are many who cannot control the extraneous predilections and predicaments they are constrained in. Be it financial, family, societal, religious or communal. These environmental circumstances often paint the destiny of many of our world’s inhabitants; for example, we are either born into wealth, luxury, prestige or not. As the saying goes ‘into haves and have nots.’ Economic studies have found that *most* poor children grow into poor adults, especially if there is a pattern of instability in the family, lack of parental education, and minimal resources or opportunities of growth in the first 5 year of the child’s life (Field, 2010). But does this paint the full picture? When the Holy Bible remarks “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” (Luke 6:20), is God alluding to another methodology by which we can escape our ‘destinies’?

Kilbourne and Pickett (2008) in exploring the rise of materialism in Western industrial societies posits that a belief that an acquisition of material goods will lead to a fulfillment of life has increased steadily amongst capitalist populations. A primary focus on these concerns is called *external* locus of control (LOC). People with an external LOC believe that consequences such as rewards or punishments are due, in large part, to external forces such as luck, chance, fate or societal institutions such as the government (Fiori, 2006). This concept even extends towards how one approaches faith with religious individuals who are extrinsically oriented being primarily motivated to engage in their beliefs due to accumulation of benefits and gains. Although this may sound materialistic as well; these dimensions can be either Extrinsic-Social such as wanting to acquire social status or Extrinsic-Personal such as wanting to cultivate peace of mind (Wong & McDonald, 2004).

But there is another component which may present a more viable, spiritual alternative. That despite all the complexities that we find ourselves in from situations of complete despair, moments of utter humiliation, to small instants of fear and anxiety; we remain with a certain set of principles and level headedness which maintain our psychological health. An internal LOC is operationalized as a belief that our own behaviors and what we do determine the consequences we reap (Fiori, 2006). Religiously, believers who are intrinsically oriented are characterized by personal control (PS) where religious beliefs are codified into one’s values and used to exert more personal effort (Ryan & Francis, 2012). Internal LOC is associated with improved physical and psychological functioning and health behaviors (Ryan & Francis, 2012). Although religion encompasses both external and internal orientations, research has found that religious individuals with higher external LOC (quantified using the Belief in Personal Control Scale, Berrenberg, 1987) have less positive psychological health (Ryan & Francis, 2012). A higher degree of spiritual instability was also found for these individuals (belief that God controls most circumstances in their life which leads to a belief that one has reduced personal control over one’s environment and future).

“Did you think that We had created you in play (without any purpose) and that you would not be brought back to Us?” (Quran 23:115)

Another tool in our spiritual kit in dealing with tragedy, suffering and meaningless is a re-orientation of how we internalize our relationship with Allah. Psychologically, this has powerful implications as research has found that positive God images (understanding God as primarily Benevolent, accepting and loving) is related to enhanced self-esteem, whereas negative God images (understanding God as primarily punishing, powerful and Deistic) are related to anxiety (Wong & McDonald, 2004). As the 6th Imam Jafar Sadiq (a.s) states “religious knowledge guides us towards love for God” (Mishkat ul-Anwar, Tabrasi, 2001). Stulp et al., (2019) denotes that that the concept of God representations are a critical mediator in understanding the mechanism by which belief in monotheistic religion is linked to mental health. Compiling a meta-analysis (n = 112 studies with 29,963 participants); secure attachment patterns to God and positive God representations were positively associated with enhanced self-concept, positive relationship with others and enhanced well-being, whereas negative God representations were linked with neuroticism and distress. The strongest link being between positive God representations and well-being ($r = .30$); Stulp et al., (2019) indicates that “simple spirituality that seems to assume that just focusing on positive feelings and positive thinking will make the negative emotions go away...deep and lasting spiritual (and resulting personality) transformations are possible by focusing on disclosure and integration of negative emotions, directed at changes in the affective implicit and procedural structures of personality. This should be related to a focus on character change and the development of virtues... (p. 41)”. This reformulation of negative emotions as part of how we understand ‘living well’ has been alluded to elsewhere (refer to Chp. 2).

This indicates that although we may *want to* contextualize suffering and pain as part of a ‘test’ from God; the negative emotions, judgements and thoughts that are resulted from tragedy may paint our assumptions of the intrinsic nature of the Divine and cause further disequilibrium. As the 5th Imam Mohammad Al-Baqr illuminates “Whenever God the Almighty loves someone, He will throw him into trouble and storm him with calamities” (Mishkat ul-Anwar, Tabrasi, 2001). Although Internal-External locus of control (LOC) are dichotomized as tail ends of one spectrum; some researchers paint this as an oversimplification and focus on subdimensions that support *why* these representations occur in the first place (Ryan & Francis, 2012). Two plausible mechanisms are awareness of God and impression management; a study of 122 Christians found that heightened awareness of God (individuals who score high on this believe that their relationship with God will protect and guide them) was correlated with psychological health, with internal LOC mediating the relationship (Ryan & Francis, 2012). These individuals demonstrate higher optimism and confidence, in the face of challenges, as they integrate a collaborative style of religious coping (Pargament et al., 1988) where God is seen as a ‘mentor and advisor’. Impression management has also been correlated with improved health (Koenig, 1998); the construct is another important psychological tool as it assesses how individuals integrate spiritual behaviors into their daily practices. As it states in the Bible, “let us not live in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth” (1 John 3:18).

Another tool in offsetting the turmoil our hearts and spirits may feel as a consequence of suffering is translating our beliefs into meaningful practices. To further concretize why ‘meaningful practices’ are important to embed in our behavioral repertoires, we must first establish what meaning is? How do we achieve meaning? A simple analogy I frequently hear is that of *salaat*; “I pray but I’m never really there, thinking about work or school or something else”, a variation of this statement is one we’ve often heard (or told ourselves). The cart must come before the horse; we pray mechanically because there is little ‘meaning’ behind the ritual. As Ayatollah Sayyid Khamenei regards, “during the performance of daily prayers, to control

thoughts and achieve presence of heart and mind strictly for God instead of getting occupied in worldly affairs is very crucial... if a person is submerged into love and desires of this glittering world and its charm, naturally his heart would be fully entangled in nonsense affairs” (2016). Existentially, if we are turmoiled by questions of evil, suffering, or even minor annoyances which trigger our psyches into frenzy and disequilibrium; we may have primarily external LOC orientations and associate any event; positive, negative or neutral as ‘others’ faults (whether it was your bad parents, God or your horrible co-workers). As we have learned previously this is associated with a reduction in autonomy and produces behaviors such as learned helplessness in which we see ourselves as nothing more than puppets being controlled by larger macro-forces. Although this may be the case in certain instances such as natural disasters, ultimately it is entirely in our will as to how we deal with tragedy.

Dealing with death

All that is on Earth will perish. (Qur’an 55:26)

Everyone shall taste death. (Qur’an 3: 185)

What is about death which perturbs us so? Heidegger remarks that death is the “impossibility of further possibility” (p. 162) and so it seeks to remind us that our existence cannot be halted, paused or postponed. Death depression and anxiety relates to one’s fears about the prospect of death, the process of dying and inability to accept the inevitable (Harding et al., 2005). Death anxiety, depression and obsession (ruminating about one’s death) has been found as a salient predictive variable of PTSD. Thabet et al., (2013) found in 374 adults living in the West Bank (mean age – 40), that the average individual reported 13.80 traumatic events with 71% losing someone in their family, resulting in 66.6% of individuals exhibiting PTSD symptoms.

If from a solely psychological perspective, we are asking ourselves what is the antidote for death depression, purposelessness and a general apathetic standpoint on existence? Alvarado et al., (2000) found that in 200 individuals from the general population; strong religious conviction and belief in an afterlife were associated with less death anxiety, death depression and death distress (Multiple R - .25, .35 and .34). Death acceptance which is conceptualized as accepting death as a reality (neutral acceptance), accepting death as a passageway to an afterlife (approach-oriented acceptance) or accepting death as an escape from a painful existence (escape-oriented acceptance) has been studied as a viable solution to ameliorating death anxiety and depression, particularly amongst the elderly and sick (Harding et al., 2005). But what are the mechanisms by which ‘strong religious conviction’ can serve to counterbalance these aspects of existence?

Koenig, Parkerson and Meador (1997) identify three dimensions of religiosity; *organizational*, which focuses on commitment and involvement in religious services and

activities, *non-organizational*, which can be identified as time spent in private religious activities such as meditation or worship and *intrinsic religiosity* which is how people infuse religion into their daily lives and experiences. Hence, in the context of Islam; spirituality can be seen as a component of one's intrinsic religiosity. Although; many other dimensions of Islamic religiousness may impact one's sense of well-being, purpose or satisfaction such as positive religious coping (Abu-Raiya, Pargament & Mahoney, 2011).

Islam seeks to liberate its adherents from internal and external demands of the world through devout submission and orientation towards God (Ghorbanai et al., 2002). Hence, religious motivation is holistic and can span from self-development (personal) to one's standing within the community (social) to bringing well-being and peace to the entire world. Ghorbani et al. (2002) found that Iranian students who had more intrinsic motivations towards Islam had better psychological adjustment ("I read the Qur'an, so that I can better understand what God has to say to me"), in comparison to those who had extrinsic motivations which predicted maladjustment ("I read the Qur'an because it makes me feel good about myself"). Psychological symptoms such as anxiety, depression, obsessive-compulsion, psychoticism, amongst others were quantified using Hopkins Symptom Checklist (HSCL; Derogatis, Lipman, Rickels, Uhlenhuth, & Covi, 1974).

Religion, may contribute to something entirely unique once other variables have been accounted for, particularly in the context of adjustment to critical life events (Pargament, Magyar & Murray, 2005). Additionally; research varies in whether spirituality exists as a component of religiosity or as a separate dimension of individual differences (Magyar & Murray, 2005). Furthermore, the lack of research on Muslim-American religiosity and spirituality makes it difficult to extrapolate what dimensions of Islam may be most salient to Muslim-Americans. Terror management theory (TMT) posits one plausible mechanism by which religious/spiritual beliefs can serve to manage our anxiety related to death. Hope in an afterlife or in some eternal reality that is prescriptive and dependent on our morality in this world provides symbolic immortality where individuals become part of something greater than themselves (Vail et al., 2000). Skeptics may laugh at the basic notion of this assumption; believers have concocted a storybook afterlife to simply assuage basic anxieties related to death. Atheists and evolutionary psychologists point at common motifs related to 'transcending death' through one's moral deeds amongst the world's religions as a cognitive adaptation or construction meant to attribute meaning to the meaningless. Here I would refer to other great works such as Copan's *The Naturalness of Belief* (2019) or Barrett's *Born Believers: The Science of Children's Religious Belief* (2012) which find just as much of a compelling cognitive and evolutionary counterargument in favor of natural tendencies to believe in the abstract and transcendent.

Islamically; a number of prophetic traditions have been left as a pathway for believers to transcend death by living more fruitfully in the present. The Holy Prophet (S) says that: "*Four things continue to reward a person even after his death; a man who dies on the true path, a good advise or knowledge given by him to someone who acts on that advice, an act of charity and a good son who prays for him and asks for forgiveness on his behalf*" (Al-Albaani, 2018). The sixth Imam also corroborates "*Six things benefit a man after his death; a pious son who asks for forgiveness on his behalf, a copy of the Holy Qur'an he read from, a tree he planted, a glass of water he quenched others' thirst with, a well he dug, and a good tradition or habit he left behind to those around him.*" (Shaykh al-Saduq). A list of charities are provided in the final part of the chapter to help in all of our inevitable journeys to the beyond; contributing to building places of refuge, wells, community centers and religious places amongst the impoverished are the

lifeblood that keeps our society and our psyches strong. Research has found that some religious people (higher in authoritarianism and fundamentalism) are unwilling to help homeless or illegal immigrants; using ‘just-world’ beliefs as rationalization (“they deserve what they got”) (Saroglou, 2013). Conversely, religious individuals higher on spirituality and ‘religion-as-quest’ dimensions (value openness, self-criticism and dynamic thought; Batson et al., 1993) are intrinsically motivated by altruistic actions and demonstrate a willingness to help even if the cost is high and social pressure is low (Saroglou, 2013). As noted in Chapter 4; a critical tool in our religious toolkits *must* be an active incorporation of spiritual ideals and behaviors (if you discriminate in your helping behaviors between individuals who violate perceived norms such as LGBT+ groups and neutral or in-group individuals; you may need to work on this).

Existentially, we may not be able to escape death but as our Islamic tradition reminds us it in the process of reminding oneself constantly about death, that we draw ourselves closer to God. It is a common Shia and Sufi practice to visit shrines of the dead and iconify symbols denoting martyrdom and transcendence. The Qur’an states “Competition in this world increasingly distracts you, until you visit the graveyards” (102: 1) so let us not let the inevitable journey to the beyond produce symptoms of doubt or anxiety, but rather infuse our everyday behaviors with meaning and adventure. It is a common therapeutic question to ask individuals, ‘what they would do if they had one last day left on Earth’ and I have found that even in the most anxious and neurotic individuals a level of tenacity, courage and boldness that speaks to the transformative potential of death. As Gandhi states, “live as if you are going to die tomorrow, learn as if you are going to live forever.”

Dealing with loneliness

“The individual in being lonely, if let be, will realize himself in loneliness and create a bond or sense of fundamental relatedness with others. Loneliness rather than separating the individual or causing a break or division of self, expands the individual's wholeness, perceptiveness, sensitivity and humanity.” (May & Yalom, 1989, p. 398)

Loneliness is operationalized as a maladaptive state of affect which occurs when there is a mismatch between a person’s desire to have meaningful relationships and what their current relationships are (or lack of) (Winkel et al., 2017). Research has found that trait loneliness (individuals that have predispositions towards feeling lonelier as a stable and heritable component of their personality) is correlated with increased negative social interactions, anticipate rejection, negative affect, and a lower reward response to positive stimuli (more hypervigilant for social threats) (Winkel et al., 2017). The endemic of loneliness is also rapidly rising with a 2020 U.S. Report by Cigna (n = 10,441) finding that 3 in 5 Americans (61%) reported loneliness compared to 54% in 2018. This rate is also much higher for younger generations with nearly 8 in 10 Gen Zers (79%) and 7 in 10 (71%) millennials reporting loneliness. How can we combat this from an Islamic and existentialist perspective?

Another toolkit we must develop in the course of our lives is reformulating loneliness as solitude. Although, this may come easier for some as research has found that some individuals prefer being alone and report positive experiences and being happier when spending more time alone (Coplan et al., 2019). Nonetheless, whereas loneliness is correlated with low social

support, depressive symptoms and social isolation (Winkel et al., 2017), solitude is defined as positive aloneness ('the constructive use of time alone') and is linked to increased well-being, introspection, appreciation of nature, art and music, meditation, strong interpersonal bonds and enhanced self-actualization (Littman-Ovadia, 2018). Furthermore, voluntary solitude is strongly linked to spirituality and most prophetic figures including Moses, Jesus, Prophet Muhammad and Buddha reported heightened spiritual experiences in solitude (Littman-Ovadia, 2018). As the Holy Qur'an states "*And truly you have come unto Us alone, as We created you the first time.*" (6: 94).

Alfred North Whitehead, the founder of the philosophical school of process philosophy states "Religion is what the individual does with his own solitariness ... and if you are never solitary, you are never religious" (p. 398). Irvan Yalom, the famous existential psychologist further corroborates "However wretched this state may be, it also stands him in good stead, for in this way alone can he take his own measure and learn what an invaluable treasure is the love of his fellow-beings. It is, moreover, only in the state of complete abandonment and loneliness that we experience the helpful powers of our own natures." (May & Yalom, 1989, p. 238). Further this inability to be alone is a societal issue: "This lack of concentration is clearly shown in our difficulty being alone with ourselves. To sit still, without talking, smoking, reading, drinking, is impossible for most people." (Fromm, 1956, p. 101).

Deep Dive: Neurology of Meditation

Our Yoga & Mindfulness Lab at the University of Houston has coordinated over 1,000 meditations across our campus and community. We regularly engage in meditative practices, even on noticeably busy work days, as they bring a sense of clarity and awareness amidst the hustle and bustle of the machine that is 'modern society'. As the Holy Qur'an emphatically reminds us, "...Indeed in that (the world) are signs for those who are self-reflecting" (16:79). More so, we believe in integrating mindful practices which can translate abstract ideals of compassion, interconnectedness, non-judgement and love as concrete skills for our educational institutes to teach amongst primary to college level students (as well as the instructors and faculty themselves). The question is often posed to us by puzzled undergraduates who are surprised that their 'business-as-usual' college course begins with a 10-minute mindfulness lesson and practice (to learn more about our Mindful Ambassador Program, you can visit our official website: <https://www.mindfuluh.org>); 'how can sitting by myself for 5 minutes a day cause any lasting changes?' Well we have ample neuropsychological data to suggest that even minimal amounts of introspective practices can have lasting changes to how our brain functions.

Holzel et al., (2007) in comparing the hemodynamic responses of well-trained meditators to novice meditators found stronger activation in the rostral ACC (anterior cingulate cortex) and dorsal MPFC (dorsomedial prefrontal cortex) during mindful breathing exercises; this suggests that individuals who engage in mindful practices are able to more strongly process distracting events (next time someone asks how you can focus more during *salaat*, you may want to pull out a brain map) as increased activation in the two brain areas are correlated with enhanced attention and emotional regulation. 'Mind wandering' is a neurological term in which attentional drift occurs towards self-centered matters ('please God help me pass that test'); Brandmeyer and Delorme (2018) found enhanced frontal midline theta and somatosensory alpha rhythms in experienced meditators suggesting better executive functioning, cognitive control and sustained

attention during meditation in comparison to novice meditators who reported greater frequency and depth (becoming attached to a train of thoughts) of mind wandering episodes.

Worch (2014) in assessing whether a 10 week mindfulness course (10 minutes of mindfulness per school day) could significantly alter brain patterns amongst 4th graders found increased left-side activation in front brain areas (correlated with dispositional positive affect). Meditators have also been found to have increased gray matter concentration in numerous brain areas including the hippocampus, anterior insula, temporal gyrus, orbitofrontal cortex and postcentral gyrus (Holzel et al., 2008). This cortical thickness is often the result of interoceptive awareness (observation of bodily sensations), somatosensory processing and attentional regulation. Activation in the hippocampal areas lead to modulation of cortical arousal and responsiveness (part of the limbic system involved in motivation, learning, memory and emotion). Consequently, it is of little surprise that mindfulness is correlated with enhanced memory, attention and ability to solve problems (Greenberg, Reiner & Meiran, 2012). Longitudinal data finds that long-term daily meditation (1-3 months of full-time daily practice) is correlated with improved visual perception, visual sensitivity, resource demand and vigilance (i.e. mindfulness leads to perceptual improvements which reduce the resources we need to sustain voluntary attention) (MacLean et al., 2010). Mindfulness also has been found to alter functional connectivity (rsFC) of the amygdala (self-reported perceived stress is correlated with greater amygdala rsFC as well as disrupted rsFC in individuals with PTSD, GAD and MDD) which leads to reduces stress and stress-related health outcomes (Taren et al., 2015). Importantly, religious prayer has also been shown to activate brain patterns such as the prefrontal cortex (executive planning), parietal cortex (sensory information), cerebellum (coordinates movement), MPFC (retrieval of long-term memory and mediates decision-making), temporopolar regions (autobiographical memories, processing of social narratives) and temporo-parietal junctions (social causation, social interaction and goal attribution) (Schjoedt et al., 2009).

At a societal level, mindfulness practices can reduce many types of biases including implicit ones; for example, many studies have found that individuals implicitly (existing at a subconscious or unconscious level) associate Blackness with weapons. Kang et al., (2012) uses the example of a study which had participants engage in a video game in which they had to shoot individuals who were either holding a weapon or an object. Participants were much quicker to shoot Black targets under normal conditions and under time pressure, as well as miss armed White targets more than armed Black targets. Bridging this to relevant examples, police often have to act in high stress situations which involve conditioning and neuroplasticity (i.e., have not created enough new neural pathways to de-condition their brains in un-associating Black individuals with stereotypes). The historical oppression we see of marginalized communities who are subject to death at the hands of police, arbitrary criminal justice (Black prisoners are subject to the death penalty at much higher rates) and persistent harassment are systematic issues which need addressing, but also individual changes which necessitate a conscious override. As Harris (2017) succinctly states “simply put, mindfulness practice will allow police to think about their actions before reacting to the situation” (p. 121).

Other ways mindfulness can help us is by reducing our brains tendency to focus on negative stimuli and situations (negativity bias), reducing bias towards others including homeless persons (in-group, out-group bias), reducing our tendency to ignore the full context of other people's

behaviors when making judgements (Fundamental Attribution Error; correspondence bias), reducing our need to put others down to make ourselves look favorable (self-positivity bias) and reducing our propensity to remain in endeavors which are detrimental in the long-run because we have put significant time and resources into them (sunk-cost bias) (Hafenbrack, Kinias & Barsade, 2013; Suttie, 2017; Smith et al., 2017).

It may be logical and rationalistic to regurgitate these scientific facts and figures to the undergraduates who pose questions as to why mindfulness can benefit them. But mindfulness for us as Muslims isn't contained in the mind, but rather in our heart and souls (as someone once pointed out for me, 'they call it mindfulness, we call it heartfulness'). This inward journey is the lifeblood of all Muslims, as the 1st Imam and 4th Caliph so eloquently narrates "*your remedy is within you, but you do not sense it. Your sickness is from you, but you do not perceive it. You presume you are a small entity, but within you is enfolded the entire universe. You are indeed the evident book, by whose alphabet the hidden becomes the manifest. Therefore, you have no needs beyond yourself. What you seek is within you, if you only reflect.*" (citation)

Although we know that social connection and social interactions are fundamental cornerstones to psychological health and functioning (Coplan et al., 2019); solitude theory proposes that individual preference for aloneness is not related to facets of sociability, neuroticism, or social anxiety (i.e., individuals who engage in solitude are not recluse loners or socially maladjusted), but rather a distinct personality construct (Littman-Ovadia, 2019). For those of us who may be more extroverted and prefer time in the company of others; alone time may be a risk factor that produces heightened anxiety, rumination and loneliness (citation). Although, we can combat this by surrounding ourselves with individuals who have a higher preference for solitude, namely introverts. Susan Cain's popular book *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking* (2012) cites research in which introversion and extroversion, along with other major personality traits such as agreeableness and conscientiousness are found to be 40-50% inheritable (p. 105). Other research finds interesting findings in that extroverts tend to have more sexual partners than introverts but also commit adultery and divorce more frequently, extroverts exercise more frequently but introverts have fewer accidents and traumatic injuries, and extroverts have higher levels of social support but also commit more crimes than introverts (p. 148).

Although we may understand our road to spirituality as primarily a solitary endeavor; we must complement our weaknesses (which as noted, is in large a product of inheritable and genetic traits) with strengths in others. As the Prophet Muhammad so eloquently states, "the believers are reflections of one another" (citation). Francis and Smith (2016) in looking at extroverted and introverted clergyman note that introverts are oriented deeper into their inner worlds and focus on concepts, ideas and understanding; choosing to reflect before acting. Whereas, extroverts turn outward and are interested in others, acting quickly and decisively, preferring to learn by talking in-depth and are active; routinely scanning their environments for stimulation and activity. Although there are notable differences; Francis and Smith (2016) note that clergy training can benefit from pairing extroverts with introverts who can help them access the benefits of quiet reflection and reflective practice which produces deeper insight. Conversely, extroverts can help introverts with the social demands of parish life such as engagement with

people, social connection and external church activities. Similarly, in our own personal lives; we may feel burdened and agitated by times of social isolation (such as when a global pandemic occurs and we must remain quarantined for months) which does not produce any insight or wisdom. Or we can ‘turn’; a term used in Jewish mysticism, if one continues to absorb oneself in pity, guilt or even constant repentance; they are seen as sinners as they live selfishly. But, if one ‘turns’ and reorients themselves to meaningful tasks, they are seen as enlightened, ‘standing above even the most pious holy man’ (May & Yalom, 1989, p. 439).

Therefore if we find it hard to engage in meaningful times of solitude; we may want to broaden who it is we surround ourselves with. Although it may be painstaking for a gregarious, extroverted person and a solitary, quiet person to form a deep connection, the process by which both can grow holistically warrants a need to move from our comfort zones and find those who complement our weaknesses. This takes on another macro level when we consider that an active Muslim routinely involves themselves with their community; we should ask ourselves who are those that are in positions of power in our local congregations? Is there an equal number of extroverted/introverted individuals represented? Are there activities that are geared towards youth that may not be comfortable with recitation in front of a large group of people or playing in basketball events? Most importantly, who is it that you surround yourself with? Research finds that most of the people we spend our time with share the same personality profiles and temperaments that we do (citation); this ‘in-group, out-group’ bias necessitates a conscious override. Instead of denigrating others for being ‘too quiet’ or ‘too loud’, let us find meaningful time to connect with others, especially those that are different from us. Existentially, we may not be able to rid the world complete of loneliness, but we can find the company of others to be a light in times of uncertainty and darkness. Most importantly, we can find in ourselves the light when all other lights have faded.

Purpose in life

“Meaning is something to be found rather than given. Man cannot invent it but must discover it.”
– Victor Frankl

The last and most meaningful potent reinforcement tool we can use is embedding our life with purpose; the antidote to meaninglessness. Robak and Griffin (2000) found a strong positive relationship between purpose in life and happiness and a negative relationship between life purpose and death depression in 118 college students (mean age – 21 years old). Purposelessness is often the catalyst for a host of mental health disorders; a core presenting concern of depression for example is lack of purpose in life (citation). Although the obvious question must be asked; how can one embed purpose in a life that is often devoid of it?

“Engagement is the therapeutic answer to meaninglessness regardless of the latter's source. Wholehearted engagement in any of the infinite array of life's activities not only disarms the galactic view but enhances the possibility of one's completing the patterning of the events of one's life in some coherent fashion. To find a home, to care about other individuals, about ideas or projects, to search, to create, to build-these, and all other forms of engagement, are twice rewarding: they are intrinsically enriching, and they alleviate the dysphoria that stems from being bombarded with the unassembled brute data of existence” (Yalom, 1980, p. 482). What is the purpose you derive from this world, dear reader? What is it that pulls on your heart and stirs your

soul when you are with yourself; when all the materialistic obligations and glitter wear off, what illuminates the darkness? For us as Muslims, it is ultimately total and utter submission to Allah, the Divine, the Radiant, the Responsive, The Pure, The Majestic, The Restorer, The Provider, The Withholder, The Extender, The Reducer, The Most Forbearing, The Subtle, The Giver of Life, The Bringer of Death, The Avenger, The Pardoner, The Unique, The First, The Last, The Distresser, The Guide, The Infallible, The Light. These manifestations of God interestingly (as you may have noted) also include perceived negative terms (i.e., One who Distresses and One who Withholds); but it must be that for the true spiritual growth of a Muslim, they embed a firm psychological foundation that these assumed negatives are mistakes on our part. As Ali bin Abi Talib states, “whoever understood his own self has understood His Lord. Then look around you, and you will see the Signs of Allah everywhere...His manifestations, the complete cosmos, Allah every-where” (citation).

This concept of *Al Baatinu* or The Hidden is one example worth mentioning as it is a critical element of our Islamic tradition in which we work towards noticing, understanding and embedding the Manifest and Hidden Signs of God through an active approach (remember in the LOC section that internally oriented religious individuals perceive God as a companion and collaborator they work *with* instead of mere onlookers with no say in the matter). What is this Hidden? Khimjee (2018) uses the example of our own self; the essence within our self is not apparent, it is hidden in the same way the full spectrum of light and frequency waves are hidden from our visual spectrums, we cannot see it yet it is there. Even more so, because this essence within ourselves manifests itself each moment in our functioning, thoughts, behaviors, emotions, our ‘aliveness.’ In a parallel manner; the painstaking, mundane, negative, tragic and seemingly arbitrary events which we cast-off as obstacles have Hidden components that may not seem noticeable to the naked eye but serve towards the spiritual essence embedded within us from Allah, who is also *Al Baatinu*.

A second question may be pondered; what about the application of these existential components in a practical manner? The Qur’an states “O you who have believed, why do you say what you do not do? Great is hatred in the sight of Allah that you say what you do not do” (61: 2-3). It must be said that the school of existential philosophy was formed as a reaction to the abstract musings of academic philosophies of the 18th century which did not seek to answer fundamental questions that placated the common man. Questions such as what is the vision we have for our life? Do we have the means to achieve that? What steps can we take to inch us towards these goals? Are the goals multi-faceted and diverse in nature (family goals, social goals, creative goals, spiritual goals, etc.)? Most importantly, what is the anchor and foundation for what will push us through in times when the vision for the goal begins to fade, first as a faint disparaging voice, then as a barrage of barricades and obstacles that completely obfuscate what made us aspire for such a lofty goal to begin with? Can science answer these questions? Or must we look towards the transcendent in deciphering these riddles wrapped in mysteries inside an enigma?

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