

Arbah's Story

The Great Artist

As a child, I loved being creative. Everything inspired me! From the clouds above me to the trees surrounding my family home. I would sit on the swing in my garden and watch planes jetting across the blue sky then follow this by pulling leaves off our garden hedge and tracing the lines on them. I could have sat there for hours, amazed at the vast world. The only way I could express this awe would be to draw this on paper. I would spend hours painting bright blue backgrounds, shining yellow suns and vibrant green trees.

The school playground was also a place to explore. I would lay on the grass and daydream, look at worms tunnelling through the dirt and create intricate architectural structures with broken branches, although they'd collapse immediately after. I remember feeling as if the world was my playground; everything around me was an opportunity to create! The branches were my paintbrushes, the ground below me was my canvas and the trees were my muse. However, I'd find myself asking 'Who created the grass, the trees and branches?'. During a late-night drive home, I looked out of the car window and saw the moon following me! I asked my dad,

"Why does the moon know where we're going?"

He would reply with a lengthy scientific explanation that I would pretend to understand as I continued to stare out at the night sky.

"Where did the moon come from?" I'd enquire.

"Allah (God) created the moon!", he'd reply.

From that moment, Allah was the greatest artist to me. Everything I held, saw and examined was intricately designed by this Creator.

Then I'm not sure what happened. As I grew older, I found myself no longer wanting to look at the bright blue sky. The leaves no longer inspired me. The last thing I wanted was to put my hands on the earth below me. I became increasingly distant from the natural world. I don't know what caused this. Maybe it was social media, my mental health or the other challenges that come with being a teenager. Alongside this, my relationship with my Creator waxed and waned. If Allah was the creator of all things beautiful, who had created all that was bad? I no longer painted and much of my later teen years and early adulthood were spent busying myself with other worldly matters. Then a few years ago - it all changed.

I met an old friend of mine, a Muslim woman who was working to become an eco-psychologist. I had no idea what that meant and why she was interested in this work. I opened up to her about how stuck I was feeling in life and she asked if she could work with me on re-building my connection to nature. She would mention that connecting to nature would not be an unfamiliar journey, rather, this would allow me to *return* to myself. Return? But I've spent so long trying to forget my past and move forward! I thought I'd give this a go - the worst that could happen is that I get some mud on my clothes.

My initial sessions with her occurred in a nearby park in Manchester. She asked me to walk through the trees and lead the way in the foreign woods. Hesitatingly, I agreed. I caught my clothes on thorny branches, slipped on muddy leaves and sat near moss-covered fallen tree trunks while trying to ignore the worms creating tunnels beneath me. She asked me to sit amidst the mess and to spend a moment being present with the surrounding wildlife. I looked below; a small puddle of water pooled around my shoes. I looked above and the trees towered high while the wind swayed them in unison. Then I looked to my right and saw layers of tangled leaves hidden amidst the shadows of the woods. There was something about this view that ignited fear *and* familiarity within me. Fear of the unknown yet familiarity in what was long forgotten.

In the months following this, I sat with my friend as we worked through this discomfort. We began each session by reading a poem written by a Muslim author alongside meditative moments of silence. I'd speak of my experiences, hopes and fears with her with support from the trees circling us and with guest appearances from some squirrels and bees. My friend would draw on Islamic scripture to guide my feelings,

"The Qur'an (Holy Book) states that we are Khalifa's, or caretakers, of the earth".

With time, I made my own visits to the park. I wanted to be a caretaker of the earth! How could I achieve this? Is it through my periods of meditation? Ensuring both my mind and the world around me remain clear of litter? Although met with initial embarrassment, I talked aloud to the trees, introduced myself and discussed anything and everything. I would lay on the ground and count the leaves draped above me, complimenting their jagged edges and vibrant colours. Eventually, I was drawn to recite pages of the Qur'an for the natural space around me followed by its English translation in case they didn't understand Arabic. This strange world had become a safe space and home, allowing me to flourish alongside its shedding and regenerative landscape. I began to note down my feelings; writing had become a newfound tool of mine. I wrote down pages of reflections throughout the seasons:

In the Summer, 'The leaves provide wonderful shade from the beaming sun'.

During Autumn, 'Trees seem to be falling into the river and redirecting the stream elsewhere'.

In the Winter, 'The broken branches on the ground have frozen together and provide better stability to walk in the woods'

And in Spring, 'The park feels like it's alive! Everything has returned!'

Following months of reflection, much of this writing led me to explore this newfound connection to nature in my university studies. How do people of faith build connections between their beliefs and the environment? How do we draw upon our religious texts and traditions to develop our understanding of the natural world? As I continue to write, I look up at the clouds for inspiration, examine leaves and remain in awe of the moon and stars. I reflect on the intelligent design of the natural world around me and I return to the belief of Allah as the greatest Artist and Creator.

