

James Farrell, Ex-Catholic, USA

Description: How the gift of a Quran transformed the life of a white, racist, anti-Muslim working-class Chicago youth.

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I can remember, throughout my childhood, all the times my parents fought over money issues, living situations and the like. I remember living in the project homes on the South Central side of Chicago with almost nothing to eat. With a family of 10 it was hard for my father to support the family in the most desirable fashion. My father was a hard working man, although he spent most of his time drinking away our family income and beating my mom, I still love my father. My father comes from Irish and German background; he has a sort of 'back home' old-fashion way of living. Whenever he would come home drunk or just upset about something he would come to me and my younger brother and lay it out on us until he had nothing else to do. Many times I could not even walk or breathe from all of the blows. Of course I had to be the one who got it most because I was older and any rap my brother gave I would take his whack as well. This was most of my childhood.

Then came my teenage years. With everything happening around me, such as girlfriends, flings, boozing, bars, drugs, etc. I just could not allow myself to be a part in any of it. It just didn't feel right. My brother was one of the biggest drug dealers in Chicago. Many a day he would bring his stash home to sell locally. He knew my views on the whole idea and when he left one day, I took about \$1,000 of drugs he had stashed away and flushed it down the toilet. When he found out, I swear, he wanted to kill me; and he would have if he had the chance. Of course I was the one who my parents took it out on because I was older and I should have taught him better.

That made me realize how fragile life can be. I didn't want to die an idiot so I began studying anything and everything. I couldn't take my face out of a book unless I put it in another. You have to realize something about my family, they are very competitive toward one another. Once they see the other person advancing they want to stop you in your tracks and allow you to go no further. My parents had mixed feelings of my personal studies. They were worried that I might become brainwashed or follow some cult. They were right in one thing, I became a Nazi in 1994. I loved the fact that Hitler had thousands of people under his control. It made me feel important...like I was somebody. My father was pleased with the whole idea. Back in the 60's when Martin Luther King Jr. was getting everyone fired up about his 'dream' my father was planning on getting rid of all of the blacks in the Chicago land area. In fact when Martin Luther King Jr. had marched through Marquette Park and Sherman Park on the South West side, my father had formed a gang, (the gang) that not only threw the blacks out but also caused a white against black war. That day my father hit Martin Luther King in the nose with a brick and to this day he brags about it. Shortly after this incident Charles Manson and his crazy

family were starting their secret mission. He was another who I admired and wanted to be like. While in the Nazi's I had witnessed the 60's all over again. I was there when they organized the attack on the little 11 year old black boy walking in a white neighborhood in Chicago (around 1997). They would have killed him but they wanted to leave a sign. Upon seeing these things I knew that I didn't fit in anymore.

In 1995 I had met the first girl I could ever say I had loved. Even though I had a perfect opportunity to do whatever I wanted with her, I didn't. I couldn't allow myself to be completely intimate with someone who I wasn't married to. A few months afterward I had proposed to her and for a little over 3 years we remained engaged with out being sexually active. We both understood that more problems would occur. Being with this woman I was able to become who I wanted to be. I studied and studied and began to realize my life and it's purpose. I knew that I was missing something, I mean I really knew but I couldn't put my finger on it, but I would not give up searching.

The more I read the more my parents were drawn back. As I had pointed out that my family is very competitive they began mentally attacking me with how bad a child I was and how ungrateful a person I am for their shelter and food they supply me with. My parents never graduated from high school, in fact they both only made it through the 8th grade and dropped out in the 9th. Therefore their education is obviously limited. All they know is what they see on TV and see from the behavior of people. I have to admit, from my parents raising me the way they did, I honor their discipline and give them absolute gratitude for what they did for me. They forced me to become a man. I had my first job at the age of 12.

At the age of 13 I was working full time making just as much as they. By the age of 16 I had my 1st apartment. I cooked, cleaned, washed my own laundry, did my own shopping and was preparing myself to get married. From the point of view that my parents judged people by their actions, I agreed with them and I still do. But that caused me to hate Muslims and Islam. I swear I really hated Muslims like you would not believe. Many say it is due to the media, well yes, it is a part of the madness, but mostly it is the own fault of the Muslims. The Muslims are the ones who have destroyed the reputation of Islam to a point that others hate us and we don't even know what we believe in anymore. It's sad but true. I have to tell you that most immigrants who enter into this country to make money are the number one accusers of spoiling the true image of Islam.

In 1997 my fiancée had given me the Quran as a gift, simply because I loved to read. Just to show you how much I hated the Muslims, I fought with her and because of that fight, we had separated for quite some time. Eventually I had picked it up and began reading it. I can remember that very day. The house was crystal clean, the air was soft and sweet and the lighting was dim and perfect for reading. It was the translation from Abdullah Yusuf Ali. I read his introduction, the first 3 pages, and I began to cry like a baby. I cried and cried and I couldn't help myself. I knew that this was what I was looking for and I wanted to beat myself to death for not finding it earlier. I just knew in my heart how magical it was. This was not the Islam I knew. This was not the Arab thing I was taught to think was dirty. This was my life wrapped up in a few pages. Every page

told my life. I was reading my soul and it felt good, but regretful. After this I had reunited with my fiancée and we discussed the whole matter maturely. Shortly afterward we both accepted Islam and were willing to live our lives as Muslims, even if it meant separately.

When my parents found out all hell broke loose. My father had threatened to take my life. He said, "You were born Catholic and so help me God I will make sure you die Catholic!" My mother's reaction was similar. I wanted to go to college more than anything, I wanted a formal education. So I got a job and paid my way through furthering my education in college. At that point my parents began flipping out over my conversion and my mother threw me out of the house which caused me to remain living in the streets for 6 months. I ate out of garbage cans and I slept in the coldest nights through the blizzard of '99. I walked miles to be with Muslims. I was chased out of neighborhoods by police officers for going into black neighborhoods attending Jummah prayer. I was pelted with rocks, spat on, harassed, etc. I just wanted to be with Muslims.

After some time I met a friend who made a deal with me. He said, "If you can build us a masjid in our muffler shop, you can stay there until you find a place." I agreed. The muffler shop had a second floor area, about 2000 square feet for storage. Every day I had spent hours on removing inventory supplies and garbage. Within one month I had utilized half of the space, built a wall, added a window, installed a door, put in some carpeting, painted and opened up the first Muffler shop masjid in the city of Chicago. I had learned the carpentry trait from my uncle. It was my first full time job.

Around 6 months later I had maintained a good job and moved in with two friends. My old fiancée was out of the picture by now. We had agreed to live our lives as Muslims, not as fools. I loved her more than anyone I had ever loved. But being Muslim was far more important than being with a person. In 1999 I had become the President of the Muslims Student Association at my college. I was attending Halaqat (knowledge circles) daily, going to seminars, I had a mentor, and I built a relationship with my ex-enemies; Muslims.

In 2000 I was on my way to Hajj. An experience I will never forget. I had visited Medina and other neighboring areas. The one thing I had realized at Hajj was the truth about God and the history of Islam. We can only go back in time so far and we can only rely on what text books tell us about people and places. In Mecca and Medina I had seen with my very own eyes the magic of Islam's great history. It was as if I was living the history. I felt the Hadith come to life. I saw the Sahabah in the mountain tops. I smelt the Battle of Badr. I tasted the air the prophet once breathed. I felt the real Islam that each and everyone of us are destroying.

Although I am alone, without a wife or a family to call my own, I know Islam is life, not a way of life but life itself. I understand that Islam is not a religion, because religion can be pluralized. I understand that Islam cannot be judged by the actions of Muslims, Muslims can only be judged through Islam. I have been given a great opportunity to become who I am and who I am is no one no higher or less than each and every one else. I was given the opportunity to acquire my dream job. I have always wanted to work for relief work and helping people, as much as my past contradicts the fact, but it's true. I

now work for Global Relief Foundation; it's where I have been for over a year now.

As much as I fed you with words of my life, nothing can explain my heart. I have only mentioned a few of the many obstacles I have faced. I know that many of you have faced so much more. My purpose of telling you this is to say that I understand the difficulties many are going through. Waslamu Alaykum.

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