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Description: How a Californian woman with a "fast and loose" lifestyle gradually found her way to Islam.

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My background was that of a typical California American growing up in the early sixties. My parents raised us five kids as Catholic, but with the divorce of my parents when I was 11, we kind of fell away from the church. In those years, it was very disgraceful to divorce so we felt like outcasts. I never really felt connected to Christianity though, even as a child. It somehow never really made any sense to me and I detected inconsistencies even at an early age. I used to go to communion so I wouldn't have to answer questions during Catechism.

Well, in typical California style we were kind of left to raise ourselves after the divorce. There wasn't much in the way of guidance. Although my mom loved us a lot, she was suddenly the sole caregiver of five children. I only saw my dad about five or six times after that. Left to our own devices, I was pregnant by the time I was 16 and ended up married to the father of my children.

Pretty much a "shot-gun wedding" I'm afraid. We stayed married for 16 years and had two children. I had missed out on the "hippie" thing when I had gotten married in 1964 when all that "drop out and drop acid" stuff was happening. To make this short, I ended up leaving after all those years and running away to San Francisco to "find out who I was" and to become "liberated"!

What I found was liquor, drugs, sex, rock & roll. I was in such a hurry to "live" that I gave no thought to morality or anything like that... just a completely hedonistic approach to life.

I came to know about Islam through a young man newly arrived in America. He was from a large family and was here alone and feeling quite lost with all the new experiences confronting him. We found a comfort in each other as I was also alone without family or friends for the first time in my life. I began to respect some of the qualities I saw in him. He was very honest and never made excuses for himself. I saw a complete acceptance and confidence in him that I never experienced in anyone before. He would tell me things about the Quran which were interesting to me. He was very low key and didn't ever pressure me in any way. I liked what I saw in him. The fact that he was honest really impressed me. I had never even thought that a person could survive in life in a clean and honest manner. He had me do Shahada the first time we were together even though I didn't have any idea what it was. Sometimes I think that even though I didn't know what I was saying... God did and took it seriously!

As a matter of fact, I was really afraid of Islam because I was afraid that God would make me boring and trapped if I became a Muslim. I was so naive about Islam that my perceptions were really skewed. I carried all of the misinformation as many Americans do. What I had in the back of my sick mind was some correlation to the nuns I had seen as a child. They seemed to me to be trapped in a prison of morals. I remember always feeling that they were lonely and dull and all they could do was pray. That seemed to me to be an empty life. At that point anything that seemed "fun" was not allowed.

But God truly is great. Somehow, He gave me all the rope I needed to hang myself then ended up being there when I fell. Anyways, after meeting this man I still spent a few more years "wandering in the wilderness".

After this young man and I parted ways, I called the mosque and asked if I could get a copy of the Quran. I just wanted to know more about it. I never intended to "become" Muslim.

Well, when I read the very beginning of the Yusuf Ali edition, the summary actually, I just cried. I was awestruck by the beauty and mercy and grace. It touched me in a way that nothing else ever had. When I read the Fatiha, I knew it was something very special but I was certainly not ready to accept or understand even a fragment of it. The beauty of it's verses galvanized me. Many of the fundamental principles I just could not imagine ever agreeing with or understanding. What most impressed me was the forgiveness and mercy. That incredible Graciousness of Allah. I was going to need lots of these blessings with the kind of life I was living and continued to live for several more years. Even though I would read the Quran and gradually began to truly and deeply in my heart believe in it as the words of God, I still wasn't ready to give up my fast and loose lifestyle. I was certainly very much like a baby taking baby steps into an unknown world.

I was recently asked, "How difficult was it to suddenly stop and give up many of the things you had been doing when you became Muslim?" It wasn't difficult because I didn't suddenly give up anything! It took me five years from the time I first started reading the Quran to make the conscious decision to stop eating pork! My family was Italian, so pork was a mainstay of our cuisine. But when I said to myself after five years of reading the Quran that maybe I should give it up because Allah had prescribed it to us as unclean, it was very difficult! It took me about a year of eating it and feeling guilty before it began to make me sick when I ate it. Now, I just look at the salami in the supermarket and say, "Well, it's a small thing Allah asks of us".

That's how I feel about Ramadan. I asked someone what is the first thing they think of when they realize Ramadan is coming. They said the first thing is, "Oh, Aghhh!", then right after that is, "Oh, Yeah!". That's what I think too. That feeling of anxiety, I guess because we know we are facing a challenge and fearful that we might fail. And then we think of that sweet feeling upon breaking fast at the proper time and knowing that you have offered up to Allah one more day in honor of your devotion to Him... because it is a small thing that He asks of us. To fast for one month only, to really try for one month only to follow his path in a very concentrated and focused way. Sometimes when I feel temptation during Ramadan, I say that to myself..."it's a small thing He asks of us" and He

grants us so much mercies and forgiveness.

Liquor, promiscuity, stealing, lying, cheating, etc... have slowly departed over the course of these thirteen years. Now when I think back I can't even imagine that the person behaving that way was me. It is so different from who I am today. Liquor brought me to my knees and Allah was there to help me back up. I had disappointed my children and certainly was a poor role model for them. But Mash'Allah, they both have the Holy Quran in their homes today and see the different person I have become because of my most sincere and deep belief in it. My granddaughters believe in Allah and always want to hear "God Stories".

My father has passed on, but my mother is surprisingly tolerant towards my belief in Islam. Although sometimes I think she thinks it is "just a phase". My brothers and sisters all are respectful towards my beliefs although they too have many of the misconceptions and stereotypes many Americans hold.

One thing I had a great problem with when I finally accepted that I was becoming Muslim was some of the attitudes of the Muslims I met. I would occasionally try to go to the Mosque but was usually disheartened by the questions or instructions I would receive from brothers and sisters there. Usually, the first question is, "Who is your husband?" If I said that I didn't have one, I was viewed with suspicion and usually no one would talk to me after that. I was told that Allah would not accept my prayers because I was wearing nail polish. That can be very discouraging for someone seeking knowledge and contact with Allah and the Islamic community. I was instructed to do some very unusual things which I found odd to say the least. It took me about seven years to differentiate between "cultural customs" and Islamic practices. I know from other converts I have talked with they have had similar experiences. But, there are the sweet memories of praying alongside my sisters during Ramadan or Jumah when I feel so close to Allah that I weep with gratitude for the gift He gave me of the Quran and Islam.

I sometimes see this journey as one Allah has chosen for me and which He isn't going to let me out of! Of course, I have come to be very grateful for His patience and tolerance for my weakness.

I still have many goals which I wish to achieve with my faith. I have come to accept my belief in Islam as a progression, a journey, a seed that was planted and has grown into a strong and living presence in my soul. I am not perfect, but I believe that I am a better Muslim this year than I was last year. I know by the number of things that I have left behind that were not pleasing to Allah. I know with each passing Ramadan because I can look back at my first weak attempts at fasting and realize that I can look forward to this month and that Allah will be there to help me through the weak moments. My children respect me. I honor my mother as Allah asks of us. I have come to accept the difficulties in my life as opportunities for Allah to strengthen me or let me practice patience or tolerance... or to "grow" me in some way.

For me, embracing Islam has been the single greatest gift ever granted to me. I am still grateful and awestruck by it.

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