

Grant Me One Muslim Friend

entrustedtothedirt blog

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“The most strategic thing we could do to reach the Muslim world is for every Muslim to simply have a believing friend.” As a nineteen-year-old, I remember hearing the missionary-statesman Greg Livingstone share this insight at a gathering in the Middle East. His point was that the vast majority of Muslims today are living and dying without ever hearing the gospel message and seeing it lived out in the life of a good friend. It wasn’t complicated, Greg encouraged us, so much could change by giving Muslims access to Christian friends who would genuinely love them and tell them about Jesus. The simplicity of this idea gave me courage. Having grown up among tribal animists in Melanesia, I might not be the most skilled in engaging Islam, but by the grace of God, I could be someone’s friend.

Being at the very beginning of my gap year in the middle east, my prayer became that God would grant me one Muslim friend who was open to Jesus. He answered, and gave me that friend in the person of Hama*, the jaded wedding musician with a British accent who would eventually come to faith after many misadventures together – including nearly getting blown up by a car bomb. In my friendship with Hama I learned that the relationally-intense culture of those from that part of the world meant that one close friend was truly all that was needed for full-time ministry. This is because a Middle Easterner or Central Asian almost never comes alone, but with their own large network of relatives and friends. One good friend serves as a gatekeeper to an entire community of those who will be open to getting to know you if you are hanging out with their boy, and who may also be open to getting to know Jesus.

The following year I found myself back in the US to finish up university. After a difficult semester at a Christian college in a very rural area, I transferred to a different school in Louisville, KY, in large part because I knew there was a community of refugees and immigrants from the Muslim world there. Once again, my prayer became, “God, grant me one Muslim friend.”

One day I learned about an international festival taking place at a community center in the part of the city where most refugees were being resettled. I hitched a ride with some other students, excited to see if I could make any helpful connections with the Muslim community.

At some point I found myself at the booth of a local library which offered ESL tutoring to new refugees. Somehow the librarian present found out that during my year in the Middle East I had become conversational in one of the region’s minority languages.

“We need you!” she exclaimed. “We have a newcomer, Asa*, who has almost no English. And he speaks the language you do. Please come and meet him this weekend!” Before I knew it, she had signed me up as a volunteer.

I was elated to hear that there was at least one person in my new city who spoke the same minority language that I’d been studying. Maybe Asa would be the friend that I had been praying for. It certainly seemed like a providential connection.

The next ESL session I showed up at the library and was introduced to the other volunteers. One older couple greeted me happily.

“We heard that you speak Asa’s language! That’s wonderful. So glad you’re here.”

“Thanks, I’m excited to be able to help.”

“We are in such need of volunteers, but we keep getting these dratted Baptists who try to worm their way in to proselytize, can you believe that?” said the husband, squinting his eyes and glancing around the room. “Keep an eye out. Well, have fun!”

This comment caught me off-guard, so I don’t know what happened to the color on this Baptist proselytizer’s face in that moment. But my mouth stayed shut.

Soon I was introduced to Asa, a single man in his late twenties. We hit it off immediately. Not only could we speak the same language, but Asa was from the very same city where I had spent most of my gap year. Before long, we were lost in that particular joy and relief that

overtakes two speakers of a common language who unexpectedly run into each other in a foreign land.

I learned that Asa was not particularly profiting from this ESL group class (the librarian seemed to have a crush on him) and he earnestly asked me if the two of us could meet separately for English tutoring instead. Between his aversion to the class and the class's aversion to Baptists, I thought this was a great idea. At the end of the tutoring time we exchanged numbers and proclaimed a barrage of respectful farewells to each other. We both left, mutually elated to have a new friend.

The next couple weeks were just like it would have been with a promising new friendship in the Middle East. Lots of calls, lots of hanging out, lots of chai, cutting up, and talking about all kinds of things. Middle Eastern and Central Asian men love to talk, and the particular Western masculinity that focuses on doing rather than talking is one of many factors that contributes to profound loneliness for most refugees from those regions. We had even begun to have our first spiritual conversations, and to my great excitement, Asa expressed interest in learning more. This was it, I thought, this was God answering my prayers. Asa was going to be like another Hama for me. I was a busy Bible college student, I couldn't do a lot. But I could be a good friend to a guy like Asa. I was so encouraged by God's kindness in providing me with this friendship.

Two and a half weeks after we met, Asa called me.

"Hey A.W., I'm... moving to Boston!"

"Boston? That's like seventeen hours from here. Why?"

"Well, a friend there said he could get me a job."

"Oh."

"Can you come by my apartment tomorrow to say goodbye?"

"Sure, I'll be there."

The next day I made my way across the city to Asa's neighborhood, disappointed and feeling a bit misled by God. Things had seemed so providential, so perfect. Why was it turning out this way? Why must I so quickly lose a friend who seemed like he could become a brother?

I walked up the creaky wooden stairwell to Asa's apartment and knocked on the door. Asa opened it and greeted me excitedly. He was packing, he said, and he invited me to come in and have some chai. In the tiny living room were two other refugee men, one tall and lanky, named Farhad*, and another short and energetic, named Reza*. As Asa packed his small bags, we began to converse in his dialect about his plans. Farhad and Reza turned to me with wide eyes.

"How is it that you can speak _____?" they asked. Turns out both of them were from other regional unreached people groups and were also conversational in Asa's language. To see a skinny white boy speaking this language was one of strangest things they had seen in America so far.

Asa handed me a scarf as a farewell gift and insisted that I exchange numbers with Farhad and Reza. "A.W. is my true brother," he said to his two other guests, in the honorable overstatement so typical of his people. I smiled, wondering how many cultures would extend brotherhood in this way so quickly. For my part, I sent Asa off with the last New Testament I still had in his language.

Asa left for Boston and I didn't hear from him again for years. Farhad and Reza, on the other hand, started reaching out to me. Eventually, we started meeting up regularly to argue about politics, culture, and how so-and-so's people group was related to that other guy's people

group. Sure enough, God opened the doors again for gospel conversation, and before long we had a Bible study going that would at its inaugural meeting run afoul of Al Mohler's security. We eventually lost Farhad when discussing Jesus' call to love our enemies. "If Jesus requires me to love them, then I will never follow Jesus!" he raged during the last time he would ever study the Bible with us. Farhad's people group had suffered genocide and centuries of oppression at the hands of the dominant people group of his country.

Reza, on the other hand, kept coming around. He became a dear friend. And he became a brother in the faith. What I thought God was doing through Asa, he had in store for me with Reza. One friend who was open to learning about Jesus. One friend who would in turn go on to share the gospel with his network, both Middle Eastern Muslims and Kentuckians.

God had answered my prayers in a way I hadn't expected. It had first involved disappointment. But it had ended in kindness. As ultimately, it always will.

*Names changed for security