INTRODUCTION

Reclaim Your Heart is not just a self-help book. It is a manual about the journey of the heart in and out of the ocean of this life. It is a book about how to keep your heart from sinking to the depths of that ocean, and what to do when it does. It is a book about redemption, about hope, about renewal. Every heart can heal, and each moment is created to bring us closer to that transformative return. *Reclaim Your Heart* is about finding that moment when everything stops and suddenly looks different. It is about finding your own awakening. And then returning to the better, truer, and freer version of yourself.

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WHY DO PEOPLE HAVE TO LEAVE EACH OTHER?

When I was 17 years old, I had a dream. I dreamt that I was sitting inside a masjid and a little girl walked up to ask me a question. She asked me, "Why do people have to leave each other?" The question was a personal one, but it seemed clear to me why the question was chosen for me.

I was one to get attached.

Ever since I was a child, this temperament was clear. While other children in preschool could easily recover once their parents left, I could not. My tears, once set in motion, did not stop easily. As I grew up, I learned to become attached to everything around me. From the time I was in first grade, I needed a best friend. As I got older, any fall-out with a friend shattered me. I couldn't let go of anything. People, places, events, photographs, moments—even outcomes became objects of strong attachment. If things didn't work out the way I wanted or imagined they should, I was devastated. And disappointment for me wasn't an ordinary emotion. It was catastrophic. Once let down, I never fully recovered. I could never forget, and the break never mended. Like a glass vase that you place on the edge of a table, once broken, the pieces never quite fit again.

However the problem wasn't with the vase, or even that the vases kept breaking. The problem was that I kept putting them on the edge of tables. Through my attachments, I was dependent on my relationships to fulfill my needs. I allowed those relationships to define my happiness or my sadness, my fulfillment or my emptiness, my security, and even my self-worth. And so, like the vase placed where it will inevitably fall, through those dependencies I set myself up for disappointment. I set myself up to be broken. And that's exactly what I found: one disappointment, one break after another.

Yet the people who broke me were not to blame any more than gravity can be blamed for breaking the vase. We can't blame the laws of physics when a twig snaps because we leaned on it for support. The twig was never created to carry us.

Our weight was only meant to be carried by God. We are told in the Quran: "...whoever rejects evil and believes in God hath grasped the most trustworthy hand-hold that never breaks. And God hears and knows all things." (Qur'an, 2: 256)

There is a crucial lesson in this verse: that there is only one hand-hold that never breaks. There is only one place where we can lay our dependencies. There is only one relationship that should define our self-worth and only one source from which to seek our ultimate happiness, fulfillment, and security. That place is God.

However, this world is all about seeking those things everywhere else. Some of us seek it in our careers; some seek it in wealth, some in status. Some, like me, seek it in our relationships. In her book, Eat, Pray, Love, Elizabeth Gilbert describes her own quest for happiness. She describes moving in and out of relationships, and even traveling the globe in search of this fulfillment. She seeks that fulfillment--unsuccessfully--in her relationships, in meditation, even in food.

And that's exactly where I spent much of my own life: seeking a way to fill my inner void. So it was no wonder that the little girl in my dream asked me this question. It was a question about loss, about disappointment. It was a question about being let down. A question about seeking something and coming back empty handed. It was about what happens when you try to dig in concrete with your bare hands: not only do you come back with nothing—you break your fingers in the process. I learned this not by reading it, not by hearing it from a wise sage, I learned it by trying it again, and again, and again.

And so, the little girl's question was essentially my own question...being asked to myself.

Ultimately, the question was about the nature of the dunya as a place of fleeting moments and temporary attachments. As a place where people are with you today and leave or die tomorrow. But this reality hurts our very being because it goes against our nature. We, as humans, are made to seek, love, and strive for what is perfect and what is permanent. We are made to seek what's eternal. We seek this because we were not made for this life. Our first and true home was Paradise: a land that is both perfect and eternal. So the yearning for that type of life is a part of our being. The problem is that we try to find that here. And so we create ageless creams and cosmetic surgery in a desperate attempt to hold on—in an attempt to mold this world into what it is not, and will never be.

And that's why if we live in dunya with our hearts, it breaks us. That's why this dunya hurts. It is because the definition of dunya, as something temporary and imperfect, goes against everything we are made to yearn for. Allah put a

yearning in us that can only be fulfilled by what is eternal and perfect. By trying to find fulfillment in what is fleeting, we are running after a hologram...a mirage. We are digging into concrete with our bare hands. Seeking to turn, what is by its very nature temporary into something eternal is like trying to extract from fire, water. You just get burned. Only when we stop putting our hopes in dunya, only when we stop trying to make the dunya into what it is not—and was never meant to be (jannah)—will this life finally stop breaking our hearts.

We must also realize that nothing happens without a purpose. Nothing. Not even broken hearts. Not even pain. That broken heart and that pain are lessons and signs for us. They are warnings that something is wrong. They are warnings that we need to make a change. Just like the pain of being burned is what warns us to remove our hand from the fire, emotional pain warns us that we need to make an internal change. We need to detach. Pain is a form of forced detachment. Like the loved one who hurts you again and again and again, the more dunya hurts us, the more we inevitably detach from it. The more we inevitably stop loving it.

And pain is a pointer to our attachments. That which makes us cry, that which causes us the most pain is where our false attachments lie. And it is those things which we are attached to as we should only be attached to Allah which become barriers on our path to God. But the pain itself is what makes the false attachment evident. The pain creates a condition in our life that we seek to change, and if there is anything about our condition that we don't like, there is a divine formula to change it. God says: "Verily never will God change the condition of a people until they change what is within themselves." (Qur'an, 13:11)

After years of falling into the same pattern of disappointments and heartbreak, I finally began to realize something profound. I had always thought that love of dunya meant being attached to material things. And I was not attached to material things. I was attached to people. I was attached to moments. I was attached to emotions. So I thought that the love of dunya just did not apply to me. What I didn't realize was that people, moments, emotions are all a part of dunya. What I didn't realize is that all the pain I had experienced in life was due to one thing and one thing only: love of dunya.

As soon as I began to have that realization, a veil was lifted from my eyes. I started to see what my problem was. I was expecting this life to be what it is not, and was never meant to be: perfect. And being the idealist that I am, I was struggling with every cell in my body to make it so. It had to be perfect.

THE OCEAN OF DUNYA

Yesterday, I went to the beach. As I sat watching the massive Californian waves, I realized something strange. The ocean is so breathtakingly beautiful. But just as it is beautiful, it is also deadly. The same spellbinding waves, which we appreciate from the shore, can kill us if we enter them. Water, the same substance necessary to sustain life, can end life, in drowning. And the same ocean that holds ships afloat can shatter those ships to pieces.

This worldly life, the dunya, is just like the ocean. And our hearts are the ships. We can use the ocean for our needs and as a means to get to our final destination. But the ocean is only that: a means. It is a means for seeking food of the sea. It is a means of travel. It is a means of seeking a higher purpose. But it is something which we only pass through, yet never think to remain in. Imagine what would happen if the ocean became our end—rather than just a means.

Eventually we would drown.

As long as the ocean's water remains outside the ship, the ship will continue to float and be in control. But what happens as soon as the water creeps into the ship? What happens when the dunya is not just water outside of our hearts, when the dunya is no longer just a means? What happens when the dunya enters our heart?

That is when the boat sinks.

That is when the heart is taken hostage and becomes a slave. And that is when the dunya—which was once under our control—begins to control us. When the ocean's water enters and overtakes a ship, that ship is no longer in control. The boat then becomes at the mercy of the ocean.

To stay afloat, we must view this world in exactly the same way, for Allah (swt) has told us that, "Verily in the creation of the heavens and the earth are signs for those who reflect." (Qur'an, 3:190) We live in the dunya, and the dunya is in fact created for our use. Detachment from dunya (zuhd) does not mean that we do not interact with this world. Rather, the Prophet ﷺ has taught us that we must:

Anas (ra) said: "Three people came to the houses of the wives of the Prophet ﷺ, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, to ask about how the Prophet ﷺ worshipped. When they were told, it was as if they thought it was little and said, 'Where are we in relation to the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, who has been forgiven his past and future wrong actions?'" He said, "One of them said, 'I will pray all of every night'. Another said, 'I will fast all the time and not break the fast'. The other said, 'I will withdraw from women and never marry'. The Messenger of Allah came to them and said, 'Are you the ones who said such-and-such? By Allah, I am the one among you with the most fear and awareness of Allah, but I fast and break the fast, I pray and I sleep, and I marry women. Whoever disdains my sunnah is not with me.'" [Agreed upon]

The Prophet ﷺ did not withdraw from the dunya in order to be detached from it. His detachment was much deeper. It was the detachment of the heart. *His ultimate attachment was only to Allah (swt) and the home with Him,* for he truly understood the words of God:

"What is the life of this world but amusement and play? But verily the Home in the Hereafter,—that is life indeed, if they but knew." (Qur'an, 29:64)

Detachment does not even mean that we cannot own things of the dunya. In fact many of the greatest companions were wealthy. Rather, detachment is that we view and interact with the dunya for what it really is: just a means. Detachment is when the dunya remains in our hand—not in our heart. As 'Ali (ra) expressed beautifully, "Detachment is not that you should own nothing, but that nothing should own you."

Like the ocean's water entering the boat, the moment that we let the dunya enter our hearts, we will sink. The ocean was never intended to enter the boat; it was intended only as a means that must remain outside of it. The dunya, too, was never intended to enter our heart. It is only a means that must not enter or control us. This is why Allah (swt) repeatedly refers to the dunya in the Qur'an as a mata'a. The word mata'a can be translated as a "resource for transitory worldly delight". It is a resource. It is a tool. It is the path—not the destination.

And it is this very concept that the Prophet ﷺ spoke about so eloquently when he said:

FALL IN LOVE WITH THE REAL THING

It's never easy to let go. Or is it? Most of us would agree that there are few things harder than letting go of what we love. And yet, sometimes that's exactly what we have to do. Sometimes we love things that we can't have. Sometimes we want things that are not good for us. And sometimes we love what Allah does not love. To let go of these things is hard. Giving up something the heart adores is one of the hardest battles we ever have to fight.

But what if it didn't have to be such a battle? What if it didn't have to be so hard? Could there ever be an easy way to let go of an attachment? Yes. There is.

Find something better.

They say you don't get over someone until you find someone or something better. As humans, we don't deal well with emptiness. Any empty space must be filled. Immediately. The pain of emptiness is too strong. It compels the victim to fill that place. A single moment with an empty spot causes excruciating pain. That's why we run from distraction to distraction, and from attachment to attachment.

In the quest to free the heart, we speak a lot about breaking our false dependencies. But then there's always the question of 'how?' Once a false attachment has been developed, how do we break free? Often it feels too hard. We get addicted to things, and can't seem to let them go. Even when they hurt us. Even when they damage our lives and our bond with God. Even when they are so unhealthy for us. We just can't let them go. We are too dependent on them. We love them too much and in the wrong way. They fill something inside of us that we think we need...that we think we can't live without. And so, even when we struggle to give them up, we often abandon the struggle because it's too hard.

Why does that happen? Why do we have so much trouble sacrificing what we love for what God loves? Why can't we just let go of things? I think we struggle so much with letting go of what we love, because we haven't found something we love more to replace it.

When a child falls in love with a toy car, he becomes consumed with that love. But what if he can't have the car? What if he has to walk by the store every

day, and see the toy he can't have? Every time he walks by, he would feel pain. And he may even struggle not to steal it. Yet, what if the child looks past the store window and sees a Real car? What if he sees the Real Ferrari? Would he still struggle with his desire for the toy? Would he still have to fight the urge to steal it? Or would he be able to walk right past the toy—the disparity in greatness annihilating the struggle?

We want love. We want money. We want status. We want this life. And like that child, we too become consumed with these loves. So when we can't have those things, we are that child in a store, struggling not to steal them. We are struggling not to commit haram for the sake of what we love. We are struggling to let go of the haram relationships, business dealings, actions, dress. We are struggling to let go of the love of this life. We are the stumbling servant struggling to let go of the toy...because it's all we see.

This whole life and everything in it is like that toy car. We can't let go of it because we haven't found something greater. We don't see the Real thing. The Real version. The Real model.

Allah (swt) says,

وما هذه الحياة الدنيا إلا لهو ولعب وإن الدار الآخرة لهي الحيوان لو كانوا يعلمون

"What is the life of this world but amusement and play? But verily the Home in the Hereafter- that is life indeed, if they but knew." (Qur'an, 29:64)

When describing this life, Allah uses the Arabic word for 'life': الْحَيَاةُ. But, when describing the next life, Allah here uses the highly exaggerated term for life, الْحَيَوَانُ. The next life is the Real life. The Realer life. The Real version. And then Allah ends the ayah by saying "If they but knew". If we could see the Real thing, we could get over our deep love for the lesser, fake model.

In another ayah, God says:

بل تؤثرون الحياة الدنيا

والآخرة خير وأبقى

"But you prefer the worldly life, while the Hereafter is better and more enduring." (Qur'an, 87:16-17)

THE DREAM OF LIFE

It was only a dream. For a moment, it overtakes me. Yet the suffering I feel in my nightmare is only an illusion. Temporary. Like the blink of an eye. But, why do I dream? Why do I have to feel that loss, fear, and sadness in my sleep?

On a greater scale, it's a question that has been asked throughout time. And for many people, the answer to that question has determined their path to—or away from—faith. Faith in God, faith in life's purpose, faith in a higher order or a final destination has often all rested upon how this singular question has been answered. And so, to ask this question is to ask about life, in the most ultimate way.

Why do we suffer? Why do 'bad' things happen to 'good' people? How could there be a God if innocent children starve and criminals run free? How can there be an all-loving, all-powerful deity who would allow such misfortunes to happen?

And if God is indeed Just and Good, shouldn't only *good* things happen to good people and only *bad* things happen to bad people?

Well, the answer is: yes. Absolutely. Only good things *do* happen to good people. And only bad things happen to bad people. Why? Because God IS the Most Just and the Most Loving. And He has no deficiency in His knowledge or understanding.

The problem is that *we* do have deficiencies in knowledge and understanding.

See, to understand the statement "only good things happen to good people and only bad things happen to bad people", we must first define 'good' and 'bad'. And although there are as many definitions of good and bad as there are people, a comprehensive understanding exists. For example, most people would agree that to succeed in achieving my desired purpose or goal in a particular matter would be 'good'. While on the other hand, failing to achieve my intended purpose or aim would be bad. If my aim is to gain weight because I am dangerously underweight, becoming heavier would be good. If, on the other hand, my aim is to lose weight because I am harmfully overweight, becoming heavier would be *bad*. The same event could be good or bad, depending on my intended purpose. So 'good' in my eyes rests on the achievement of my personal aim. And ultimate 'Good' rests on the achievement of my ultimate aim.

But what is my aim?

That brings us to the fundamental question of purpose as it relates to the greater Reality of existence. There are essentially two distinct worldviews when it comes to purpose in life. The first worldview holds that this life is the Reality, the final destination and ultimate goal of our endeavors. The second worldview holds that this life is only a bridge, a *means* that stands as nothing more than a glimpse in the context of God's infinite Reality.

For those in the first group, this life is everything. It is the End to which all actions strive. For those in the second group, this life tends towards zero. Why? Because, in comparison to infinity, even the largest number becomes zero. Nothing. Like a fleeting dream.

These distinct worldviews directly affect the question of purpose. See, if one believes that this life is the Reality, the final destination, the goal of all endeavors, the purpose of life would be to maximize pleasure and gain in *this* life. In that paradigm, 'bad' things ARE in fact happening to 'good' people every single second. Within that paradigm, people reach the conclusion that there is no justice and therefore either there is no God or God is not Just (*wa athu billah*, I seek refuge in God). It's like a person who concludes that there must be no God because they had a bad dream. But why don't we give the experiences of our dreams much weight? After all, some dreams *are* horrifying to live through—and very often do happen to 'good' people. In our dreams, do we not experience extreme terror or bliss? Yes. But why doesn't it matter?

Because put in context of our *real* life, it is nothing.

In the second world view (the Islamic paradigm) the purpose of creation is *not* maximizing pleasure and gain in a life that is nothing more than a dream. In that world view, life's purpose is defined by God who tells us: "I have not created jinn and humans (for any purpose) except to worship me," (Qur'an, 51:56).

It is important to note the special construction of this statement. It begins with a negation: 'I have not created jinn and humans (for any purpose) [...]'. First Allah *subhanahu wa ta'ala* (exalted is He) negates ALL other purposes before He states the one and only, singular purpose: 'except to worship Me'. This means that as a believer I know that there is *no other* purpose of my existence except to know, love and get closer to God. This is the one and only reason why I was created. And this is the most essential realization, as it defines everything else I do or believe. It defines all things around me, and everything I experience in life.

SALAH AND THE WORST KIND OF THEFT

The only sad part of finding the straight path is when you lose it. There are many ways to fall, but no fall is more tragic than a fall in one's deen. Sometimes it's a sister who decided to take off her hijab and live a different type of life, other times it's a brother who was once active in the community, but got caught up with the wrong crowd. But, with each story, somehow, somewhere along the line, our brothers and sisters fell so far.

Sadly, these stories are not uncommon. Sometimes we can't help but look at them and wonder: How? Why? We wonder how someone who was so straight could have gotten so far off the path.

In wondering this, we often don't realize that the answer may be simpler than we think. People fall into all types of sin, but there is one sin many of these people have in common. There is one common denominator for most individual who lives a life full of sin. Whether that person was once on the straight path and fell, or whether that person was never on that path at all, one thing is likely. That person had to first abandon, minimize, put aside, or ignore their salah (prayer) before they were able to fall.

If one is praying, but continues to live a life full of sin, that salah is likely only the action of limbs—not heart or soul. See, there is a crucial characteristic of salah that is often overlooked. Besides being a sacred meeting with our creator, salah is a protection of the realest kind. Allah says, "Recite, [O Muhammad], what has been revealed to you of the Book and establish prayer. Indeed, prayer prohibits immorality and wrongdoing, and the remembrance of Allah is greater. And Allah knows that which you do." (Qur'an, 29:45)

When someone decides to abandon salah, they are also abandoning this protection. It is important to remember that this abandonment of salah often does not happen all at once, but rather in stages. It begins by delaying prayers out of their specified times and then combining one prayer with another. Soon it turns into missing the prayer all together. Before you know it, not praying becomes the norm.

Meanwhile something else is happening that cannot be seen. With every delayed or missed prayer, a hidden battle is being waged: The battle of shaytan. By abandoning the salah, the human being has put down the armor given to them by Allah, and has entered the battle field with no protection.

Now shaytan can have full reign. Of this truth Allah says: "And whoever is blinded from remembrance of the Most Merciful—We appoint for him a devil, and he is to him a companion." (Qur'an, 43:36)

So it should be of no surprise to anyone that neglecting salah becomes the very first step in the path to a lower life. Those who have fallen off the path need only to look back at where it began; and they will find that it began with the salah. The same is perfectly true the other way around. For those who wish to turn their lives around, it begins by focusing on and perfecting the salah. Once you put salah back as the priority—before school, work, fun, socializing, shopping, TV, ball games—only then can you turn your life around.

The irony of this truth is that many people are deceived into thinking that they need to first turn their life around, before they can start to pray. This thinking is a dangerous trick of shaytan, who knows that it is the salah itself which will give that person the fuel and guidance necessary to turn their life around. Such a person is like a driver whose car is on empty, but insists on finishing the journey before filling up on gas. That person won't be going anywhere. And in the same way, such people end up in the same place for years: not praying, and not changing their lives. Shaytan challenged them, and won.

In so doing, we have allowed him to steal from us what is priceless. Our homes and our cars are so precious to us, that we would never think to leave them unprotected. So we pay hundreds of dollars on security systems to keep them safe. And yet our deen is left unprotected, to be stolen by the worst of thieves—a thief who has vowed God Himself to be our relentless enemy until the end of time. A thief who is not simply stealing some carved metal with a Mercedes symbol on it. A thief who is stealing our eternal soul and everlasting ticket to Paradise.

JUST MY THOUGHTS

There's a strange sadness today. It's not the kind that leaves you empty or lonely, or even wanting. It's the still kind, the kind that comes from a certain level of understanding, even acceptance.

I looked at this photo today, and every time I did, I found tears fill my eyes. It was a sunset on the beach. Stunning. And above it the ayah: *Rabanna ma khalaqta hatha batilan subhanak* (our Lord you have not created all of this for nothing, subhanak.)

And that's just it. All of this. The sadness, the accidents, the smiles, the peace, the pain, the love, the loss, and the sacrifice: it's not for nothing. It is not without purpose. It's not a mistake, some sort of oversight or a random course of events.

I looked at the image and suddenly I was filled with such a deep sense of nostalgia. For a time, I have no memory of.

وإذ أخذ ربك من بني آدم من ظهورهم ذريتهم وأشهدهم على أنفسهم

ألست بربكم قالوا بلى شهدنا أن تقولوا يوم القيامة إنا كنا عن هذا غافلين

"And [mention] when your Lord took from the children of Adam—from their loins—their descendants and made them testify of themselves, [saying to them], "Am I not your Lord?" They said, "Yes, we have testified." [This]—lest you should say on the day of Resurrection, "Indeed, we were of this unaware."" (Qur'an, 7:172)

I was overcome with the feeling of missing someone. Missing Him. Missing being with Him. Missing a time that was or will be. A time so certain, it is as if it already happened. That's why when Allah talks about the hereafter in the Quran, He uses the past tense.

When you fall in love with a work of art, you'd die to meet the artist. I am a student of the galleries of Pacific sunsets, full moon rises on the ocean, the clouds from an airplane, autumn forests in Raleigh, and first fallen snows.

And I'm dying to meet the artist.

"Some faces, that Day, will be radiant, looking at their Lord." (Qur'an, 75:22-23)

A REFLECTION ON LOVE

All of this love. Every piece. Every part of all the love in this world. The love they make poems with. The love of spellbinding novels. The love in songs. The love they tried to capture in a movie. The love of a mother for her child, of a child for her father. The love that liberates. The love that enslaves. The love you win. The love you lose. The love you chase. The love you live for. The love you know you'd die for. The love that makes men bleed. The love that swords have killed for. The love of fairytales and tragedy.

It is all just a reflection.

An echo. Of one single Source. Of a single love that you know, and I know, because we knew it before we could know. We were loved before we could love. You were given before you could give or know what it was to give. It is the love that your heart was created to know. It is the love that creates and sustains all love. It is the love that was before—and will remain after all else has passed away.

It is the love that was before...and will remain after all echoes have passed away.