

TWO BROTHERS

Sometimes in your life, you witness something that is so profound that you struggle to put it into words and share it.

But being a good witness demands this sharing. Especially in a time when media delivers a relentless torrent of testimony of the worst and most meaningless matters. So let me share this testimony:



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c o l l e c t i v e

At the end of July, I was amongst 60 people who retreated from our daily lives, in a valley called Pontbriand, high in the Appalachians of Quebec. There, for six days, we followed a rhythm of existence that centred around devotion, reflection, and seeking of wisdom and meaning. We gathered early morning to pray and invoke God. We rested before midday, and then reconvened to learn about how to let our hearts flower and open up to the Love of the Divine.

We ate wonderful meals together, prepared by a loving soul who poured her care into each dish. After lunch, we'd meet again to meditate and let the lessons of the day seep into our hearts and out again in shared reflections.

Following the apex of the day—the mid-afternoon prayer—we felt renewed by that very intense meeting with Him (al Asr). And at that point we gathered again to receive knowledge and guidance about how to let our hearts flower for God.

And every evening as the beautiful darkness of night fell, casting stars into view across the heavens, we celebrated the Gift of Guidance, by reciting the story of our Beloved Prophet Muhammad, may the peace of God continue to nourish his being and our connection to him.

All of this took place in a sacred place called Versant-La-Noël: an ecumenical retreat centre built according to a vision that was seen, one night, by a man of God. Our daily prayer and learning gatherings all took place in the heart of the site—a chapel that is also a mosque and a synagogue. The minaret and star of David sit amongst spires and crosses, ordaining the exterior of the building. And inside—oh, inside.

The spirit that fills the place is one of peace.

The one who received the call to build this safe haven for all faiths is Abbé Robert Lebel. And it was Abbé Robert who was our host.





And it is with Abbé Robert that this testimony of mine starts. What I want to share is the otherworldly meeting that took place between this Bishop and the Shaykh who led our Retreat, Shaykh Hamdi Ben Aissa. I stand awed even now, not sure what words to choose, to describe what can only be considered something heavenly, revelatory. As I sit here now, I feel so human compared to the Angelic presence I felt enveloping me throughout those days of Retreat. A presence that strengthened every time I saw these two men of God, the way they held themselves, the way their focus on God never wavered for a moment, and most of all, their love and respect for one another. You hear about interfaith all the time. But this was a whole other universe. It was faith intertwined! It was two people who had loved God deeply, and sought him, and committed to serve Him. As they met, their words flowed together, and it was clear as day that these words were from the same Source.

What we witnessed in this meeting was the experience of recognition. Nothing was unique to the men themselves, the brilliant thing was that they were like mirrors of each other. So that when they were together, it was the pure love of God flowing back and forth across the two Abrahamic identities...Two sons of the same Father, reuniting. Seeing in each other, their Beloved Father.

To see the Shaykh teach a lesson on a topic, and then to have the Bishop come in moments later and deliver a session in which he echoed the exact same message, [in a song](#)—the mind spun: ‘how could this even happen?’ And then, the heart would respond: ‘and how could it not?’

It was so normal and natural...is this not what we have been taught all along? That we are of the same stream, the same source? That our faith, Islam, is a continuation of the same Message brought by Prophet Moses, Prophet Abraham,



Prophet Isaac, Prophet Ismail, Prophet Noah, and Prophet Jesus, may the peace of God continue to nourish their beings and our connection to them!

These Prophets—for the first time their names became more than just a list to me...as Shaykh Hamdi time and time again upheld their mention, lovingly reciting each name, sending many of us into ecstasy. These are the Complete and Perfected Seekers of God. This naming of the Prophets was no longer a defense, a way of asserting that we are not a freak faith coming out of nowhere—as so many of us use the Prophets to prove; it was a genuine celebration of our Beloved Guides. For the first time, I felt appreciation for these human beings who came forward to represent all of humanity, acting out of their love for us and their desire that we reconcile with our Lord.

One after the other, [the songs](#), the talks,

the exchange before us, began to unfold that truth to us: that all Prophets brought the same message. The miracle we were seeing, of this flowing of faith and understanding, was all brought into logical sense as Shaykh Hamdi taught this ultimate truth:

All Prophets came with the same message—a single Message from God to humanity:

Tell those who seek Me, that if they ask for Me, I am right there. If you invite Me into your life, I am there already, waiting, and I will respond to your invitation.





How many a time Shaykh Hamdi would say something and later, when Abbé Lebel would join us, and Shaykh Hamdi would ask him to come up and share some words, Abbé Lebel would end up saying either what complemented Shaykh Hamdi's talk—which he had not even been present for—or echoed it. How many a time did Abbé Lebel use

the very same language that Shaykh Hamdi had been introducing us to: rather than slave of God,

let us define “abd” as one who seeks His Face.

Abbé Lebel used the very same terminology and imagery.

Among the followers of earlier Revelation are those who have a truly living faith in God. They believe in that which has been bestowed from on high upon you, as well as in that which has been bestowed upon them.

Humbling themselves and ready to receive life from God, they do not choose worldly convenience over following His guidance. Indeed worldly convenience, if you reflect on it, is but ephemeral and trivial.

They shall have their reward with their Sustainer. Truly God is swift to recognize and reward you for the smallest good you do. The Family of Imran [Chapter 3: Verse 199]



This harmony of language and attitude brought into focus and cemented deeply the realization that we are worshippers and lovers of the same God. That we all come from Him, and that amongst those who recognize His Existence are those who really love Him and are seeking Him.

Every night Abbé Lebel joined us, praying with us, invoking God during the evening meditation and the singing of praise songs about the Prophet, may the peace of God continue to nourish his being and our connection with him. He said he was finally seeing his vision realised—twelve years after building the grounds for it. He told us, now that we had come and filled the chapel with the sounds and feelings of faith, he just could not stay away. And he said he loved to listen to Shaykh Hamdi. Each day, he'd come in during the afternoon hours with guests he'd invited to see our group. I don't know what he told them, but he was like a sincere son wanting to show his family his new friends, proud of them, protective of them too. One special day he invited

the four people who had been with him in the construction project of the Retreat Centre. They were two nuns, the architect, and the friend with whom Abbé Lebel had first shared his vision.

You could imagine that Abbé Lebel had called them to say: 'it's finally come true. We built in the minaret, and today, its people have come. It was all worth it.'

Indeed, we were the first group to ever use the minaret, and the beauty of the call to prayer echoing out from that minaret, built over a decade ago and waiting for this moment, was something to behold.

The peak of this experience though was to see the love exchanged between the two men of God—Abbé Lebel and Shaykh Hamdi. It was a genuine love, a genuine recognition of a shared life story—the story of serving God by calling His seekers to Him.





The truth is that this vision was almost unbelievable. I have seen many Muslims, including myself, interact with Christians with politeness but rigidity. With a warmth that is not freely felt. With a kind of need to stand separate and assert boundaries. To stand guard against any tacit approval of associating partners with the One Lord, our Creator, or wrongdoing that we perceive Christians to have fallen into....

But here, the Shaykh actually called the Bishop his twin brother. We began to see that: to see the



resemblance of humility and love that they both possessed—as their common heritage—proving they are from the same family. Finally these words we kept hearing in the lessons started to find their target in our hearts: this is what it meant to love all our brothers and sisters in humanity. To really recognize the good in them, the same spirit created by the One Lord, and seeking that One Lord. To not feel the need to judge.

As God Most High says:

Do not reject those who, morning and evening, invoke the Lord, seeking His Face. Your concern should not be to determine their status with God, just as their concern should not be to determine yours.

So, never turn a cold shoulder to them. The Cattle
[Chapter 6: Verse 52]



I have never seen or experienced the energy of the kind of exchange that silently and deeply took place between these two men of God, and allowed us all to become drunk in its beauty.

One more thing happened. A couple who was travelling in the area, stopped to visit this monument—the Retreat Centre. They had no idea we were there, but they came to stay one night. They joined us in our activities. Over a meal, they explained to Shaykh Hamdi that they

were Protestants and active seekers of Truth, that they loved God and sought His Face. They joined us at prayer and for a lecture by Shaykh Hamdi, and they were soon overwhelmed with emotion. After the evening gathering of devotion in which we celebrated the Final Messenger, Muhammad, may the peace of God continue to nourish his being and our connection to him, Shaykh Hamdi invited them to share their thoughts. The man could not stop crying. He said he felt the light of God in this gathering.

You will find that, of the communities around you, they who have the greatest affinity and love for those who follow this guidance (that has come through you, O Muhammad), are the people who carry the legacy of the ones who said to Jesus “we are your supporters.” This is because amongst them remain priests and monks, guiding them, and they strive to not be arrogant.¹

When they hear what has been bestowed from on high upon the Apostle of God, you witness their eyes filling with tears in recognition of the Truth they know.

And they say: ‘O our Lord, we believe in this! Make us one, then, with all who bear witness to the Truth. Why should we not believe in God and in the Truth that has come down to us, when we long for our Lord to include us in the company of the righteous?’ For saying this, God has rewarded them with Gardens graced with flowing streams, and there they will stay: that is the reward of those who do good. **The Banquet [Chapter 5: Verse 82-86]**

¹ *Witness how God brings our attention to this point: that the vitality of a religion is in its continuing capacity to produce true followers who are upright, dedicated to God, and godly in their actions and behaviour in public and private.*

The pious people in any faith are the full potential of that Path to God, the perfect fruit. A religion is to be appreciated by its Saints and those regarded by their communities as being pious, and not by its criminals. It’s amazing that people love Rumi today, and they don’t like Islam at all, as if Rumi is anything but the pure refined fruit of Islam, amongst many others like him.





Why does this all matter? Because it helped us become witnesses. It helped us see Muhammad. This *is* Muhammad, our Muhammad. Our Beloved who loved the Christians of his time, and who is the Brother of Jesus, may God's peace continue to nurture their souls and our connection to them.

This experience that I was privileged to witness matters to the whole world. It matters because we need to become like these two men of God. How many times have we felt happy to prove a point of dogma to a Christian? Or in this day and age, to watch a Muslim online, via Facebook, addressing Christians at large in a way that asserts some kind of religious ascendancy. There lingers in our communities a kind of aloofness,

if not arrogance, towards the communities of Prophet Jesus and Prophet Moses, may God's peace continue to nurture their souls and our connection to them. It manifests in many micro-actions—not always outright rudeness, but a kind of smug superiority. This was all erased and melted in the vision of the Shaykh and the Bishop, hand in hand, and arm in arm, and by the end as they said goodbye, embracing. The Bishop said something amazing to Shaykh Hamdi, in the closing ceremony of the Retreat. While students thanked and praised him, Abbé Lebel gave Shaykh Hamdi the kind of recognition and praise only a Brother, a dweller in the same domain, can give:

**Shaykh Hamdi, my Brother,
you...are...crazy!**



We all know that in the spiritual path, being crazy is synonymous with being outside of the norms and standards of this world, and on a path that only a person with no concern for the opinions of those who judge, with concern only for God and His service, would take. I knew that Abbé Lebel himself had had to face much censure from some religious officials for his vision of a Retreat Centre that would honor all the traditions of the children of Abraham. He had come under fire especially for including the minaret.

So, coming from Abbé Lebel, this statement was one of camaraderie, one that can only be fully understood by those who have taken real risks to seek the face of God.

For many of us who have grown up in the west, and even more so for those who grew up as Christians, witnessing the relationship between Abbé Lebel and

Shaykh Hamdi was a deeply healing experience.

It was an experience that created a bridge between the Word of God as it sits in the mind, and its living truth that is witnessed by the inner and outer senses.

Suddenly we went from the theoretical to the palpable: God tells us that the Guidance shared by Jesus and the Guidance shared by Muhammad are cups from a single stream of Divine Sustenance, and that any who can see and embrace this, is blessed. Witnessing Abbé Lebel and Shaykh Hamdi, the continuity between the two iterations of God's guidance was clear and undeniable. How Generous the Lord is:

**Consistent and Abiding,
ever sending guidance to
whoever seeks His Face.**





Those whom We entrusted with past Revelations are bound to welcome this one as well. When it is clearly conveyed to them, they exclaim:

‘We fully embrace this Message. It is clearly the Truth coming from our Guiding Lord. We have been waiting for this. We submit our will to the Lord, and we are ever-ready to receive the guidance coming from Him!’

These people are rewarded twice over, because they remained steadfast in wanting and following guidance.

They lived their lives resisting evil with good, and giving charity from the provision We blessed them with. Whenever they heard empty talk (speculating and philosophizing about the nature of God), they turned away from it and said:

‘We have our focus, you have yours. May you find peace. We do not want to follow the way of those who lack interest in pursuing the Truth with all their hearts.’

The Story [Chapter 28: Verses 54-55]



We could see the connection between following Prophet Jesus and following Prophet Muhammad, his Brother, may the peace of God continue to nourish their beings and our connection to them! We could see the single thread of light and revelation and good and truth.

We could see how the Muhammadan way embraces it all, and is the stamp of approval—that kind of “seal”—on the Message that has come before.

The mother of one of the organizers of the Retreat shared a beautiful reflection afterwards: Pontbriand is the name of the region where the Retreat took place. But it sounds like:

**Pont brillant,
which means,
shining bridge.**

And indeed, what was it but a shining bridge that had been constructed before our very

eyes, for us to walk to God and love of all His creatures. In the meeting of two men of God, we saw the vision of a shining bridge connecting the Prophets each to the other, and under them, all those who follow sincerely.

It was such an honor to be a witness of the beauty of the lovers of God. Their mutual care and honoring will forever stay with us, all of us who were there. It is this that we all need to witness more of. May we receive the gift of seeing bridges of light, shining forth in all their beauty, being built one after the other, by those who seek His Face. May we have the honor of sharing this kind of testimony and not keeping it to ourselves. I pray that those better and more worthy than me will take this message far and ponder it, and make good on it.

Bismillah!

- Shehnaz Karim



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We sent forth Our Apostles with all evidence of this truth; and through them We bestowed revelation from on high, and a balance to weigh right from wrong so that humans might behave with equity and maintain the cosmic harmony and equilibrium within creation. And We bestowed from on high iron, in which there is awesome power as well as benefits for humankind. And all this was given to you so that God might mark out those who would stand for him and His Apostles. And remember, God is the Powerful, the Almighty!

We sent forth Noah and Abraham as Our Apostles. And from amongst their descendants, We brought forth further Apostles. Some of the descendants of Noah and Abraham sought and received the guidance of the Apostles of their time, while many others of their descendants sought only deviation and to shed the cloak of honour We had given them.

Once more, We sent Apostles to follow in their footsteps. And then We sent Jesus, son of Mary: We gave him the Gospel and put compassion and mercy into the hearts of his followers. After Jesus, his followers started the tradition of monasticism in order to seek the pleasure of God. Not all could uphold the reality of monasticism, so We rewarded those of Jesus's followers who truly sought to bring themselves to their Lord, while many amongst them sought only deviation and to shed the cloak of honour We had given them.

O you who truly seek to bring yourselves to your Lord, continue to seek the Face of God, and welcome His Apostle. He will make you inheritors of two legacies of grace. He will provide for you a light to illuminate your path; He will forgive you—God is Most Forgiving, Closer to you than your closest and most caring relative.

The People who We have entrusted with Revelation and who read and meditate upon the Scriptures should know that they have no power over any of God's grace and that grace is in the Hand of God Alone: He gives it to whoever He will. God's grace is truly immense.

Iron [Chapter 57: Verses 25-29]





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