

Umrah Reflection

Life often feels like running on a treadmill. I feel this constant need to challenge and push myself. Pausing to take a break doesn't feel like an option; it feels unproductive. Yet, I've realized that sometimes it's exactly what I need. Umrah provided me with this opportunity to pause, express gratitude, reflect, and understand myself better.

Every stage of this trip from reaching out to friends before the trip to ask for forgiveness to listening to Chaplin Khalil's lectures at sunrise in front of Masjid Al-Nawabi (the Prophet's mosque) has had such a profound impact on me. I truly cannot express in words everything this trip has meant to me, but I will try to share a few lessons I'm walking away with.

1. You are never alone.

I often reinforce the narrative to be self-reliant and independent. "Be comfortable with being alone and don't ask others for anything," I tell myself. I am willing to give. I love helping others. But to ask? To take? That is much harder. During Umrah, I realized that perhaps it's not a matter of taking but accepting. Accepting the love others are willing to give you.

There were so many moments when I was away from the rest of the group, and a stranger, who often didn't speak the same language as me, offered kindness, unprompted out of the goodness of his/her heart. I want to remember these moments. I want to remember the older woman who was sitting next to me on the plane ride from Istanbul to Madinah. She pulled out an orange from her purse and started to peel it and share pieces with me. When the airline staff came to pick up my breakfast tray and I was asleep, she saved my water, so when I woke up, I had my water in front of me and more peeled orange pieces. I couldn't even say thank you because she didn't speak English or Urdu, but I believe she understood my gratitude from my smile.

I want to remember the woman in Madinah in front of the Masjid Al-Nawabi during Jummah salah (prayer) who asked me if I speak Urdu and then shared her radio and headphones with me, so I could understand the khutbah (sermon) that was taking place. I want to remember the man in the Kabah who offered me gum and the woman who shared her pistachios with me. I want to remember the woman in the masjid we stopped by outside of Madinah who watched my struggle with my hijab with Sister Samia, took my hijab cap, tightened it with a pin and gave it back to me so it fit perfectly. I left that pin in the cap the entire trip; her one small action made my day better for the remainder of the trip. It's beautiful that even when we don't speak the same language, the language of love and community is the same; a smile goes a long way.

More than anything, I want to remember the moments with my fellow group members, friends I met just a few hours before, who checked in on me to make sure I woke up in time for prayer, gotten food to eat, and was feeling well. I felt so much love for my roommates and other group members. It helped me realize how much of a blessing it is to have love in our lives, and we always have it. If we look for it, we'll find it.

2. You go farther together.

I found Umrah to be an amazing reflection of life in that you can go faster alone, but farther together. Whether it was the full trip from Madinah to Mecca or the actual Umrah, it would be faster alone. You'd spend less time waiting and coordinating, but you also would be unable to have some of the amazing experiences we had. Whether it was the group events graciously hosted by the Ministry of Hajj and Umrah or sharing reflections with one another during the trip, there were moments of learning that simply wouldn't have happened if I was alone.

Observing the people circling the Kabah proved this to me as well. Praying near the Kabah is so difficult given the congestion, and sure, it's possible to pray alone. However, you're running the risk of being trampled. If you're with a few people, they can form a protective barrier around you so you can take turns

praying and ensure no one gets hurt. Moreover, watching the men clean the haram around the Kabah floor in groups of five reminded how a seemingly simple task would be far more challenging to do alone. Four create a protective barrier with rope, and one man is in the middle mopping the floor as they walk around the Kabah. It was such a beautiful system showcasing the power of teamwork.

I hope to remember the words of the Imam we met in Madinah, “As humans, it is impossible for you have impact alone. You are stronger with other people.”

3. Our mistakes do not define us.

We spend more time with ourselves than anyone else in the world; yet, sometimes we are the most critical of ourselves. How do we learn to be kinder to ourselves? To forgive ourselves? I’ve been grappling with this question over the past year, and one morning in Madinah, it hit me. Chaplain Khalil was sharing a story of the Prophet (pbuh), who was sharing Islam with a group of elite Quraysh tribe members, when a blind man came up to him. The Prophet (pbuh) rebuked and ignored him, so Allah (swt) sent down a verse of the Quran telling the Prophet (pbuh) to be more careful going forward because everyone deserves respect and love.

I had heard this story before, but hearing it again at this time of life made me think, “if the Prophet (pbuh), who serves as our ultimate example for character, is capable of making mistakes, then how can I expect myself to be perfect?” Mistakes happen. They do not need to define us. We simply need to try to be better. We will probably spend our whole live making mistakes – ideally not the same ones, but different ones – but mistakes are inevitable. Lapse in judgement are normal. We are not born knowing how to handle very situation life throws at us. We cannot be perfect at all the time.

But we can aspire to be better, to be more careful, and to be more forgiving of ourselves. If we cannot show mercy to ourselves, we’ll never truly be able to show it to others. If we cannot show mercy to others, how can we expect mercy from Allah (swt)?

The Prophet (pbuh) said, “Allah will not be merciful to those who are not merciful to people.” Source: Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 6941, Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim 2319

4. “This deen (religion) is easy. Allah (swt) sent it to remove difficulty from our lives.”

When the Imam in Madinah said this, it caused me to pause. I’ve always believed that Allah (swt) would not prescribe a task for us if it did not ultimately help us. Yet, sometimes being a practicing Muslim still feels harder than it needs to. It does not feel easy to pray five times a day, fast during Ramadan and abstain from certain activities. It feels hard, especially in a world where these practices are not the norm. When I have thirty minutes between class to grab lunch, do wudu and find a quiet place to pray, praying doesn’t feel easy.

However, the same can be said about a lot of things that are good for us because in reality, the things that are good for us can feel difficult in the moment, but they bring us a lot of peace and joy in the long run. Things that aren’t as good for us can bring a lot of joy in the moment, but in the long run, they cause us pain. Allah (swt) is simply trying to protect us from pain; pain that we often unknowingly rush towards.

Even Umrah, for example, can be seen as a difficulty (financially, logistically, emotionally, physically depending on your situation), but it ends up being such a blessing and wondrous journey. Leaving Umrah, I aspire to remind myself this quote in moments of frustration and doubt.

Leaving Mecca was incredibly bittersweet. I was so grateful to Harvard, to Chaplain Khalil, to Sister Samia, to my amazing roommates, to the entire group, and to Allah (swt) for the journey. It was transformational, and I didn’t

want to leave. But leaving is simply an opportunity to come back one day, insha'Allah, and I pray that Allah (swt) brings all of us back to Umrah next time as a better people with more faith, love and gratitude than we have today.