

The Importance of Prayer

Your Honour, Distinguished Platform Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen.
Thank-you for letting me address you today. It's a great privilege to have been invited.

I'm an hysterical believer in signs from God. My husband mocks me ceaselessly about this, but I believe God works in mysterious ways and you have to constantly work to decipher the signs. To show you what I mean, I'm writing a book and I received the phone call to give this address as I was in the middle of writing a chapter on Hajj, the pilgrimage Muslims must undertake once in a lifetime. When people think of hajj, they think of the pictures of Muslims circling the kaba in a counter-clockwise direction, which makes a great photo op from space, but that's just one part of hajj. When the call came, I was writing about the ritual of Sa'I, which commemorates a woman's prayer to God for help. Jews, Christians, and Muslims believe that the Prophet Abraham took his wife Hagar and son Ishmael out to a remote part of the desert. There were no people, no shelter, no supplies. When he turned to leave, she asked, "Where are you going?" He didn't reply. She asked, "Is this what God has commanded?" He nodded. She said, "Then God will take care of us."

Personally, I would have just followed Abraham back home. But Hagar didn't. She was a woman of faith. She stays and eventually runs out of food and water, and her child cries from thirst. She becomes worried and climbs a hill looking for help. She can't find anyone so she runs to another hill nearby, climbs it, and looks for help. She runs between the hills seven times and finds no one. She goes back to her baby and finds a gusher of water by his feet.

Eventually a caravan of people come upon Hagar and ask to share her water and she agrees. A well is built and a settlement formed, and a city named Mecca is founded. In the Bible, this story is told in the book of Genesis 21, verse 17 – God hears the prayer and promises Ishmael, the child, that a great nation will come.

Centuries later, the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, would be born in that city and he would start preaching the oneness of God through the message of Islam. Today, one of the most important rituals of hajj, is walking between the two hills that Hagar ran between. Those hills are called Safa and Marwa, and still exist, only now they're worn down. Today, a large convention-like building has been built over the hills, which are 300 metres apart. Muslims are ordered to walk between the hills to recreate Hagar's journey, except that we know it's like walking in a large hotel complete with chandeliers and overhead fans and water dispensing jugs along the way, features Hagar would have appreciated. There are three lanes: one for people coming, one for people going, and one in the centre for people in wheelchairs. It was an incredible test for any human, to be left entirely alone in the desert with just her faith to sustain her. And on top of everything, she also had to worry about her child dying of thirst. This powerful story is reenacted by millions of people every year during the hajj. God did not want this story to die. The power of prayer and faith is told through a story of a woman, left alone with a child, who was frightened and probably wondering if and when God's help would come. Fast forward a few thousand years later, and I get a call from the Lieutenant Governor's office and show up here to give this address about the importance of prayer. See how I connected the two stories, and you were worried about where I was going with this.

I've been told I'm the first Muslim to give this address. Don't worry; if you want a talk about prayer, we are definitely the ones to call on. Muslims pray five times a day, every day. We have to pray before the sunrise, which was 6:17am this morning, in case anyone was wondering. We pray when the sun passes the zenith, then in late afternoon, sunset, and at night. In Regina in the winter, when our days of sunlight are about three hours long, you need to get out of our way. If you see a Muslim woman running into a change room at The Bay with a pack of Men's XXL underwear, please stop knocking on the door. She's fine. She's actually not going to try them on. She only had five minutes left before her next prayer started. I've had to pray under stairwells, behind trees, behind doors, behind coat racks, and behind desks. I don't recommend behind desks. You have a lot of explaining to do when the occupant comes back and catches you on your hands and knees. It looks like you're having sex except there's no one else is there.

When I was praying with my youngest son, he looked at me and said "All this praying to God is too hard. I think I'm just going to become an atheist." I replied, "That's fine, but in this house, you'll be the only atheist that that still has to pray five times a day."

What does it mean to pray so much all day?

Your life ends up becoming one long constant communication with God, which my husband, a psychiatrist says is fine, as long as you don't hear God talking back – then he'd like to talk to you. What do we pray for? We pray for the things that are the most important to us.

I spent my youth praying for my career. My mother spent hers praying that I would get married. I wanted nothing else in my life other than to be a doctor. As a daughter of Pakistani immigrants, we are brainwashed from an early age to pursue a career in medicine. After completing my Bachelor of Science Degree from the University of Toronto, I received a rejection letter from medical school. I had prayed so hard for the letter to say that I would get in. It was the first, most devastating event in my life. You know it's easy to believe in God and be grateful when things are going well in your life. It's the hard moments that are the real test of faith. You have to fight the feelings of abandonment and accept God's will over your own. My mother, however, was thrilled. She started introducing me to young men in our living room hoping for a husband. These men were the catalyst I needed to apply quickly to other professional schools. The only school still taking applications so late in the year was the school of journalism at Ryerson, but being a journalist was a sexy career that good Muslim girls didn't do. Like wearing fishnet stockings or sparkly eyeliner or talking to boys on the phone. As I watched a steady parade of young men eating samosas in my living room, I applied and got in.

I suddenly found myself enjoying courses in the arts that I had never allowed myself to pursue seriously before. I finally had to admit, if it hadn't been for the rejection by medical school, I would never have found about my other abilities. I had to admit, grudgingly, that God doesn't abandon us. God works in mysterious ways.

After I graduated and started working, God started listening to my mother's fervent prayers and I met the man of my mother's dreams and got married. What I didn't realize at the time was that he came with baggage, in the form of a whole province attached to him. My husband Sami moved to Regina when he was two years old. His father was an ear, nose, and throat doctor who received several offers for work, and chose Regina as his home. At that time there were few immigrant families from Bangladesh living in Saskatchewan. My mother thought her prayers had been answered when we married. Like most people in

Toronto, she was ignorant of the rest of Canada. “Who knew there was a strange, unpronounceable land west of Toronto, chock full of husbands?” she would say in awe. If only I had known about this place earlier. Even I am embarrassed to admit that I had asked Sami whether Saskatchewan was one or two provinces over. He said, “It’s true what they say about you people from Toronto.” To which I responded, “You talk about us?”

I’m sad to admit that when Sami and I were first discussing where we would live after marriage, I told him that I couldn’t live in Saskatchewan. I was planning on becoming an international investigative journalist, who was ignorant about Canadian geography, and we would have to settle in Toronto. I had a job with CBC radio working for the late Peter Gzowski on his show “Morningside”. Sami agreed with my decision. Once again, God did not. Then God does what God does best – send a message to you that you’re not going anywhere. A few days after we were married, the Ontario government passed a three-year moratorium preventing any doctor who had been granted a medical license from a province other than Ontario from being given a billing number, making it impossible to practice medicine in the province. Sami’s license was issued by the University of Saskatchewan. This law has never been issued before or since. It was like this law was tailor-made for me. Since I wasn’t willing to give Saskatchewan a chance, God was going to cut off all my avenues. I was already pregnant with our first child and we were living in my parent’s house, and they were extremely unhappy about the state of affairs. I worked full time at CBC until I gave birth to our first daughter Maysa and lived off unemployment insurance trying to figure out what to do next. Sami was living the good life, sleeping all day, watching TV all night, taking Chinese cooking classes. He had no problem being a kept man, but my parents did. After the baby came, they put their foot down. We’d have to leave. “You’re destroying his life,” said my mother. “But what about my life?” I asked. “You’re married. This is your life!”

It was the second time in my life where I thought my future was over. I’m very dramatic that way. I needed to stay in Toronto to become a famous journalist and continue working with the CBC. I had already changed my career from medicine to journalism, and now I’d have to change again but had no idea what to choose. I had a discussion with God about a journey that I didn’t want to take. Like most conversations with God, they tend to be one-sided.

It was that move to Saskatchewan that sparked the idea of changing my career from international journalist to filmmaking. I took a film course and made the short film “BBQ MUSLIMS”. It was about two Muslim brothers who awaken to an explosion only to find that their BBQ was blown up by a Barbecue Anti-Resistance Front opposed to the air pollution that BBQ’s emit. They were immediately arrested for being Middle Eastern terrorists even though they hadn’t even been to the Middle East. I submitted the film to the Toronto International Film Festival and then promptly forgot about it, and had another baby. I may have given birth in another province, but I always conceived them in Saskatchewan. It must be the long nights. We have a little bit of downtime between all the prayers and we try to make good use of it. Anyway, the film was accepted into the Toronto International Film Festival and I received a very annoyed call from the acceptance committee. Apparently, I had forgotten to put my address on the form and they had to call all of southern Ontario trying to find another Nawaz who knew me and could pass on my number. I took it as a sign from God. I was meant to make funny films.

Next, I wrote a film entitled “Death Threat” about a young woman who couldn’t get her bad romantic novel published so she tried to get a death threat issued from her Muslim community. When they try and appease her, she decides to visit the Hamas, who are in town for a men’s-only meeting, to try and get them to sign her own death threat. It turns out that it wasn’t, in fact, a meeting of the Hamas, but a male-only cooking class for Humus.

A couple of short films, four babies, and a documentary later, CBC asked me to pitch them a television series. The mosque I went to in Regina was like the mosques I grew up in – a former church. So I pitched a sitcom about an Imam, who – like me – grew up in Toronto, then moved to Saskatchewan for work, and had to re-adjust to life after having lived in the middle of the universe. The television show encapsulated all the experiences I had accumulated over the previous decade. Some real and some completely made up.

My husband told me of a story of the members of the Islamic Association of Regina trying to buy land for a Muslim cemetery. They lay in the cemetery, on their right sides facing Mecca, ostensibly testing out the gravesite. I thought to myself, what if while staring off into the distance, they saw something objectionable. The episode emerged entitled “A Grave Concern.” The Muslims of Mercy, while lying northeast in their own cemetery, see a saloon off in the distance. Baber, the Muslim extremist, feels his death has been ruined and goes off into the saloon to demand that the den of vice be shut down. After all, he doesn’t want to spend eternity watching non-Muslims drinking alcohol. The non-Muslims reply that they don’t want to be drinking in a bar while being watched by dead Muslims.

My favorite stories were about the ecumenical cooperation between Christians and Muslims, having to co-exist in the same space. Having gone to mosques that were converted churches when I was a child, I came to identify stained-glass windows and choir balconies as an integral part of mosque architecture and, hence, Muslim worship. When Amaar, the imam of the mosque decides to have a quiz competition about the stories in the Qur’an, Reverend Magee, the Anglican minister, wins hands down because the stories in the Bible and Qur’an overlap. Baber Siddiqui, the Muslim extremist, is extremely distraught that a white person, much less a Christian, would take first prize in an Islamic quiz competition when, clearly, he was the true believer.

I wrote a story about the Catholic Church in Mercy ordering a statue of Jesus. It’s accidentally delivered to the Anglican Church, where the mosque resides. Yasir drops the delivery and inadvertently breaks the statue. The Muslim community is shocked by the accident and tries to rectify it by ordering a new Jesus statue on-line before the accident is discovered. The problem arises when a confused Muslim community, unaware of the controversy about the colour of Jesus, orders a black Jesus statue by accident, causing even more chaos.

Then as divine providence would have it, I was forced to move back to Toronto for half the year since the interiors of the show were shot there. I was teaching my youngest son, the aspiring lifestyle atheist, how to pray. I said, “You can ask God for anything you want.” He said, “Really, God will give me anything?” I said, “Yes.” “Okay, I’m going to ask God that you don’t have a job anymore.” Oh, no,” I said. “Anything but that.” By now, I had adjusted to my life in Saskatchewan and the move came as a shock instead of the blessing I had once believed it would be. I was living in a hotel room for up to 6 months, and coming home on weekends. I don’t think our family would have managed had we lived anywhere else but Saskatchewan. It takes a village to raise children and in the Regina community, I had found my village. Teachers, parents of my children’s friends, made it possible for my

husband to carry on without me while I worked on the show. Eventually my son's prayer did come through and after six wonderful seasons, where the show was sold to over 80 territories around the world, the series came to an end.

What it exported was the beauty of Saskatchewan, the beauty of prayer, the beauty of faith, and the beauty of multiculturalism. Everyone from Canada has come from somewhere else and has ultimately become part of the Canadian landscape: a place where everyone is free to worship in any manner they chose, to wear whatever they want on their heads – a hijab, a diamond-encrusted crown, a pope's hat – no one really cares, as long as you pay your taxes. And if you don't pay them, that diamond-encrusted crown is going to be confiscated by Revenue Canada.

God works in mysterious ways. Like why do geese who have flown non-stop for days getting from Florida back to Regina have to cross Broad Street on foot?

I may not have been left alone in a desert to find a home; instead, I was pushed out of Toronto and sent to Saskatchewan to become the person I was meant to be. For being sent to this province, I will always be grateful.

I end this speech with a verse from the Qur'an, chapter 49, verse 13:

Oh Mankind, We have created you all male and female and have made you nations and tribes so that you would recognize each other. The most honorable among you in the sight of God is the most pious of you. God is All-knowing and All-aware.