

Dreaming of the Prophet

Prophet of God, Muhammad, may peace and blessings be upon you. Peace and blessings from the heart of this pitiful delinquent, and if you turn me away, I have no grounds to complain. I know that I am a man who is frivolous, malevolent, and trivial; I deem myself entirely contemptible. So if you ignore me, I understand; in fact, perhaps that is exactly what you should do. Yet, you never turned a single soul away especially when this soul, with your love, is entirely at peace. Truly, God and God's angels extol their blessings upon you. "O ye who believe, invoke blessings upon him, and give him greetings of peace" (33:56).

The visions and dreams ravage this sorry mind with images of what was, but to me, they are the only truth that remains worthwhile. I see the images in my wake and sleep, I see them in the Conference and in the books I read. I see them in every instant of the struggle of life. I see them in embarrassment, I see them, and I am invigorated despite my shame.

I see you in your last illness ravaged by the unrelenting fever, and your beloved standing frozen at your feet. I see you dipping your hand in water and wiping your blessed face. It is as if I can hear the rupturing of the breaking hearts and the very echo of the falling tears. I can feel the agony of the earth, and the embarrassments of nature at the illness overcoming your body, and I even feel their embarrassment at the searing heat. But the earth and nature confess their servility to God and their inability to waver before God's decree. I can see it, and I see you overcoming your pain to rise and confront the burdens of fate. You face your people and say, "Whoever has erred and fears his fate, let him come forward so that I may pray for him." Among

those who rise is a man who tells you, "I am a liar and a hypocrite and there is no sin that I did not commit." 'Umar Ibn al-Khattab, may God bless his soul, looks at the remorseful fellow and in pity exclaims, "My fellow, you have embarrassed and shamed yourself." But you, and blessed be you, you say, "'Umar, the embarrassments of the Hereafter are worse than the embarrassments of this earth. Allah, give [this fellow] truthfulness, and faith and lead him to the good."

In embarrassment, I confess my love, and, yet, my longing draws me near. I should absorb my shame in silence, but I feel that I will combust if I do not speak. What I want is impossible and even preposterous, but since childhood this has been my singular dream. I want the laws of nature to break, I want history to revert, and I want to spend a single day in your company. I want to hug your hand, kiss your head, feel your heart, and implore you to pray for me. I want to study your movements, your gestures, the blink of your eye, and memorize your every step. I want to imbue every cell in my brain and every nerve in my body with a sense of your balance and dignity. I want to mend my heart by fully absorbing your beauty, and then rebuild my faith in humanity. Yet, I know that if the earth and nature could not pause to grant you relief, history will not revert, and I will have to go on living in my visions and dreams.

In the mind of my dreams, I can see Thawban (d. 54/674), your charge and friend, his face darkened with dismay. You noticed, and thus you asked, "Thawban, what disturbs you?" Thawban gave the answer that lives in my heart, "Prophet, I am not ill or in pain. It is just that when I am not with you, I miss you terribly until I see you. Then, when you mention the Hereafter, I fear that I will no longer see you because you will be in the highest levels of heaven, and if I enter heaven, I fear I will be at a lower rung. But if I do not enter heaven, I will not see you at all. "My Prophet, Thawban deserved a revelation (4:69), but I—what do I deserve when I see you with the eye of my mind, and the love of my heart? I console myself, for in Bukhari it is reported that you said, "A person [in the Hereafter] will be with whom he loves." But what possible claim do I have when I am such an insignificant newcomer at the tail of so many great others?

I confess my love to you, my Prophet, but my love is not a eulogy of enchantment and idolization. It is the love of the assiduous engagement; the love of conviction, of reflection, of study and examination. I want to study your trials and tribulations, your strength, your power and patience, your intricate balance, and unfathomable beauty.

You are but a human—a beautiful human—and a blessed example for all the nations. I see no merit in the love of selfishness and simple sensations. I see no merit in the love that is simply a form of indulgent self-affirmation. I want to absorb your example, transform myself, and learn the road to our salvation. I want to explore the meaning, the subtleties, the implications, and permutations. If I study your *hadith*

and *Sunna*, I find but a complex mixture of data. It is the heart and mind that places this matrix of data on a bed of beauty. It is the heart and mind that weaves its morality. It is my vigilant heart and probing mind that engage you in my dreams, and guide my sensations.

I see you after your migration with your camel leading the way. It picks the spot where the mosque in Medina is destined to be. But the land belongs to two young men, and they insist that the land is a gift. But you insist on paying them just and full compensation.

You did not take the rights of people for granted; you did not pretend that the ends justify the means. You treated your people with dignity, and with dignity they learned to live free of fear.

After the hardship and homesickness of migration came the affliction of disease. Both Abu Bakr al-Siddiq (d. 22/634) and Bilal Ibn Rabah (d. 17–21/638–642) fell ill with malaria, and when 'Aisha (d. 58/678) would nurse them they would lament their homesickness in poetry. I see you praying that God would replace the hardships with ease. I see you imploring God that Medina would become the land of the free. It came true my Prophet, but today, we continue our migrations chased by our fears. Our loss of dignity has become an unrelenting moral disease.

I see you, my Prophet, your gaze to the ground is longer than the sky, ever reflecting, adorned by humility. I see you in your dignity. If a newcomer arrives, you move quickly to give them a seat. I see you quick to smile, quick to greet, neither harsh nor offensive, rarely angry. If you did become angry, you simply turn your face away in silence. I see you generous with praise, never castigating or disparaging, averse to conflict, and averse to comfort—always rising to the challenges of history.

I see you in the day of Badr with 'Ali and Abu Lubaba by your side alternating the ride on one camel on the way to battle. 'Ali and Abu Lubaba offer you their turn on the camel, and you exclaim, "You are not more capable of walking than I, and I need God's blessings no less than you."

At the end of the battle, in the midst of your happiness at God's victory, you learn that your beloved daughter Ruqayya (d. 2/624) died, succumbing to disease. And so, victory mingles with calamity, and the blessings and tests of God never cease. So many tests and so many blessings, and I reflect upon your remarkable balance. After the Battle of Khaybar and during the ecstasy with God's victory, your daughter Zaynab (d. 7/628) takes her last breath as you sit close by. You comfort your son-in-law and now motherless granddaughter, and bury your daughter with your own hands. After the expedition of Tabuk, you returned home to find that Umm Kulthum (d. 9/630), your daughter, had died. You console her husband, bury her, and dry your tears. Truly, the tests of God never cease. Then, honored with the Lord's victories and the approach of the Farewell Pilgrimage, a calamity befalls your son Ibrahim (d. 10/632). He falls ill and takes his last breath at your side. He was a vivacious and

lively child; your arms embraced him with the delight of love, but now you hold his lifeless body, as your love bleeds in tears. When the sun eclipsed, the mourners said it eclipsed in bereavement, but you stood up and said, "The sun and moon are the signs of God. They do not eclipse for the death of any human being." Earlier during the life of your beloved wife Khadijah Bint Khuwaylid (d. 3 years before *hijra*/619), you witnessed death taking your baby boys al-Qasim and 'Abdullah from her arms. My Prophet, you know that people witness the death of a single child and their sense of balance forever dissipates. I beg of you, teach me your sense of balance in confronting the trials of my fate.

In Uhud, I see you proceed to battle outnumbered by your enemies. At the approach of battle, 'Abdullah Ibn Ubayy Ibn Salul (d. 9/631) withdraws with one-third of the Muslim army and leaves you and the believers to your fates. Despite the defeat in Uhud, you seek no slaughter or vengeance against Ibn Ubayy and his army of cowards. 'Umar offers to kill the traitor, and you declare Muhammad does not kill his people. 'Abdullah Ibn 'Abdullah, Ibn Ubayy's son, offers to kill his father for his persistent sedition, and you, my Prophet, state, "No, we will have mercy, and treat him kindly as long as he remains with us." And, when Ibn Ubayy dies after the Battle of Tabuk, you stand and pray at his grave. In a tradition, 'Umar protests the bestowal, upon this long-time hypocrite, of such a grace. You look at 'Umar, smile, and say, "'Umar, pray behind me for I have the choice, and I chose to pray."

When Hatib Ibn Balta'a betrayed you by sending a message to Mecca informing them of your preparations against them, you hold the message in your hand and say, "What is this, Hatib?" His response is as shameful as his actions, but you accept it with forgiveness and remarkable grace. When Mecca is defeated, you grant all an unqualified amnesty, but Fadallah Ibn 'Umayr conspires to have you killed. Fadallah approaches you, looking for his opportunity to plunge his knife in your chest, but you meet him with calm and a smiling face. You say, "What were you thinking of Fadallah?" Nervous, he lies, "Nothing, I was just thinking of God." You laugh kindly, and say, "Fadallah, seek God's forgiveness, and abandon what you intended to achieve." You speak kindly to him and place your blessed hand on his chest to cool his rankling heat. Fadallah lived the rest of his life saying, "I came to kill him, and I left with no man more beloved and dear to me." On another occasion, Ghawrath Ibn al-Harith stealthily comes up to kill you as you sit alone under a tree. Holding his sword, Ghawrath says, "Who can protect you now, Muhammad?" You calmly look at him and say, "God." Perturbed by your calm and his overwhelming guilt, Ghawrath drops the sword. You rush to grab the sword and say, "Who will protect you now Ghawrath?" Then you throw the sword away and forgive him. Ghawrath returned to his masters in Mecca proclaiming, "I have returned to you [from the land of] the best man." Such is your character—your pain and hurt humbly succumb to your faith. Even when your Companions tell you that they have suffered at the hands of their en-

emy, and ask you to pray against them, you respond with, "May God guide the people of Thaqif." In Uhud, with your blood mingled with the blood of your Companions, you are told, "If you would pray to God to curse the people of Mecca [God would answer your prayers]." You wipe your blood and proclaim, "I was not sent to curse people. I was sent as an inviter to the truth and as a mercy for the people. May God guide my people [the people of Mecca] for they do not know."

I see you in these glimpses that are as if revelations into your personality. If only my resolve could match my education. In the Battle of Hunayn, once again you confront a major defection, and most of the *Tulqa'* run in retreat. But the believers persevere and the battle ends in victory. Once again, you seek no punishment, and you accept their contrived apologies. Meanwhile, Abu Talha (d. 34/654), the Companion, runs into his wife Umm Salim wielding a knife angrily—the same courageous Umm Salim who fought in several battles along your side. "What is this Umm Salim?" Abu Talha asks her, and she snaps back, "A knife to fight the enemy, and after that, I will fight those who deserted you in the midst of battle." Abu Talha looks at you and complains, "Prophet do you hear what Umm Salim is saying?" You gently laugh and say, "God has been kind to us Umm Salim, and sustained us from such a deed." For the generations to come, you proclaim that the lives and the honor of Muslims is greater than or the same as the Ka'ba in its sanctity. Despite the pending dangers, you built a society free of subjugation, excoriation, excommunication, and free of fear.

Prophet of God, I long for a life free of humiliation—for a life of beautiful dignity. And, when I long, I visualize you in my dreams. I visualize the moment that Asma Bint 'Amis returned after her migration to Abyssinia. Like most of the emigrants to Abyssinia, she returned after the Battle of Khaybar—after missing most of the early struggle, both its bitter and sweet. Asma was visiting your wife Hafsa Bint 'Umar Ibn al-Khattab (d. 45/665) when 'Umar arrived and saw her. Perhaps he was jesting when he said to Asma, "We migrated with the Prophet and so we have more right to him than you." Jestling or not, Asma became incensed and proclaimed, "By God, I will not eat or drink until I tell the Prophet what you just said, and I will not lie, embellish, or exaggerate." She ran to you complaining and, upon hearing her, you said, "No, he has no right to me more than you. 'Umar and his companions migrated in the way of God once. You [emigrants of Abyssinia] migrated in the way of God twice [the first time to Abyssinia and the second to Medina]." Asma' was a resolute and spirited woman, and such a woman had every right to you. She impressed Abu Bakr al-Siddiq (d. 22/634) and so he married her and, after Abu Bakr died, she married 'Ali your cousin and Companion. Yes, such a woman could claim her rightful position. But what right do we have to you?

When the women of Medina complained that the men manage to outspoke them in meetings, you smiled and gave them their own day. In Bukhari, it is reported that Anas Ibn Malik (d. 93/711) said that any women in Medina could grab you by the

hand and lead you to where she wished, and you would follow her until you fulfilled her need or request. In fact, again, it was Anas Ibn Malik who reported that a senile woman in Medina came and said, "Prophet, I need something from you." My Prophet, you replied, "Umm so and so, choose any place in Medina, and I will sit with you until I get you what you need." Both of you, woman and Prophet, sat down in the place she chose, while she talked and you listened. And, you did not leave until you fulfilled her need. Truly, as God has said, "If you had been harsh and hard-hearted, they would have dispersed from around you" (3:159). But my Prophet, today we care about *fitna* more than we care about need. So if a woman in need would grab a man's hand today, the man would probably look at her and growl, "Let go of my hand, woman!"

When 'Umar heard that your wives argue with you and lose their balance, he came protesting that women are bound to learn to defy their men. Your response was a beautiful smile—a response more telling and more eloquent than a thousand words. Your smile, your magnanimous smile—your smile was the earmark of your balance, your dignity, and the blissful essence of your soul. Your smile melted hearts and was more effective than any possible *bay'a* (oath of allegiance) that could be given. Jarir Ibn 'Abdullah said, "Since I became a Muslim I never felt neglected by the Prophet, and whenever he would see me, he would smile at me." When a man attempted to kiss your hand, you smiled and pulled away while saying, "Do not do that, I am one of you."

When someone in your household would call upon you, you would smile and respond, "At your service." In fact, you did serve your family—you deloused your cloth, mended your sandals, served yourself, cleaned the house, kneaded the bread, and hobbled the camels. You would take the camels to graze, you would eat with the servants, and you would carry your own goods from the market. When 'Aisha (d. 58/678) was asked, "How did the Prophet behave at home?" She responded, "He was in the constant service of his family." Anas Ibn Malik served you in your household for ten years, you never chided him or castigated him, and whenever you would see him you would smile.

You owed money to Zayd Ibn Sa'nah. Zayd approached you as you walked with 'Umar and grabbed you by the collar of your garb yelling, "You, the people of 'Abd al-Muttalib, do not pay back your debts!" 'Umar defended you by yelling and pushing Zayd back. You, my Prophet, smiled, and said, "There is no need for this 'Umar. 'Umar, we wanted more than this from you. You should advise me to pay back my debts, and advise Zayd to be kind in the way he demands his rights." You paid the debt back and more, and Zayd, humbled by your kindness, became a Muslim. I also see you walking with Anas Ibn Malik when a Bedouin comes up from behind you, and grabs the neck of your robe. The ring of the collar leaves a red mark on your blessed neck, and you turn around to look at the brute. He yells, "Give me some of

the money that God has given you!" You smile, and you grant what he asked for. I find my mind wandering to your solemn robe—this robe that seems to have accompanied you for a good portion of your life without the company of a similar robe. I see you standing in Hunayn with the same old garb. You are distributing God's wealth when a group of louts descend upon you. They clamor and fight over the delusional ornaments of this earth until they force you against a tree and snatch even your very robe. You call upon those louts to return your lonely garb, and gently remind them that, other than the clothes on your shoulders, there is not a single thing of value or item of wealth that you intend to reserve for yourself or to keep. There is no wonder in this, for Anas Ibn Malik had said that in your life you never tasted soft bread. There is no wonder when I hear 'Aisha say that three months would pass in your home without a cooking fire being lit. There is no wonder, when upon your death, the only food found in your home was a small batch of edible grain. Even more, you died with your shield pawned with a Jewish merchant.

Yet, my beloved Prophet, at the end, despite the searing fever and pain, you fight your illness and rise to declare, "People, rancor and enmity is not in my character or quality. The most beloved to me are those who have a right over me, and demand it. If this right is justly theirs, then they will unburden me, and I can meet my God in peace." You prayed *Zuhr* sitting down, and afterwards, repeated your request. Finally, a man stood up and said that he had lent you three dirhams, and you gave it to him promptly. Whoever asked for a supplication or prayer you kindly obliged. The end of your burdens and the beginning of ours were now painfully clear.

Your last words were not about property, dominance, or kingdoms. Your last testament was to maintain our prayers and protect the weak. You repeated the testament until your lips stammered, but the voice had retreated to a whisper. Beautiful in life, and beautiful in death—and so your last act of beauty was to clean your teeth. Then, you put the *miswak* down, and closed your eyes. Your head rested on 'Aisha's lap as she stroked your hair and consoled her tears. When your head grew heavy in her lap, she knew that the Prophet of God had now been set free.

Thus, my Prophet, I engage you, and such is the nature of my visions and dreams. Yes, I confess to you that I wish I could break the law of history and live in the beauty of your comfort. But I know that there is no virtue in the idolatry of love or in the pure indulgence of sensation. We worship only God. You were but a human being. It is just that my heart longs for beauty, and you were such a beautiful human being. So I do what I must do with beauty—I engage it and absorb it in the pulse of my heart, in the folds of my mind, and in every fiber of my being. Beauty, my Prophet, becomes my vision of life and my singular dream.