



## MOUND OF LEAVES

*Not a leaf doth fall but with His knowledge.*

**(Qur'an 6:59)**

“John Greene filed his complaint,” should be the words that begin the first chapter of your next book,” the Shaikh said as we drove along a street in Pine Crest, the southern village where he lived at that time. “Do you realize how many people just like him are suffering throughout the entire country?” he asked.

“I am sure there are millions,” I answered. But John Greene was unique for the reason that he complained about being treated unfairly because he was black. One may ask where the uniqueness is. Many black people and others of various nationalities and colors are treated unfairly every day. Yes. But no other person of color had ever lodged a complaint about racial discrimination in that particular southern village before. It is likely that John would never have done it either had he not been awakened by the Shaikh.

It was late winter when John Greene's story began to unfold within my own story during one of my trips to visit my guide. Accompanied by another disciple, I came to the village in order to be in retreat with the Shaikh and to be available for *hizmet*, or service. After driving all day, we arrived late at night. We entered the Shaikh's home with sighs of relief. It was good to be there. No matter how chaotic things became within or in the world around me, there was always peace in the Shaikh's presence. I often wondered what I would do without him in my life. In the past he had reminded me and other *murids* that he was already a dead man: dead to needs for power and reputation; dead to desires to fulfill every whim and inclination; and dead to desires for fulfillment by this world. But also, he had assured us that we would experience our connection with him more strongly when he had crossed over into *akhirat* or eternity.

Looking at myself, I saw that I was still very much a prisoner who only hoped to be free. I felt gratitude for having escaped the narrow cell of a few of my *nafs*; a few longstanding egoistic desires and demands. Unlike the Shaikh, I had not yet achieved complete liberation. Even though I was out of the cell, I remained in confinement. I still sought a means of escape to a greater and more complete freedom beyond my personal prison walls.

Two *murids* (disciples), who departed just before we arrived, left a note behind. The note conveyed greetings of peace (*salaams*) and informed us of messages that had come for the Shaikh who was away. We enjoyed some fruit and tea then said our prayers and took rest for the night. The following day, we kept busy with minor household repairs and cleaning. Just as the time of the Sunset prayer (*salat al-maghrib*) was ending, the Shaikh called. My heart leapt when the phone finally rang. In that moment, I realized that I had spent the entire day anticipating that call. The Shaikh conveyed *salaams* to us with his usual warmth, inquired

about our journey and what time we had reached his apartment. He asked if we knew our way to the airport. I answered that I did not but that I could use a map or easily ask directions.

“Good,” he said. “It will take you about forty minutes. I will see you soon, *insha’Allah* (God willing). Bring my mail too, if you don’t mind. I would like to read it in the car.”

We arrived at the airport and found the Shaikh easily enough. He looked well but it seemed he had a great deal on his mind. He called salaams again, as he sat his briefcase on the car’s back seat, while we exchanged the fraternal greetings of the dervish circle.

“Why are we here?” he said with a sigh, taking the mail into his lap, just as I started the car. “Why are *you* here, Hajji Muhyiddin? Did the Prophet’s journey to Tabuk have any point?”

I took the questions in combination with the sigh as a signal. I understood that a new *irshad*, another lesson was beginning. I had long since learned that the Shaikh never asked any question simply for no effect. His *irshad* was like a Buddhist koan. Sometimes what he asked was baffling and held absolutely no sense of reason for a logical mind; yet it was always given to help the *murid*. The *irshad* was something to solve like a puzzle or riddle, and like the Buddhist master, the Shaikh was as interested in how the disciple answers a question as he was in the content of the disciple’s answer. The Shaikh’s question almost seemed rhetorical in the moment, but I took it seriously nonetheless, as something I should reflect upon. The *irshad* was immense and prophetic. When I read about the events of Tabuk and saw the Qur’anic verses that expound upon what occurred, I began to reflect and understand. But what I understood at first was only the tip of an iceberg.

When the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, announced an expedition against the Byzantines, he began calling together the grandest army he was ever to lead... an army of thirty thousand

strong with ten thousand horses. Interestingly, the announcement came at the time when the dates were ripening and the heat was oppressive. Most of the community however, made haste with preparations but some people made excuses. The hypocrites, together with some from among the Bedouin and from among the less devout, asked to remain behind. But also four highly reputed men of good faith procrastinated and delayed until finally, the army left without them.

About ten days after the army had set out, one of the four who had stayed behind realized that he had made a mistake and rushed to join the Prophet and his army. He was welcomed. Finally, the confrontation with the Byzantines never happened. But the expedition exposed people to themselves and to each other. After spending twenty days at Tabuk the Prophet returned to Medina. The hypocrites who had made excuses approached him and he accepted what they said. But he also told them that God was aware of their secret thoughts. As for the three believers who had not come, they were cut off from the community and orders were given that no one should speak to them *until God decided their case. The three lived as outcasts for fifty days.* On the morning of the fiftieth day, after the Morning Prayer, the Prophet announced that Allah Almighty had relented and he told the three that the revelation had come:

*He also turned in mercy to the three, the decision of whose case was deferred. So despondent were they that the earth with all its vastness, and their own souls, seemed to close in upon them. They knew for certain that there was no refuge from Allah except in Him. Then He turned to them in mercy so that they could repent. Surely, Allah is the One Who is the acceptor of repentance, the Most Merciful.*

**(Qur'an 9:118)**

During the time that I was visiting the Shaikh, he invited me to lunch together with John Greene, his wife, and his son. We sat down for the meal at a rather typical family-style restaurant, which had a reasonable menu with hearty home-cooked food. John's son was the center of attention. About seven years old, the precocious child was articulate, alert, perceptive and obviously bright. He was a delightful presence... smiling, cute with dimples, a good appetite and good manners. That lovely child was born among the people who are oppressed but his potential could be clearly seen.

Later, I commented to the Shaikh about *qaumu sahib*, the people who are the rightful owners. The Shaikh had told me that the people who are held low are often the inheritors and that everyone will have his or her day. "The wheel of fortune is always turning around," he said. "One day the king is over the slave, the next day the slave becomes the king."

During lunch, I learned that at that time in the mid-1980's John was earning \$10,000 a year when he needed no less than \$20,000 to support his family. John may have even been better qualified than some who earned more or who were his superiors at work. But color prejudices ran deep in some southern cities and even after the Civil Rights era in the United States, some considered that blacks like John were less than human.

On a completely different level, the Shaikh was oppressed in his work but he never cowered to it. The Shaikh not only inspired John but he directed John and showed him how to address the system that choked him. The Shaikh showed him the necessity of standing up for himself and his family and that he should not be weak and allow the evils of oppression to overtake him. I suspect that the Shaikh also told John that if he made the effort, he would prevail and that he should not be stopped by fear. John was stunned but his face and his wife's face were as open as the blue sky above us that day. They both listened to the Shaikh. I witnessed John's

opening with regard to his predicament. As I looked at him, I could feel him shifting from doubt to stronger belief and confidence in his value, and also courage to fight for more.

Later, during the ride home the Shaikh told me that the people who lived at Tabuk were a desert people. He said that although they did not have a great deal of interest in spiritual matters, they were good people whose energies were primarily centered on earning a living. “John is one of those desert people of today,” the Shaikh said. “Struggling against the system that presses him down will help his own best interest.”

We rode in silence as the Shaikh looked out the window. “When the leaves blow away,” he said, “the evil shows itself because then the *kafirs*, (the ones who reject faith) always react whenever their comfort is disturbed. Hajji Muhyiddin, what is this *dunya* that is not leaves? It is just a mound of leaves.”

The Shaikh had repeatedly given us hints that hard days were ahead. He flatly told us that we were entering a time of immense trial and that the hardships would give us the opportunity to stand up like John and grow through the suffering.

The Shaikh also warned us that a man from the east would be a part of our trial. “You will know him because he will ask you not to say: *Rabbana wa lakal hamd*.” The thought seemed so incongruous; it made some of us burst into laughter. These words: “Our Lord, to You is the praise and thanks,” are routinely uttered in each cycle of daily prayer. But the Shaikh was not laughing because he knew better than any one of us how urgent the warning was. We would be shown the true meaning of what *tariqat* is and then be left with a personal choice of whether it is the path we want to be traveling on or not.

“Since Kerbala, there has never been a time more serious,” the Shaikh said. “Evil is triumphant everywhere. We have no odds...

We have absolutely no chance. We need an urgent remedy for the wound. What is more, those on the side of justice usually suffer most and the people on the other side do not listen to the truth. It is our duty to stand up for the right of life regardless of what obstacles exist.”

“I will also tell you this,” said the Shaikh: “*tariqat* is the light in the thunderstorm for humanity. It is composed of people who stand up for the truth. This is the characteristic of a Muslim, a person who is in peace and submission to God... and God knows who is a Muslim. One who is Muslim carries a most honorable title. It is higher than the title of deans and presidents. It is higher than those of princes and kings. Nothing is higher. The highest possible rank is to be annihilated or lost in Allah. More than anything else, what Shaikhs desire for their *murids* is satisfaction in their relationship with God.”

I realized from past lessons that I might not have had the faith or courage to choose annihilation in God in that moment. But I understand that it is available for those who seek it. How one achieves such a state is almost a paradox because it is more an outcome of *being* than *doing*. The Shaikh gave us a clue when he said: “*Niyyet*, or intention is greater than the action or *doing* we call *amal*. The power of sincerity, *adab*, and submission is greater than you know.”

I returned to the southern village where John Greene lived many times but I never saw him again. For a long time I wondered why the Shaikh did not discuss John’s case. Whenever I mentioned it to others something always interrupted us or interfered. Finally, I saw that the lesson in John Greene’s story was not about John at all. The lesson was about myself. I must take the same responsibility that John Greene finally took, which was to write the best conclusion he could to his own story. In truth, this is what each

of us is doing. We are writing our lives each day by the decisions and choices we make, for and against our very own selves.

Years after John Greene's incident, the Shaikh still talks about standing up against oppression, as much now if not more than before. How much suffering we *murids* could have avoided if we had understood the lesson he tried to teach us. But we were unable to bring the teaching into our collective consciousness quickly enough. Before we realized it, the things that the Shaikh had warned us about were happening in our lives and all around us.

“What is there of this *dunya* that is not leaves?” the Shaikh asked again. Then he smiled and answered: “It is just a mound of leaves.” Soon I began to realize that the whole question of human potential and possibility is hidden in this apparently simple question. The question points to the secret of what one can *be* and *do* in this phenomenal world (known as *dunya*), once one sees it for what it truly is.

“Everyone is waiting for his or her moment,” the Shaikh told us, “and everyone's moment will come.”

The fruit of faith: the moment of transformation, comes the moment the seeker opens his or her heart to this simple truth about *hayyat-ad-dunya*, the life of this world: It is just a mound of leaves. If one decides that *dunya* has the substance of Mount Everest or Mount McKinley, then one will have endless mountains to climb. But if in the face of what seems so impenetrable, heavy and immense, one sees that this *dunya* is really *whatever one decides it is*, then one can make what some tend to *see* as a Mount Everest or Mount McKinley, nothing more than a mound of leaves.



## **CHAPTER 1**





## THE WALKING BUSHES

*He is the First and the Last, the Evident and the Hidden and  
He has full knowledge of all things.*

**(Qur'an 57:3)**

In early spring of my eleventh year on the Path, I visited the Shaikh again. Traveling with another dervish, we departed by car in the early morning hours. It was an entire day's journey to the small Southern village where the Shaikh resided at the time. In many ways there was nothing extraordinary about making such a trip. The Shaikh had moved often over the years and it was not unusual for his *murids* to travel, in order to be with him. Aside from my hopes for spending some time in *khalwat*, I was not expecting anything spectacular. Really, just to be around the Shaikh, experiencing the energy in the atmosphere around him, would certainly be enough.

The day could not have been more perfect for travel. It was a clear and blue-skied, balmy day, with sunshine and gentle breezes. Everything seemed wonderfully picturesque. The day was so strikingly lovely that I was surprised each time I turned my head. The beauty of things around us seemed to be enhanced by the beauty of the day. We arrived late at night and were greeted by a *murid* who welcomed us, offered food and drink of which we moderately partook, and then retired to our respective corners to rest.

On the following day, the Shaikh sat down with us to talk. He had recently returned from a journey to Tasmania. In the moment he began the conversation and *muhabbat*, the telephone rang. He had given me the charge of answering the telephone throughout my stay so I took the call and returned to my place.

“Who was that?” he asked and I gave the *murid*’s name.

“And what was his concern?” He continued pursuing the details.

“He wanted to see you,” I said. “And had hopes to speak to you in person but as you had advised, I mentioned that it might not be a good time for either. I suggested that he call later if that was his desire.”

“Good,” said the Shaikh with unaffected directness. “And how did he respond?”

“With difficulty,” I said. “It seemed that he was hearing the message but it was a message he did not want to hear. He was attempting to hear it while struggling to find an opening.”

“That is interesting what you say Hajji Muhyiddin, and that you use this word: *opening*. Does my *murid* understand that the opening he seeks is something which he must come to within? Even though he does not realize it at this time because of what he desires, the opening must be found inside himself?”

It was this event which began our *muhabbat* that evening, all of which centered on the startling power of self-awareness and

issues of opening. Early in the talk the Shaikh told a story which seemed entirely unrelated at first but later became quite clear. It was about a man who journeyed to a certain place to rest but after having arrived at that place, found he was unable to relax. All that he could hear was the sound of a child blowing a whistle. He attempted to ignore it but each time the whistle sounded he jerked. Soon he became irritated and annoyed but the child continued to blow on the whistle for hours. Finally, in desperation, the man called from the window:

“Young man, is that you blowing the whistle?”

“Yes,” said the child.

“I take it that you like to whistle very much,” said the man in a forced friendly tone.

“Yes, I do,” the child answered.

“That’s a fine whistle you’ve got but do you know what?”

“What?”

“I’ll give you ten dollars if you stop whistling. What do you say?”

“Okay,” said the child. “You’ve got a deal.”

Pleased to have resolved it, the man returned to his bed to rest. But before his head hit the pillow, he heard the sound of more whistles, all of them now being blown at once. Looking from the window he saw that every child in the vicinity had gathered beneath his window and was blowing a whistle. Throwing open the window he cried out in exasperation:

“Hey! Can somebody down there tell me exactly what’s going on?”

“Yes,” one of them answered. “We heard there was a crazy man around here who gives ten dollars if you stop blowing your whistle.”

About this story, the Shaikh only gave a question: “When God sends something unpleasant to us, should we try to change it?”

Although the question did give a small indication, it was only the tip of an iceberg. Soon I began to understand the point of the story which dealt with the issue of opening. When faced with a problem, one may choose a solution that truly opens or one may choose a solution that results in closing. The “right choice” involves a paradox because there are times when what seems to be an opening may actually close one off, while alternately, what seems to be a closing may actually open a whole new realm of concerns. This dilemma is very important for a spiritual seeker to understand. Through the teaching which the Shaikh presented that evening, the point of his story became increasingly clear.

The Shaikh had noticed me writing and asked me what I was working on and if my project had a title. I told him that I had only thought of two possibilities so far. They were *Passage to Nowhere* and *Into the Shadows*. The Shaikh looked at me and said: “What you have written may be profound but neither of the titles is suitable for your work. They sound like something you would find on one of those novels in a supermarket.”

The Shaikh’s reaction caught me completely off guard. I was surprised by his bluntness and it was hard to discard my ideas and accept his suggestion. But I noticed my resistance and attempted to let go so that I might discover his meaning.

The Shaikh brought my reaction into the *muhabbat*. He expounded on the theme of subjective perceptions and types of understanding, which he said “in some ways limit one’s imagination and broader scale conceptualization.” To illustrate his point, he gave a vignette concerning some Tasmanian missionaries he had encountered while on his journey. These missionaries had strongly warned him not to eat anything in the hotel where he

had registered. They also said to him that they would have in fact preferred to house him in their own homes and by their standards of hospitality, not permitted the Shaikh to stay in a hotel. Had the Shaikh not insisted that he *must* stay at the hotel because he had already paid the fees, they would have probably never accepted his decision.

“Just make sure that you don’t eat anything when you go there,” the missionaries added. “And watch out for the cats.”

Oddly enough, when the Shaikh arrived at the hotel, he found that members of the hotel staff were inviting him to eat at every turn. In some moments, their subtle suggestions seemed to become demands that hovered on the brink of force.

“You must eat something,” said a clerk at the desk. “You’ve had a long journey. Are you sure we can’t get you something? It will be no problem to prepare something for you. We can even have it sent to your room.”

“No thank you,” the Shaikh repeatedly said.

“Well then, at least have a drink. Surely, a drink would be refreshing. You certainly must have something.”

“No thank you,” said the Shaikh as he turned to walk to his room. He crossed under a thatched-roof archway and passed through a hallway to reach the door of his room. No sooner than he had taken out his key to unlock the door, the maid approached him again.

“Good evening, Sir. May I help you with those bags? I do hope that you find everything satisfactory in your room. And may I get you something to eat or drink? You must be hungry after such a long journey.”

“No thank you.”

“But you must have something. Are you absolutely sure? Getting room service to deliver it right to your door, even to that table near your bed in the room would be no trouble.”

“No thank you,” said the Shaikh.

When he returned to the missionaries the following day, the Shaikh was immediately questioned.

“Did you eat anything while you were there?”

“I only ate an orange,” he said.

“What!” they all gasped in unison. “How could you do that after the warnings we gave? From exactly where did this orange come?”

“I had the orange with me already,” the Shaikh replied. “I had been keeping it in my bag.”

“That is okay,” they all replied with great sighs of relief, the color now returning to their faces. “You had us greatly worried for a minute.”

This is as far as the Shaikh went with the story. Without any special warning, he then suggested that we should come up with the title or perhaps even try to imagine what the end of the story should be.

“But we don’t know enough. We only have a fragment,” said one of the dervishes.

“You have imagination and this would be a good way to use it,” said the Shaikh in a frankly serious tone. “This is an exercise in abstract thinking.” I threw out some ideas: “How about Hotel Forbidden Fruit or Mysterious Tasmanian Missionaries?” The Shaikh shook his head. The blank looks of the dervishes told me they had no interest. No other titles were forthcoming.

Later, in the evening, the Shaikh gently suggested ways we might best use our time. “While you are here just make an attempt to explore your own vulnerability in the face of something



different from what you know,” he said. “Try to put your concepts and questions aside.”

We had a meal together and heard more about the Shaikh’s journey, most of which to our unawares or not, was a part of his attempt to teach us. Another one of the stories he told us was about a package he was asked to deliver to a man he was to meet in the international airport at Chicago. However, the man did not arrive at the appointed time. When the Shaikh was unable to wait any longer, he boarded a shuttle to another part of the airport in order to transfer flights. In the shuttle, directly across from him, was a woman with a little girl. The Shaikh was observing the depth and wisdom of that child’s most unusual eyes, which he said were quite beyond her years. His pondering was interrupted by the mother who had noticed the name of the man on the large envelope that he held in his lap. The Shaikh examined her by making a comment about the man’s four children. The woman responded that she knew that in fact, the man had only two children and the daughter affirmed this because those children were her playmates. Moreover, the woman said that her family and the man’s family were friends and would be having dinner sometime later that week. Upon hearing this and being satisfied that indeed she spoke the truth, the Shaikh turned the package over to her and asked if she would deliver it to the man.

“What I want to ask you,” the Shaikh said to us, “is if this could possibly be coincidence? What are the chances that such a thing would happen? In an airport the size of Chicago O’Hare, what are the odds of meeting someone like that woman and her child?”

Later that evening, just before midnight, the Shaikh suggested that we all go outside. We had been around the apartment for most of the day and he thought it would be good if we went outside for a while.

“Would you like to take a walk?” he asked. “I want you to explore the walking bushes.”

He brought us all before the window. With puzzled expressions we looked out as we listened to the Shaikh’s instructions.

“Go toward the light. Tonight is a special night but you cannot stay long. You must return in fifteen minutes.”

He pointed to an amber colored light, which peered out from the trees in the distance. As we stepped over the threshold into the outside hallway the Shaikh spoke to us again before closing the door. Even though I understood him to be addressing the three of us who were present, I was standing closest to him and he was looking directly into my face.

“All of *tariqat* (the Path’s opportunities), will be available and *haqiqat* (the realization of Truth), if they are desired. They must be wanted,” he said. “But here we must return to the earlier issue of vulnerability. One must find the willingness to allow that one’s concepts simply do not apply.”

In a moment, we three disciples were down the steps and outside the building walking along the street. Just as we crossed the lawn, I heard what sounded like a dog barking in the distance. The sounds were followed by a stark and sudden silence. Nothing could be heard except the sound of an occasional car passing along some other not too distant road. The three of us walked while most of the people slept. Yet what appeared to us and what was unveiled perhaps rivaled the dreams of the sleepers. There, along that dark and winding street, what we saw I understood so little about; it might just as well have been a dream.

The night was perfect to the eye. In the sky there was only an occasional star and a low-hanging, ceasing crescent moon. The road was storybook-like and idyllic as it gently wound its way along. All the nearby houses sat in neat little rows, their lawns

manicured and impeccably trimmed. Somehow, the trees and bushes seemed stately and noble. Their branches extended and reached in circular patterns into the night, their leaves full and green with the vibrancy of late spring, but yellowish by the color of the reflection of the soft amber light from lamp posts here and there. Peering at the trees I could not fathom them moving, so serious and well-planted they appeared to be. But when I quickly spun around to see if a tree or bush might be fleeting behind my back, from the corners of my eyes, I could see the forms of the trees *beyond* the trees, skipping, playing hide-and-seek, and dashing in the shadows. One of the other disciples saw these shadows too. It was he who called my attention to the trees that stood before us where fireflies flashed their lanterns. Though each of those lights was bright as the light of a star in the heavens, it moved as a firefly moves. I was so determined to make it what perhaps it was not (a firefly that is) because I had never known stars to hang so low in the heavens or to move and flash on and off like fireflies. As I pondered this, a car which passed us on the nearby street cast the light of its headlights upon the trees. To my wonderment, I noticed that it left its light behind, still upon the trees. I could hardly believe my eyes. There must be some explanation, I told myself. Yet even as I sought an explanation, a bird or flapping creature of some kind rose up from the ground before me and flew up over my head. I craned my neck around to follow only to see it vanish into the amber light above me. It was this experience, which inspired a poem that I later shared with the Shaikh:

*Creatures of night fly off into light,  
With dancing shadows of trees.  
Stars flash low like fireflies,  
While shadows run in the breeze.*

*A war is waged upon my concepts  
And ways I think I understand  
It seems an invitation perhaps,  
Into a nearby distant land.*

When we returned to the Shaikh's apartment, he asked about what we had seen. I had not written anything at the time but I reported to him briefly about what I had noticed.

“As I have done with other *murids*, I sent you together for mutual support,” he said. “But if I send you alone, be assured, you will likely see even more.”

Much went on that first day with the Shaikh. His teaching took us late into the night. After we had returned from our trek to find the walking bushes, the *muhabbat* continued to draw us deeper and deeper into its theme. That theme as I understood it then, was about two overlapping concerns. The first of these was about issues of opening: How to find one's opening, how to open, and what to open oneself to or not. The second was about learning how to see properly. Seeing had to do with our perceptions and concepts, our rigid structures of thinking and views of the world, all of which at some particular junction on the spiritual path become obstacles to growth.

Sometime after midnight, as we sat engrossed in the lively *muhabbat*, attempting to connect the threads of the teaching; the lesson of the walking bushes and the shadows, the telephone suddenly rang. No one expected the phone to ring at that hour except for the Shaikh who insisted that he must answer the call. He took the call and after speaking for a minute or two, handed the telephone over to me and asked me to converse with a stranger. That stranger happened to be someone who was not a *murid*. The

Shaikh stood there beside me while I attempted to find my balance, to not say too much, yet not say too little and observe my own heart as I spoke. After a little while, he took back the phone and in due time concluded the conversation.

After the phone call he looked at us. “Why did I answer this phone call?” he asked. “Why did the call come at this particular time? Is this a coincidence? What kind of person was this?” he asked, now addressing the questions directly to me. “Give me a description of this person’s personality based upon the voice. Tell me, what is the meaning of this?”

One of the disciples and I attempted to answer the Shaikh’s questions. The other dervish saw many connections concerning the caller and the shadows that still were not apparent to me. I expected that there was a connection that simply escaped me at the time. Later, I realized that through all of the events of the evening, the Shaikh was continuing his teaching about opening and closing. In the personal sense, it was a lesson of the heart, at least as much as I understood it. It was a lesson about to whom and to what one should open oneself and one’s heart, and who and what one should be closed to.

Let the seeker know that on the spiritual path one is faced with one’s own idiosyncratic and innermost whims and desires; one’s attachments and longings and dreams and hopes. This or God... that or God. There are choices at every turn and no room for two. In fact, no room for you (meaning your ego and its baggage)! When Shaikh al-Akbar said that “the journey is based upon toil and the hardships of life, on afflictions and tests and the acceptance of dangers and very great terrors,” he meant exactly what he said. “It is not possible,” he informed the seekers, “to find in this journey unimpaired comfort, security or bliss.”



## **CHAPTER 2**







## FURTHER INTO THE BUSHES

Late in the night after all that had happened, I sat up compiling notes and composing a poem about “*The Walking Bushes*” and brainstorming titles for the story about the missionaries the Shaikh had encountered in Tasmania. Inspired by the *muhabbat* and what I had seen on the walk, I worked on these things diligently that night and at intervals during the next day. The Shaikh was busy for several hours during the day. On the day after the first *muhabbat*, he did not sit with us until late in the evening. When he finally did join us, he came with teachings of power and force and we each got more than what we expected. The lessons of that night addressed things that were painfully difficult and intimately personal issues. Each lesson was fully fraught with struggle, which the Shaikh pushed us into head-on.

Perhaps a half-hour before midnight, the Shaikh changed the pace and proposed that we all go out for a ride. We all climbed into the other dervish’s car and in a moment, we were on the main

street of the town. The Shaikh suggested that we might want to stop in a restaurant for some refreshments but every one we tried was already closing. Somewhere in our ride we stopped at a post office where the Shaikh mailed a card or a letter then he stopped us near a large super market in a shopping plaza and got out of the car.

“You go on and look for another restaurant down the road. If nothing is open, then go over there and wait for me.” He pointed to an all night food and gas mart. “Go inside and have something. I will meet you there, *insha’Allah*.”

We drove off and finding nothing open we arrived at the gas pumps to sit and wait for the Shaikh. I went into the store to buy a soft drink and to see what I could see. I noticed that there were two police cars parked on the side of the store as we pulled into the lot. One of the policemen was standing behind the counter inside talking to one of two young women cashiers. Another was standing outside near a motorbike parked on the sidewalk, talking to another woman. The woman was standing at the curb near a van, which appeared to be hers. There was a man inside the van at the wheel. I did not get the sense of anything problematic in the scene, except that the policeman at the counter was unusual. I couldn’t understand why he had gone behind the counter to talk with the young woman. Further, I did not know if seeing them had anything to do with why we were sent there but since I knew that the Shaikh might examine me concerning what I saw, I attempted to be more alert and observe things around me. Both police cars were gone before the Shaikh arrived. I was sitting in the car just finishing my soft drink when I looked up to see him crossing the street, walking toward us. He walked directly to the entrance of the store then called for us to join him.

“Would you like to play a game?” he asked.

We all looked nonchalant. Actually, his suggestion seemed a bit strange. But I had not forgotten the things, which he had said earlier that night so I tried to stay open and go with the flow. In the rear of the store was a coin-operated game, which consisted of a huge glass box inside of which were countless cheap, soft and furry toys. Except for the fact that they were all relatively small in size, they were much like what one might expect to win in a carnival for knocking bottles from a shelf with a ball. Above the toys in the top of the glass box was a crane-like contraption, at the end of which was fashioned a kind of mechanically-operated grabbing device. After depositing twenty-five cents, one could press buttons that would move the crane only twice, in predictable directions. After this, however, one was helpless but to let the grapple randomly fall wherever it might. All one could do was twist one's face or shift one's body like a would-be driver in the passenger seat of a car, in desperate hope that something would be grabbed and delivered down the chute.

All of us tried the game without winning a thing. I felt stupid. I returned to the cashier at least twice for change but neither my own heartless efforts nor those of the others were to any avail. We left the store empty-handed and perplexed about why the Shaikh had asked us to play this game. Later it dawned upon me that it was just those questions and that very attitude I had seen in myself that I should have been guarded against. The Shaikh's teaching had gone to such levels of subtlety that I nearly missed the lesson in spite of the fact that he had said many things earlier to help us. His stories, advice, comments, and questions had illustrated the teaching. Such things for example as: "Try and put your concepts and questions aside," or "could this possibly be coincidence? What are the chances such a thing would happen, what are the odds in an airport the size of O'Hare?"

Weeks later, after much reflection on the lesson, it dawned upon me that if God can do whatever He wills in a place as large as Chicago O’Hare, He can do exactly the same if He chooses, in a glass game box in a store. But in order to win at the game, I had to change my whole way of perceiving and thinking. I must eventually come to see that the reason I was not getting any soft furry toys or not finding my opening, so to speak, was not because something is wrong with the game but rather, because something is wrong with me. Until I recognized that my questioning, doubting attitude and present ways of viewing the world were holding me back, *the opening* would continue to escape me. So it was that we all left the store empty-handed that night, in more ways than one. The Shaikh showed not the slightest hint of disappointment despite our thick-headedness. In fact, he continued his efforts to teach us.

Now let the seeker understand that the Master does not abandon his disciple, no matter how it seems. The true Shaikh working hard to bring the *murid* to perfection has not less than one hundred twenty-four thousand ways and means of approach in his grasp. So long as desire remains in the heart of the *murid*, the Shaikh will remain as his or her guide.

Back inside the car, the Shaikh looked to me with what seemed a completely unrelated question.

“What was I doing when I was across the street while you were waiting at the gas mart?”

Actually, I had wondered what he might be doing and I had tried to picture him in my mind as we were driving. I told him what I thought: That in my mind I had a picture of him inside the supermarket stopping at a fruit bin to inspect some fruits, then moving to some nearby aisles in search of something he had in mind to either bring to or use with us.

The Shaikh listened to my comments, then looked directly into my face and said:

“You must learn to see me clearly whether I am close to you or far away.” When we returned to the Shaikh’s apartment, he did not conduct any *muhabbat* but we did sit together with him briefly before he retired to his room. I mentioned that I had begun writing about the walking bushes and asked if he would be interested in listening to a little of what I had written so far. I also mentioned that I had attempted to come up with a name for his story. Even though it was late, he said that he would like to listen to me. He seemed pleased that I had followed his suggestion and I was happy to have made an effort that he considered worthy of attention. As I took out my notes and papers, he and the other disciples gathered around to listen. I presented a few paragraphs and tried to be brief. In a few minutes I was done.

“That is very beautiful.” said the Shaikh. “Very beautiful, yes. *Alhamdulillah*, and that which you have before you will become your next book. *Insha’Allah*.”

Needless to say, I was pleased and most surprised at how suddenly things emerged on this path. Until I came into that moment, I did not have any clue that a book would come forth even though I was writing. Suddenly it was *deja vu*. Years before, I had come to the Shaikh’s apartment with a handful of notes and papers, just after I had become a *murid*.

“What is that you have in your hand?” he had asked.

“Oh, just some notes.” I replied with hesitation.

“I know,” he said. “I know exactly what they are. I’m directing you through a book.”

Indeed those notes became the first chapter of the book: *The Writing on the Water*. So now the past became the present. That night I also mentioned some of my titles to the Shaikh, related

to his story. Out of the four or five ideas presented, the Shaikh reacted positively to three. These were “Banquet for Fools,” “The Untouched Plate,” and “Beyond the Thatched Roof”.

“You have left out the word Tasmania,” he commented. “And that word is a key. So you might say for example: ‘Beyond the Tasmanian Thatched Roof.’ ” There was another idea I had too, I confessed. But I was not sure exactly where it fit. The idea was “Corridor of Shadows”.

“*Corridor of Shadows*,” the Shaikh repeated, his smile almost turning to laughter. “That is a good title and where it fits is exactly everywhere!”

I heard the Shaikh’s answer but I did not understand it at the time. As I sat there allowing the dust of my mind to settle, the Shaikh stood, gave salaams and left the circle. The two other disciples retired to their corners and I was intending to do the same. But after settling down, I found myself wide-awake and not ready to sleep. I decided to turn out the lamp and sit to do *dhikr*. Just as I reached for the lamp switch, the Shaikh re-entered the room.

“Hajji Muhyiddin,” he said with a voice of intensity and directly, as if there was no time to waste. “Can you come with me? I’d like to go out with you for a while.”

“Yes, of course I can,” I said. I borrowed the car of the dervish with whom I came. As the Shaikh and I went out of the apartment, I was suddenly snatched into another completely new level of teachings. With no warning and no clue, another door was thrust open and again, I was simply flung into a corridor that led into another realm. That night, the Shaikh examined me again. It was a prelude of things to come. He began talking to me as soon as we entered the car. I started the engine and pulled off as he spoke.

“Your first book was the about *tariqat*,” he said. “And what was the last statement in that book?”

“*Antal hadi antal haqq. Laisal hadi illa hu,*” I said. “You are the One Who is the Guide and you are the Real, the True. There is no one who guides except for Him,” I answered.

“You had *hidayah,*” said the Shaikh. “You are guided and in the second book you will go further to explore the invisible world. This is the world of your reality. But in it there will be no needle, no clogged pipes, and no speeches in the park such as you had before to help you. In the invisible world you will experience yourself with no existence. You will experience this world as if it were an apparition. And there will be more, *insha’Allah.*”

We reached a certain intersection on the road and the Shaikh indicated that I go left. I turned onto a row of quiet professional buildings, and then pulled into a small parking lot. The Shaikh exited the car.

“Wait for me here,” he said, then walked across the lot and disappeared into the building. I could not see where he had gone once he was inside but I attempted to follow him by my heart. I realized that he had not brought me with him just for company or for chit-chat, so I attempted to tune-in and stay alert. Sure enough, when he returned, he questioned me about what he had done inside the building.

“What did you do while I was inside?” he asked. “What did you notice?” he inquired as soon as he re-entered the car.

I told him that I had attempted to maintain a connection with him while he was in the building and to follow him by observing my heart.

“That is very good,” he said in a tone of voice that gave the impression of genuine interest. “Tell me exactly what you saw.”

I told the Shaikh that it seemed he had walked down a long corridor and that shortly after he had entered the building he passed

another person. It seemed that the person was a man and that the Shaikh had spoken to him briefly, then entered another room.

“And that room you saw,” he said, “was it on the right or left of the corridor?”

I told him that it was on the right.

“Good,” he said. “Please continue.”

I told him that once he was inside the room, he approached a desk, took something from a drawer, and then exited the room.

“Let us go,” he said, pointing which way he wanted to exit the lot. I followed his direction and listened intently as he spoke.

“During the remaining night of your stay you will explore the bushes. I want you to go deeper into them. You will discover paths to take you further back inside away from the road. Have you read Dante’s *Inferno*?” he asked as if the title had somehow come into mind. I answered that I had not. I told him that I had read sections of it in college.

“There is a river called Acheron,” he said. “And you should read what Dante’s teacher Virgil says to him about reaching that place.”

As we rode, we talked about other aspects of the *muhabbat* of earlier that evening and other aspects of my personal struggle. In a short time we reached the apartment and came inside. The Shaikh retired to his room and I to my corner where I had much upon which to reflect.

The following morning the Shaikh called the *azan*. It seemed that he had not slept a wink. We said the Morning Prayer together and sat for a modest morning meal. The Shaikh spoke to us for a short while, then left to attend affairs of his day. We saw him again for a little while in the afternoon, and then he left us again. He had given each of us respective things to be done and he left us to carry them out on our own.



Later on that day, sometime just after sunset, I received a visit from an unseen being who gave me a spiritual lesson on the World of the Shadows. The being did not come with any mysterious light. I had not emerged from any ecstatic meditation or prayer. It simply came as I sat making notes on my experience and wondering what would occur in the bushes that night. The experience was on a level of subtlety I had not experienced before. But I clearly felt its presence, speaking, and giving me direction on the subject of the *World of Shadows*.

“All of existence is imagination within imagination,” the being said, among a great many other things which I am not sure I fully heard or understood at the time, even though I attempted to listen. “Know and remember and do not forget that true existence is only with Him.”

At the appointed hour of the night I was full and raring to go. I left the apartment and went out into the night. I made my way along the street. Not long after I was out, I heard barking sounds from the right. When I came near to the wooded area of the bush, I stopped to observe lights and shadows. Looking into the darkness in the branches of the trees I saw the star-fireflies fluttering round in the shadows. Noticing that one of them continued flashing in the very same spot, I moved in its direction and entered the bush. Immediately, I noticed the noise of my footsteps crushing the leaves. I made my way up onto a little mound near a tall, slender tree in the shadows, which I leaned against so that I might see. As I looked, I saw that I had been joined by two shadows with tall vertical forms shaped like sentinel dogs sitting nearby to my left and to my right. They did not move and their presence conveyed the feeling of safety and peace. My back still leaning against the tree, I squatted down into the darkness and attempted to bring my attention into that space. The sound of cars grew more distant, the darkness grew more pronounced. After sitting quietly for several

minutes, I noticed that the star-fireflies had begun to gather. They looked as if they were stars that had descended to earth. They danced, and shot across the sky like falling comets that twinkled and glittered so sparkly bright I could hardly believe what I saw. But what was surprising was the feeling of normality. It was as if in that place, what was happening was normal. It appeared to be an ordinary occurrence. After what seemed like only a few minutes, the spectacular star-firefly show ended. I noticed now that a dim light had begun to creep across the trees. The night grew still darker as I just sat looking and listening. What I was seeing would ordinarily be considered ominous or frightening, but I had no sense of anxiety or fear. All I had was a sense of appreciation for what I was being allowed to glimpse and the hope I might be allowed to see more. After a while, I heard barking sounds from the left this time. I took this as a cue that my time had ended. I stood up and made my way back through the bush to the roadside. Just as I was exiting, some creature dashed into it. I thought it was a small animal of some kind but it moved too quickly for me to fully see it. It was growling and angry, as if it had been thrown out of the bush so that I could enter. It seemed annoyed that it had no power over me or any ability to be in control. I was startled as it ran past me but not frightened. I stepped back onto the winding road and made my way back to the apartment. I returned to my corner where I sat for a little *dhikr* and prepared to rest for the night. Early the next morning, I received a phone call from the Shaikh. He asked me if I had seen anything while in the bushes the night before and with excitement, I replied yes, that I had.

“I want you to go out into the forest tonight,” the Shaikh told me. Filled with enthusiasm and hopefulness, I could hardly wait for night to come. Finally, when it came, my Lord was more generous than I ever imagined. With gratitude, I prostrated in voluntary prayer and wished blessings and prayers of peace on

the Prophet. I also wished God's blessings upon the noble chain of saintly beings who followed in the footsteps of the Prophets and whose own steps marked my way.

Just outside my building I stood on the lawn. I looked toward the lights, toward which direction the Shaikh had earlier pointed. I looked into the sky to notice what seemed to be the flashing light of a distant airplane and a few scattered stars. I observed the stars carefully and noticed the generally cloudy and overcast skies. I lowered my gaze and looked into the woods.

There were many flashing lights of what seemed to be fireflies. The lights of those creatures were dazzling! Flashing and bright, they were like no fireflies I had ever seen. They seemed to imitate the stars. They flashed with brightness, sometimes here and there, sometimes in clusters. Sometimes with a prolonged light or sometimes they fell in long sweeping arches as if they were shooting stars in the heavens. I watched half-consciously at first, and even though I attempted to remain alert I struggled to stay present and awake. Suddenly, I realized as I stood there, that one light was flashing in one place and it flashed with a particular brilliance. It was the star I had mistakenly seen as an airplane. After a moment it somehow dawned upon me that the flash was indicating the pathway beneath it by which I should enter the woods. To my surprise, when I moved closer I found that a path was indeed there. Following the path, I was led up into the woods. Then suddenly I ran into brambles and such darkness that I could not see. As I stood there wondering whether or not to press forward, the firefly flashed and clearly indicated that I should move to the right about six feet and proceed forward from there. Following this indication, I arrived at another landing deeper in the woods on the elevation of a small hill. To my shocking surprise, the firefly had guided me around a dangerous pit. When I saw what I could have fallen into had I not followed the firefly, my heart began to pound. I