



In Memory of a Great Shaykh
&
In Memory of a Long, Long Friendship

The former Qadi (judge) and teacher at Masjid al-Aqsa in al-Quds (Jerusalem), Shaykh Muhammad Said Al-Jamal ar-Rifa'i ash-Shadhdhuli, affectionately called Sidi by his thousands of students worldwide, passed away after a short illness in San Francisco, California on Wednesday, November 11, 2015, after Asr prayer. He is remembered as a long-time advocate of world peace, who wherever he went preached the spiritual essence of Islam by emphasizing the central message of peace, justice, mercy, love, and freedom as exemplified in the life example of the Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him and his family, of whom the Shaykh was a descendant through his ancestor, Shaykh Ahmad ar-Rifa'i.

He was born in Tulkarum in Syria in 1935. He is the spiritual inheritor through the Shadhdhuli line from his Guide and Master, Shaykh Abdu-r-Rahman Abu-r-Risah of Halab in Syria, and his second teacher, Shaykh Tilmansani, who after rigorous training sent him to al-Quds (Jerusalem), where he worked tirelessly to help the people and to keep Tasawwuf alive as an institution and a school of thought and spiritual knowledge. In 1997 he restored the 1000-year-old Sufi Council that served in the Holy Land. He was the Head of this Council as well as a teacher and central figure at the Masjid al-Aqsa beside the Dome of the Rock, for many years transmitting knowledge at that sacred sanctuary, which is linked for all Muslims to the Holy House in Mecca by the Qur'anic story of the Night Journey (al-Mi'raj) of the Prophet Muhammad, peace & blessings be on him and his family, from the Ka'aba in Mecca to the al-Aqsa Masjid and from there to the heavens. Not only was he a teacher and counselor for all those who come to be at al-Aqsa, but he was also its custodian, for through his hand and leadership in these times this Sacred Precinct has been preserved, in the face of many efforts to destroy it, as a place of prayer for the Muslims who come from all over the world to visit the Holy City and to take the blessing of praying there.



Shaykh Muhammad said there is “righteous anger”, but he refused hatred. He helped whoever needed help, holding drug rehabilitation retreats for both Jews and Palestinians and sponsoring a kindergarden for children of both nations, while giving generously of whatever he had or could collect to the Palestinian families who came to him constantly for advice and assistance. He was a grand human being who was much loved and will be greatly missed.

Shaykh Nooruddeen Durkee met Shaykh Muhammad Al-Jamal in 1969 when he was living on the Mount of Olives in occupied Palestine. At that time Shaykh Muhammad was working as a judge in Bethlehem and Shaykh Nooruddeen was working on a book on the Old City of Jerusalem. Much of this book (never published), besides showing photographs of the Old City and its inhabitants, consisted of interviews with religious luminaries. As it was, Shaykh Nooruddeen and Shaykh Muhammad used to take the same bus from the Mount of Olives to the city, almost every day. When they met, they both had red beards, and this is what initially caused them to recognize one another. (From here on I will use the first person). I asked Shaykh Muhammad if I could interview him for the book, and Shaykh Muhammad said yes, come tonight after Maghrib salat, and he gave me the address, which was very near where I was staying. I came with my translator, who was a Christian Arab from Bethlehem. The kind of easy exchange we had experienced on the bus, even with no translator, was replaced by a kind of stilted official interview, and after an unsatisfactory hour, at the call to prayer for 'Isha, we parted company. I thought then that, unfortunately, was that.

I went home to the house, and about twenty minutes after 'Isha salat I heard a knocking at the gates of the courtyard. When I went out, there was Shaykh Muhammad, who somehow made me understand that he was not satisfied with the interview, and would like to talk with me at length. I invited him in, and during tea he

made me understand that he would like to redo the interview with a better translator.

It so happened that the grandson of my Shaykh Abdur-Rahman as-Sharif, from El Khalil (Hebron), had pretty good English. So I asked him to come, and with him I visited Shaykh Muhammad, who said if I didn't mind he would come to the house after 'Isha again and we could talk. That interview went on for almost three months, during which time I, and the people working with me, got to know Shaykh Muhammad on a more intimate level, and he opened all of our eyes to Islam and its inner meanings through the science of tassawwuf. And so began a forty-five year relationship that went through many different phases and forms. During part of that time I studied in Makkah, and later in Cairo with my Shaykh Dr. Ibrahim al Batawi, as my first Shaykh had died, Allah yarhamhu. On several occasions I visited Shaykh Muhammad in Occupied Palestine, and although this was difficult due to passport problems, where there's a will there's a way, and over the years we found a way. I kept up with his activities and his thought and sensibilities.

In 1994 I had returned briefly to America in preparation for moving back to Egypt where I had been teaching under my Shaykh's supervision for five years. My wife Hajjah Noura had gone from Virginia, where we were visiting, to Abiquiu, New Mexico to close our house at Dar al Islam and pack up our belongings to ship to Egypt. Shaykh Muhammad was visiting in Santa Fe, and came up to Abiquiu to lead a dhikr. He mentioned that he thought Shaykh Nooruddeen's wife, who he also knew very well from the early days on the Mount of Olives, was there.



Indeed, when she heard of his presence and came immediately to see him, he told her he must speak to Shaykh Nooruddeen about something very important. She connected us across the 2000 miles by phone, and when he and I talked he told me that during Ramadan, on Laylat-ul-Qadr, he had a dream or a vision (ru'yah) while in murakaba underneath the rock of the Dome of the Rock, and that the Prophet, peace and blessings be on him and his family, had told him to tell me to stay in America, and to help him with his work among the American revert community.

I was very surprised by this, but the fact of the ru'yah made it very hard to do anything but stay on in America, even though that had not been my plan at all. I called my Shaykh, Dr. Batawi, and told him what had happened. He at first was very reluctant for me to stay, as I was teaching under his tutelage and he felt I had another couple of years to complete this work. However, considering the

nature of the ru'yah, its time and place and the person who had it, although he was not happy, he agreed it was best I stay in America.

At that point I was staying on the east coast, and it so happened that Sh. Muhammad had gathered a small group of people together outside of Washington D.C., and he invited me to come and speak to them, with the understanding that I might be able to help him in his work there with those people. However, when I went to visit them, I was very put off, because I had been living a long time in a Muslim environment and the environment there was not very Muslim, The people were in various stages of New Age undress, no one understood the first thing about adab towards the Shaykh, how to sit, speak, and eat... in general I couldn't imagine how I could deal with them, even though the people seemed keen to understand what the Shaykh was teaching. The final straw came when it was time to pray. The house where the meeting was being held had a rather large dog, which had been running everywhere, and I couldn't understand how we were going to pray. I said this to Shaykh Muhammad, and he told me:

“Ya Nooruddeen, the world is an unclean place, and we have to clean it, and in order to do that we have to teach these people to pray. So we should just pray.”

I acquiesced, but later went outside to find a clean place on the sidewalk, and prayed again. I wasn't so sure about the dog.

We parted good friends as always.

About a year later I got a call from one of his students, saying that Shaykh Muhammad invited me to come to Chicago to give a talk at a weekend seminar he was holding. I asked what he wished me to talk about, and he left it open to me to say whatever I wanted.

When the time came to give my talk, (and mind you that every week I was responsible for giving a khutba at one or another of the

local masajid where I was living, and remembering the environment of the previous year's visit) I decided to give a straight talk on Islam as such, not as an adjunct to contemporary life in America, or as a side issue of Sufism, but as the determining factor in how a human being was supposed to live their life, according to Allah and His Prophet, peace be upon him & his family. When the time came I gave my talk, which lasted an hour; I had allowed time for questions, but nobody saw fit to ask me anything, so I returned to my room in the hotel where I was staying and where the conference was being held. I had just settled in when there was a knock at the door, and three of the organizers and students of Shaykh Muhammad were there. I invited them in, though I didn't exactly know them, but had seen them in his company at the conference. After a few minutes of small talk, the person, a doctor, who seemed to be the principal person in the group, said: "We liked your talk, but we have to tell you, we can't sell this on the basis of Islam."

I was very much taken aback by this, and told them I wasn't selling anything in any case, but I was asked to come an to give a talk, and I did so, and they should take it up with Shaykh Muhammad. What were they selling, I wondered. (Later I understood that they were talking about the University of Spiritual Healing).

This question, though not annunciated by Shaykh Muhammad, colored all of my relations to his group(s) from then on, to greater and lesser degrees.

I returned home to Virginia; in the course of time I heard from Shaykh Muhammad again, and he asked me if I would come and teach Arabic with a view to reading Qur'an, as I was at that time very involved in learning and teaching Qur'an. He told me that he was in the process of creating a Shadhdhuli center in Northern California, and there was a building in which he was planning a

masjid, and I could teach in it, and there were rooms above it as it used to be an old hotel, where I could stay with my family while we were teaching.

It was with that invitation that I spoke to him about the events of the previous year, and told him that the only way I could come and teach there was for him to give me an ijazah that I had come to teach Arabic and Qur'an. I didn't want to be involved in selling anything; I would just come with my helpers and do that. Which I did.

This work continued at the Center in California, and other places as well, for a number of years, and many people learned to read Arabic and the Qur'an, Alhamdulillah. He broadened my teaching to include salat, its language, its reasons and rules, etc, as he said it would be easier for the people to understand this from someone of their own language and country rather than someone from a different culture. I did this, and was happy to be of help. At this point, in addition to working with the group in California, I was asked to come to the group at the Farm of Peace in Pennsylvania, and to speak with them along the same lines, which I did.

One afternoon when he and I were talking, we spoke about Ramadan, and he brought up the idea of Itiqaf, when during the last ten days of that month people stay in & around the masjid. He asked me if I could somehow find the time to come and lead that, including nighttime readings of Qur'an and other classes led by me and my family. We did this a number of times, and in that time paradoxically our relationship grew both deeper and more distant. There was a lot that simply was left unsaid and was based upon a subtle unspoken understanding that had elements of both agreement and disagreement on the ways and means to advance the objective of explaining Islam and Sufism.

These sessions of Itiqaf continued for a number of years, and I found them very rewarding, as he had by that time invited me to speak openly with his students. He finally offered me a house at the Center there in CA, a generous offer which I was unable to accept for any number of reasons.

In the midst of this period, my Shaykh Dr. Batawi, Allah yarhamhu, died, and I was left bereft. The feeling of being bereft was made even more so by my coming into contact with a hadith which totally changed my life. This hadith says that whoever dies not having met the Imam of his time dies in ignorance. When I first read this my whole world was shaken, for although I had studied Sufism for a long time and tried faithfully to advance the tariqa, I did not know who was the Imam of the time. And although I had met many great awliyyah and ulema, for many reasons I could not imagine any of them to be the Imam.

So began in my life a search which was mainly internal, although had external edges to it, to find the Imam of the time. This had the effect of functionally taking me away from Shaykh Muhammad and his work of bringing Islam to a cadre of mainly middle class white Americans. With the result that for many reasons, not the least of which was his refusal to discuss this matter, we grew apart, and though I have always deeply appreciated his work, and all he has done for the good of so many people, I ceased to be involved.

I don't think there are any of the Shuyukh who have come to America, or even those born here, who have had such an effect on bringing ordinary Americans to Islam, and into the Islam of peace and spirituality that they have been able to integrate into their lives, opening their hearts and minds to Allah and His service. And very few who have added to that his gifts to the orphans of al-Quds and his service to the Masjid al-Aqsa, which he defended and protected for many years.

I conclude with the eulogy spoken in al-Quds by his son, Mahmoud. Nothing better can be said of a person than that he has left a son who thinks thus of his father:

Today we concluded the third and final day of our master's farewell ceremony in Jerusalem.....

I find me wordless to express the beauty this man has possessed in his life and death !! It was a celebration of his legacy, of the love he spread all over the Hearts he has touched over the years,

So much of him to go along us all the great and endless amount of love he gave to all the beloveds and yet I felt that he gave me all the love not and never a bit short of perfection,

The grand master has left us and I know my life will never be the same for he was my father, my love and my master...

He knew that he was not gonna be coming back to Jerusalem alive... his last words to me as he got in the car were with tears in his eyes: I am leaving you and your kids in the hands of Allah...

I know he is in a better place; when we said our final goodbye and I felt his face 9 days after his death, his face felt and looked just like he just went to sleep one minute ago !!! No one I have seen so beautiful in his death as he was!! and I am happy for he embedded glory until the last moment, he shall be missed, will always be remembered, his love engraved in our hearts, will never be forgotten until the end of time.....

Salaam



إنا لله وإنا إليه راجعون

Inna Lillahi wa inna ilaihi raji'un)

In loving memory and by way of explanation,
Shaykh Abdullah Nooruddeen Durkee, Virginia, 2015