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Rating: 4.8

Description: How a spiritually dissatisfied American Catholic teacher found fulfillment and direction through her new job at a Muslim school.

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My new position at the Islamic school was received with reserved enthusiasm from my Christian family. "Just make sure you do not convert," my father-in-law at the time told me when he found out about it. My mother-in-law was intrigued by the idea of being around something "exotic". I grappled with whether I wanted to work at this school. While I would have my own classroom (which I desperately wanted), I would only be part-time and I would be required to dress Islamically (even cover my hair). This whole concept was very foreign to me. I debated with myself for a day or two until deciding to take my first teaching assignment at this school. I was open and determined that this would be a learning experience for me. Boy was it ever!

On the first day, the new "non-Muslim" teachers were given a "scarf" lesson by a sister in the teacher's workroom. We were laughing as we tried different styles. I still remember that morning being pretty relaxed, and it was during this event that I realized I always thought Muslims were stern and serious. It is strange how one can hold certain stereotypes of people without even knowing them. Cross off one misconception!

During my 1st year of teaching, I learned many things. I was extremely impressed with the way that my students knew my religion (Christianity) better than I did. How did they know the stories? My students were always asking me questions about my beliefs, and they made me think. What DID I actually believe in?

I was brought up Catholic, and as an adult, I started to stray from it. I didn't know what it was that I felt uncomfortable with, but I just knew something wasn't right. I ventured a little into the new-age type of Christianity, but that didn't sit well with me either. I just knew that I wanted to connect with God. I didn't want my religion to become something that I felt I had to do in order to be considered a "good person" in the eyes of my relatives (as was the case with my husband). I wanted to feel it in my heart. Looking back now, I was lost, but didn't know it at the time.

Kids will be kids, and my Muslim students were no different. They left their books in my classroom instead of taking them home. This was a blessing in disguise as I started to read these books after class. So much of it made sense. To help matters along, one

sister and brother were more than happy to answer all of my questions, and I had many! We would discuss Islam and religion for hours. It was very intellectually stimulating and I was excited about it. I felt that I had found what I was looking for. There was a peace slowly spreading over my heart.

Around this time, I started to read the Qur'an at home. My husband at the time (I have since divorced him) did not like my interest in Islam. When I would read the Qur'an, I would do so in private without his knowledge. At first, I felt that I was doing something blasphemous. I remember being very scared that God would be upset with me. I thought to myself how can any book other than the Bible be from God? I tried to listen to my heart, and it was telling me to read. Some of the passages of the Qur'an felt as if they were written just for me. I found myself sitting there and crying many times. All at once, I felt at peace, yet confused. There was something holding me back from accepting it full-heartedly.

After months of reading, talking with people, and a lot of soul searching, there was one event that I consider to be the determining factor in my becoming Muslim. I was standing in my son's room trying to pray. I had a book on Islam opened to the "how to pray" section. I was standing there in conflict with myself. I was not used to praying directly to God. All of my life I was taught to pray to Jesus, who would then tell God my prayer (or something like that). I was so scared that I was doing something wrong. I didn't want Jesus to be mad at me. At that moment, it hit me like a tidal wave. Did I really think that God would be upset at me for wanting to get closer to Him? Did I really believe that Jesus would be upset with me for trying to get closer to God? Isn't that what he wants me to do? God knows my intent. To this day, I believe it was God talking to me-that is how powerful the feeling and voice inside my head was. What did I have to fear? How could I NOT convert to Islam? At that moment, I started crying and crying. It was what I needed to hear. I knew at that time that I had to convert to Islam. It felt right and nothing else mattered.

After taking my shahada in front of the entire school, I was a new person. I did not have that "where-do-I-belong-and-what-do-I-believe-in" feeling anymore. It was gone. I knew that I made the right decision.

I have never been so close to God as I have been since becoming Muslim. Alhamdulillah, I am so lucky.

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