

Touching people: Another degree in faith

- “How many people’s lives do you really touch?”

Jenny and Deana were sitting in a park in the center of the town.

Jenny looked straight in front of her and crossed her legs, drawing her veils upon them.

Deana was watching intently, expecting an answer impatiently. She urged her sister:

- “Think! How many?”

- “I do not know. Many I think.”

- “People say to you that you have changed their lives?”

- “Yes, as a teacher, I touch many lives, especially the lives of children.”

Deana looked puzzled but still insisted:

- “And how many do you really touch religiously?”

- “What do you mean by touching, Deana?”

- “Well, touching people is to push on their heart lightly but consistently so that they may either think more deeply or feel the presence of Allah alive.”

- “Oh! This is something else. I do not know, maybe one. I always try to talk to people about my religion anywhere I go.”

Deana continued:

- “And how many people really touch your life?

How many people make a difference in your life?

Count. How many?”

- “I am not sure, Deana. People touch my life occasionally when I hear a good *khutba* or I read a book. The pen is a very powerful tool, Deana. You can really reach people if you write with sincerity.”

Deana paused for a moment, the orange blossoms over their heads forming like a canopy. Then, she declared:

- “I have always thought that if you are lucky enough or if you have the blessing of Allah Ta’alah, I will be able to touch the heart of one single person. It might be a single person in a lifetime, but it would be worth striving for it. Don’t you think so?

As a writer, I always hope I can touch somebody’s life.

Actually I hope that the life I touched is touched by Allah Ta’alah therefore I am just a means to reach this goal.

I often look around me and I ask myself who do I really touch? To whom am I really useful?”

- “Deana, our families are the persons we are really touching on a daily basis. They are our chance to do something good, this is why many people have so many children; they hope they can touch the lives of a future generation.

But there is something I disagree with. Touching is not to impose; it is not to try to influence; it is just to offer a way for others to see things with more acuity. For instance, it is wrong to force children to behave the way we want. It is wrong to force them to realize the ambitions we did not attain. Touching their lives is to make them feel deeply about life and their choices; it is to make them feel responsible and aware. It is to help them to become the person they have inside, not to make them follow an idealistic model.”

- “Jenny!” replied Deana very concerned. “But we still want them to be the best Muslims they can be.”

- "Yes, we help them to find their way to Allah."

Deana looked at a silk web that hanged from the tree. There was a caterpillar struggling to find a support on a leaf. Deana played with the thread, breathing on it lightly. She said:

- "I was thinking about all these people, our siblings, that we touch on a daily basis, do we take care of their heart?

Do we take care of people's hearts?

Or are we indifferent? Or do we give up easily? Or do we delay our efforts under any pretext?"

Jenny lied on the grass to see the insect weaving its way to the branch of the orange tree. She waited before answering:

- "Deana, my friend, sometimes there is already too much to do within ourselves. We fight hard enough against our own souls; we already have hard time saving ourselves. Sometimes it is hard to pay attention to others."

Deana picked up the caterpillar with a stick that she had removed from the ground. The insect looked scared at first but now it was trying to settle on the twig. She said dreamily:

- "I always remember that taking care of other people's heart is also an act of worship. Look at this little thing here." And she pointed at the branch she was holding. "I could have left it fall on the ground and Allah Ta'alah saves it from harm. Well, I chose not to do it. Every living creature prays like us. What kindness we do to them will be returned to us on the day of Judgement, Insha Allah. Jenny, listen.

There was this woman who did a lot of acts of *ibadah* (worship) and she prayed *tahajjud* (night prayer) a lot and she fasted a lot and refreshed her mouth often uttering *duas*.

Rasulullah (SWAS) saw her and told his companions (May Allah Ta'alah be pleased with them) 'This woman will go to the Hellfire'.

'Why?' Asked one of the Companions (May Allah Ta'alah be pleased with him).

'Because she oppresses her neighbors,' answered Rasulullah (SAWS).

Jenny? Is it possible that we oppress our friends without knowing it? Do we oppress the people around us or do we take care of their hearts? Do we make life easier for them? Do we ease things for them? Do we try to make them happy and do we fight enough against our own desires? Do we give the best within ourselves or just the minimum because we live too much in the *dunia* (life) or because we are afraid to give too much?"

Jenny rolled over on her side to look at Deana who was still holding the branch with the tip of her fingers. She declared:

- "Love, Deana, is the only rational thing. The proof is this caterpillar was first afraid when you picked it up. Now, it feels more at ease and he knows you do not want to harm it. Isn't this a rational thing?"

- "What do you mean, Jenny? I always thought it was the most irrational thing that exists because we have no control over it."

- "I believe, and this is my experience, that we cannot touch anybody's life if we do not love them. When we love, we give the best within ourselves without sparing any effort and without sparing good deeds. To love someone is an act of worship because we love others for the sake of Allah only. Anything that is done for the sake of Allah is blessed. It is rational because you make the effort to make this person happy, so your mind controls it. Love is not a spring that flows wherever it falls; love is the bedding of the spring that you take care of. Love is a thing you take care of. The love you have for Allah and His

prophet (SWAS) becomes rational because you are working on it. This is how you show how much you are grateful for what you have.”

Deana pondered a few minutes about what her friend had said. Then she declared:

- “Are we grateful for all of this, Jenny? For the trees, for the chirping of the birds, for the miracle of life? Most people go outside their homes and look at all of this and they feel happy, but soon they forget it exists until the time something or someone reminds them of its existence. I remember when I reverted to Islam, I opened my window one day and I cried. I just cried because I realized how beautiful all of this was. I realized suddenly that they were alive! It made sense for the first time in my life! I felt the fresh air and I felt it go through me. I heard the wind in the trees and I was moved by it. Now, each time I go out, I look at the details of nature and every day I feel moved differently by them. I think we should feel moved by other people the same way.”

Jenny smiled and said absently:

- “Why not? Then, we try not to hurt them by our words or our acts.”

Deana suddenly tensed at her friend’s words. She bursted:

- “There is something in people I personally never understood.”

- “What is that?”

- “Why do we lie?”

Why do we lie in order to spare someone’s feelings?

Why on earth do we do that?

How on earth can we spare someone by lying to them?

Rasulullah (SWAS) never told a single lie; he was called “al-ameen”, i.e., the trustworthy. He was always sincere and true, no matter what.

I think to be sincere is to take care of someone’s heart; it is part of worship.

These are not just words; these are things I have applied personally in my life and I know they work and they have purified my heart.

Listen, Jenny.

I do not know why but this make me think about my mother, and I rarely have good thoughts about my life back at home. But I remember...

My mother used to ask me: ‘Am I beautiful? Tell me the truth for I will surely not feel offended.’

I would say: ‘No, you are not beautiful, but today your smile is really impressive; tomorrow I will forget about your smile but I will find your eyes full of life and I will be sincere, and the day after I will find that the way you pick up things is truly graceful and I will also be sincere. Each day I will be in awe before you in a different way.’

See, jenny, I could have lied to her and just say: ‘Yes, of course, you are beautiful; you are my mother after all.’

But I would have be lying to please her. I do not want that!

She would ask me: ‘Why? Why do you see me in a different way every day?’

I would reply: ‘Because I do not see you with my eyes. I see you with the love I have for my God Who says that we should be grateful for all we have.’

She would laugh and I would say again: ‘I see you anew everyday because I appreciate you because you are my mother, because you gave me life and it is now that I really feel grateful to be alive because I have found the true religion. I am grateful for all the sacrifices you have done for me and for your patience. I do appreciate all this even if you are not a Muslim and I know you are misled.’

My mother would look at me strangely and she would understand. One day, my mother told me: 'Deana, your religion is awful. When I lived in Algeria (my mother has lived part of her life there even if she is not Arab), and there was the war, people said that Arabs would invite you for dinner then kill you as soon as you had your back turned to walk out of their homes. I used to believe that. In our farm, we never had any problem and we had such a wonderful life, but we heard that women were beaten and kept in prison inside their homes. For many years I believed this was true but we did not witness this on our farm where many families lived among us. Now, I understand you better. I have watched a documentary on television and they were talking about Algeria at the time I lived there. They lied about almost everything. They said that the Arabs did not go to school with us. That's a lie; the Moore girls were pensioned with us in my school. They said that the Algerians lived apart from the Europeans. That was a lie; we lived in the same area and sometimes even ate together. So, why do they tell lies?'

I told her that we all saw what we wanted to see.

I sent my mother a translation of one of my stories. My mother said: 'Oh! Deana! This story made me cry.'

I was surprised because I thought she would not read it or would throw it away because it talked about Arabs and Muslims, but I was wrong. My mother said: 'This story reminded me so much of Algeria; it was hard for me to bare all the beautiful memories it awoke back into me.'

I think I took care of my mother's heart and I pray Allah Ta'alah that she becomes a Muslim before she passes away. Ameen."

Jenny took the twig from the hands of Deana and put the caterpillar back on the tree where it could weave its cocoon once more.

- "Did people take care of your heart when you were a *kafir*? I mean, do you see a big difference now from what you have known before?"

Deana thought for a long time, then lied down at the foot of the tree besides her friend, and started to explain:

- "My mother used to have a Bible in her chest of drawer near her bed table. In it, she had hundred of pious images of saints, proverbs, words of wisdom, etc., you name it. When I was a little girl, I used to sneak into my parents bedroom and look at all these beautiful little portraits and pearls of wisdom. I had to be very careful because my parents' bedroom was strictly forbidden to any of us children unless supervised. I would delicately open the Bible that had a golden edge and very soft pages, then, every time I would pick just one image and read and think. I did not understand everything, but these images spoke to my heart. For me, these moments were like a treasure, a forbidden treasure. It made me closer to my mother somehow. As soon as I heard a noise, my heart would beat so fast, I could feel it pounding inside my head. I was so afraid I would be discovered and forbidden to see the book again.

But one day my mother opened the door slowly and called my name with her voice that was so soft you were not sure she was really here in the same room with you.

She said: 'Deana, do you like them?'

She kneeled beside me and took every image that was sticking out of the pages and started to explain patiently, as if nothing was wrong: 'This image, I received it for my First Holy Communion. This is about thirty years ago.'

I was so amazed! These pictures were older than I was. I felt so small!

That day, my mother had taken care of my heart so well I still remember it with happiness today.

My mother used to keep many things. She wasted nothing. She kept her schoolbooks and her homework; she kept her babies cloth; she kept all kinds of things that were not useful anymore, things that kept her company.

One day I said to her: 'Mommy! You know, in my religion, one is better off carrying with him only enough for traveling. The companions of the Prophet (SWAS) used to have just a few belongings but they took good care of them.'

She replied: 'How terrible! Then, how did they remember?'

'They did not need to; they just needed the Qur'an and the reminder of the Hereafter; they did not live for this life.'

She looked shocked but I understand why; she had nothing of her own. Her memories were her only belongings.

One day I stayed home for the weekend, I had learned that we, Muslims, should not keep pictures or images of living creatures. So, I took all my images and began to tear them apart. My mother heard some noise and entered the room. She looked at me frightened and she took all the photos from my hands.

She said: 'These are mines! How can you destroy them? Are you mad?'

I looked at her puzzled and declared: 'These are not yours, Mommy! These are those people gave me or I took them myself. I would not touch something belonging to you!'

She looked very sad and said: 'But, these are my memories.'

Thus I gathered all the pictures and put them all in her hands and added: 'Mom! You can have them all.'

I think I took care of her heart that day. Maybe one day she will let them go. Maybe one day she will look back at this episode with happiness. As long as I let them photos go away inside my head, I was ok; no need to hurt anybody."

Jenny moved a little, stretched and declared with a smile:

- "Taking care of other people's heart is to see what's important for them and respect that.

This is why we, Muslims, cannot sneak up on people or overhear conversation or come upon somebody's secrets unexpectedly.

When I became a Muslim, I cut all ties. Unfortunately, I cut the ties with my family for a while. I had my own reasons and I am not particularly proud of it, but I did.

My family was wondering why I had done that since they were not yet aware I had reverted to Islam. One of my sisters opened all my letters and read them! When I heard this, I felt extremely sad. I felt sad because she had not respected me. She was the only one who had kept contact with me the few months I stayed away from my family. She was the closest to my heart but she was the only one who betrayed me. She thought she had more rights over me because I trusted her.

She did not take care of my heart.

My best friend also came to insult me in my room. She did not care about my heart.

So, I cannot say that being a *kafir* I knew the meaning of it.

Islam teaches us that the persons we should respect more than anybody else is our siblings, our close family, our friends.

I have leaned this the hard way; taking care of other people's heart is vital, even required by Islam. It is, yes, an act of worship.

One does not enter Paradise if he or she prays a lot but forget an essential part of the worship: not oppressing others and taking care of other people's feelings.

Why?

Because a Muslim is a person whose neighbor is safe from him.

I think we should remember this every minute of our lives.

A Muslim is a person from whom one is completely safe."

Deana agreed. She rearranged her headscarf before continuing. She poked a lock of hair back into the headband with one finger. The wind passing between the branches of the tree made a few white blossoms whirl above their heads.

Deana smiled and looked at it with awe.

- "Oh! Jenny. This is like snow, snow under the sun. Do you know that there was a king who loved his wife so much he planted a grove of trees with small and white blossoms so that his wife could enjoy snow in the middle of Spring.

I wish I would be loved like this one day."

Jenny smiled broadly, then giggled.

- "You are an incurable romantic, Deana."

Deana laughed.

- "A small price to pay to enjoy all of this.

My mother used to be a very romantic person. Unfortunately, she lost it under the harshness of life.

One day I was standing near the fireplace when she came near me and asked me if I had read a letter that was placed near me. I had not seen it and did not pay attention to it, but my mother looked suspicious. I said to her:

'I will not take from you anything that is not given willingly. I will not take from you anything whatsoever that you are not willing to share. If I find a note that you left on the table, I will not read it. If you left a book opened somewhere and I need to move it; I will mark the page for you and turn it upside down so that I will not be aware of what you were reading about. If you send me a message that was destined to somebody else and I discover it and it says 'dear X' instead of 'dear me', I will erase it or send it back to you without knowing its content. If I discover one of your secrets, I will erase it from my mind and forget that I even came across it. That is true faith, mommy. That is why you can always feel safe from a Muslim.'

My mother looked at me with strange eyes, thought, laughed and declared.

'That's quite extreme, my spleen.'

I smiled back at her, and said 'No, it isn't.'

She always calls me her spleen; I have no idea why and this is really peculiar to her.

Actually I guess where this habit comes from.

In arabic people say *kabidee*, my liver when they talk about their children.

Masranti, my intestine means progeny.

When one lady is asked about why she favors her children, she would answer saying *Ashbaraitilak ya qalbi*: what do you want to my heart? Or how can I fight against the impulses of my heart?

So, my mother said: 'What an extreme comment, my spleen.'

But I saw that she looked at me with new eyes. Her voice had more respect and I had touched her life.

Then, suddenly, she broke everything. She said: 'I have no secrets to hide', after that, she added; 'anyway, at my age...'

At this very moment, I understood that my mother never had time to have her private garden. She had devoted all of her youth and life to us, her children. She had sacrificed her desires to obey her husband and she had sacrificed her dreams for us to live decent lives.

For many years I had been angry at her for this. I did not understand why she could not stand for what she believed was true and always bent one way or the other. Actually, she was the bond between us all.

She was the link that kept all of us together.

She did not have time to think about herself between the fights between sisters and the worries of my father.

She did not have time to dream of jewels when she poured half the content of her plate into ours so that we would feel full. She had no need to do this but she did it nonetheless because we were her spleen and what do you ask to your spleen?

So I said to my mother: 'Mommy, you have no secret at all?'

She shrugged her head in denial.

'And what about this book you cried about for years?'

My mother looked confused then her eyes took a shade of sadness.

'Oh! This? I forgot about it! That was a dream. I read this book about this woman who took a break from everything, family, work, and she went to live alone in an island.'

My mother always tried to make us feel like she had no dream. Indeed her dreams were simple but they were deep as an island in the middle of the ocean. She actually felt like an island in the middle of the sea because even if she lived with us, nobody took care of her heart and she was always the loneliest person of us all.

My mother always looked so unhappy; she disappeared in the room when people argued around her or she was simultaneously the center of it when there was something funny to do.

But we actually had less and less funny moments as we grew up.

Why?

Because we did not take care of each other's heart, because we did not have Islam to guide us and we lived in the *dunia* instead of the *akhira*.

Thus my mother found it a little extreme, she who had lived exclusively for us, to found out I would no try to discover her secrets. She had none to speak about.

Maybe she would have had some if only we had taken care of her heart. But she had all these dreams of escape that nobody acknowledged. She used to ask my father to travel some place. There was no time for that. Her dreams were her secrets. She probably will never be able to talk about them with anybody. Why do so? She had to renounce it all.

When I remember my mother, I remember how we children are cruel to our parents and how, without Islam, we never really pay attention to their feelings and emotions. We think everything is for granted. I envy Muslims children but take care of their parents' hearts. I envy them so much for being raised Muslims and closer to the truth. Muslim families are blessed.

This is why a Muslim is always proud of his Islam no matter how lost he or she is.

A Muslim stays a Muslim no matter what because Islam is truth and we are all born with the ability to recognize the right from the wrong.

And Paradise is at the feet of mothers. And you know what, Jenny? Some of the sahabas took so literally this *haadith* that they actually kissed the sole of their mother's feet." They laughed.

- "Maybe so," added Jenny, " but they were not as wrong as you think."