



musawah

For Equality in the Muslim Family

We Were Soul Sisters

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We were never far apart. We shared Berber roots. We shared sheer determination when they said we had not a leg to stand on. I began my career as an Islamic feminist, before I could accept the title feminist. But Fatima Mernissi saw through the dialectics and identified with the global feminist movement as a Muslim, an Arab, an African, and a woman. However, when I entered graduate studies in 1980, I stepped into the minefield that has been Islam and gender reform and I thought we were standing on two separate planes of reality. As a spiritual idealist, unaware of my slave roots from an African Muslim Berber, I followed a utopia towards an Islamic ideal that eventually led me to Malaysia and the International Islamic University. Then the dream was deferred: the dream that somehow, just saying “Islam” would bring peace and harmony to the planet.

Mercifully, when the door to that dream closed, another door opened and it was much more transformative. I became a founding member of Sisters in Islam. That was 1989. All the members were so impressed by the outstanding work done by Fatima Mernissi who had tackled headlong myriad ways for unraveling the mystery of why this perfect “way of life” had failed so many women. Still, I introduced another dimension: women can take full agency to reclaim “Islam” for the full empowerment of women.

With that I moved closer to the work of Dr Mernissi. Over the years, both of our works would transform. I took an intensely personal and radically political step towards reconciling gender inclusive analysis of Islamic primary sources with the lived realities of Muslim women. Fatima already started with that lived reality. We were soul sisters on this journey: speaking truth to power from our own locations. It was inevitable that those locations would cross paths. After all, the journey is for us all—especially to embrace our differences. We do not become one and the same just because of gender oppression.

Eliminating gender disparity and arriving at equality and justice (or Musawah) would take still another 20 years. So when the Musawah movement transferred to Morocco, Fatima and I would finally complete the circle that had been on the move for 35 years. Yet, it was not to be. The week I arrived in Rabat—scheduled to meet her over lunch—would be the last week in her life. I think about walking this path together for 35 years on an intellectual level but never sharing an embodied relationship together on the physical level. The obstacles we faced were determined by a destiny put into place before we hit this realm of existence.

We resisted the temptation to recapitulate to the privilege of male readings. We determined for ourselves and for so many others that our own embodied reading is an intimate part of the totality of Islam. When our “readings” were silenced or marginalized by that same privilege we would not be able to share what our readings meant for each other. Still, the vision of its necessity and beauty

linked us. We did not approach this from mere academic methodology. We did not approach it with bitter angst. In the end, what was different about us clarified what made us the same. We spoke from the heart, about the heart, and to the heart.

Each of us on the planet is called to use our limited years in service to the grand scheme of divine beauty, truth and harmony. I shared this task with Fatima Mernissi although we walked separately and in different contexts. Now, she returned to the Beloved. The legacy she leaves will live on. May all our sisters and friends be the change they wish to see in the world.

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