

Challenges facing the Muslim Community

By Azher Quader M.D.

1 Promoting character development

In my opinion, this seems to be the core area for concentration even before education. I think that a person's character is a sum total of his/her habits. Habits are formed when the what, the how and the why of a certain idea meet. If I wish to develop the habit of timeliness, I must first know what is the best tool for telling time; then I should know how to use it to tell time properly and finally I should have a desire for keeping time which is where the why comes in. It is only when all three exist that a habit is formed. When we are habitually trustworthy, fair and just, reasonable, compassionate, willing to listen, learn and understand before being understood that our relationships will improve. We cannot build strong families much less strong communities on the quicksand of broken promises and absent trust. Character is not built in the class room. We can teach the what and the 'how' but the necessary why comes from our commitment to a belief system. The answers to our many whys are learnt in the quiet seclusion of our homes, and not within the crowded hallways of any school. If we are true to our beliefs our behavior will reflect it. If we are not true to them all the rhetoric to hide it will not change the reality of our disbelief. Further, good education does not necessarily equate with good character. If it was so we would not have had to experience the national embarrassment that nearly brought down our presidency due to the indiscretions of a Rhoades scholar in the White House. Nor would we repeatedly witness the jailing of our highly educated corporate elite on criminal charges of defrauding the people and breaking the public trust.

When we decide to seriously address this issue, several other matters we perceive as challenges today, will resolve themselves. Challenges such as improving our bad image, building bridges, spreading Islam, uniting Muslims, building mosques with the goodwill of our neighbors and even improving access to affordable health care.

2 Promoting excellence in education (secular)

To me this is key to our progress and prosperity. The purpose of excellence in education is two fold: First to widen the horizons of our knowledge and second to equip us with some marketable skills to enable us to earn a livelihood. Excellence in education means good public schools. In America that translates into good neighborhoods. There was a time we thought good neighborhoods meant the neighborhoods around Islamic Centers and mosques. Over time we have realized the shortcomings of the school systems, private or public in the neighborhoods of our mosques. If we are serious about excellence in education we will need to move to those neighborhoods where the good schools are and where housing is affordable. With less than 2 percent of our children attending Full time Islamic Schools at a price tag of \$3,000 - \$4,000 per child, we should know now that another ten years will neither increase the numbers significantly nor make the tuition any cheaper nor produce any better students academically or morally.

Excellence in education today means not just a high school diploma but a college degree. A college degree does not come cheap though and we need to explore ways of making it affordable. This may mean supporting our high school seniors to seek financial aid more aggressively from existing resources and or establishing new sources of funding through interest free loans and scholarships etc. Excellence in education also means helping our students with after school mentoring programs within our mosques and community centers or through the internet. It also means organizing SAT and ACT, LSAT and MCAT classes which are affordable for as many interested students as possible. With proper emphasis on excellence in our schools and colleges a community committed to excellence in the workplace and professions will naturally evolve over time.

Promoting excellence in education can also include excellence in Islamic education where the focus is on ethics and values, with a strong emphasis on seerah and essential concepts of the Quran. We should be able to do this through our weekend schools supplemented by summer schools and home based programs. Present volunteer staff is to be appreciated for their dedication to do the job, but the demands for excellence in this area will require for us to invest in teacher training, salaries and adequate physical facilities for the future.

3 Setting up financial goals and committing to reach them

Money is important to buy food, shelter, clothing and happiness. It also buys good education, pays medical bills and supports charitable causes. We need to learn to earn and to set up financial goals, to save for the future, invest for the long term and pursue plans to retire with a reasonable degree of financial freedom. Too many times we live from paycheck to paycheck to find that we never reach the land of financial security. Too many of us settle for less. A disciplined approach to investing in real estate and equities can provide rich dividends and put our community on a sound foundation of economic security. Encouraging people to move from renting to owning can be the first most difficult step to take but will open the way for them to realize the many rewards of real estate ownership. Organizing regular workshops on wealth building and wealth preservation are important in reaching these goals.

4 Preventing the breakdown of Muslim families

If there is one structure that is central to the building of community in Islam it is the family unit. We cannot attempt to build community if our families are breaking down. In America the family structure is constantly being threatened by forces from Hollywood, the TV, the liberal media and more recently from the Gay/Lesbian movement. In a society where pre marital and extra marital sex have come to be the accepted norms of gender relations, where single parent families are becoming increasingly common, where extended families rarely exist in the neighborhood to provide support and where the struggle to make ends meet keeps both partners working long hours with little time for each other, we need to explore creative solutions to safeguard the integrity of our families. Our community centers need to double as Youth Centers and Senior Centers till our resources permit us to establish these as independent institutions. We need to provide Family Support Services through qualified professionals for pre marital counseling, parental counseling and conflict resolution in case of strained relationships. We need to encourage foster parenting and we need to establish domestic shelters to fight the scourge of domestic abuse.

5 Promoting Political Participation

This may be a popular idea but in my estimation comes only after all the above issues have been taken care of. In our zeal for gaining political power we ever so often appear to lose track of who we are and what is our purpose. The sad state of affairs in most countries where Muslims hold political power is a grim reminder that without the right preparation jumping into the political arena does not accomplish anything good. Perhaps a more basic need in our quest for political activism is to define our political mission, establish issues for advocacy and develop relationships with groups pursuing similar goals. Another area of need is to develop voter lists with phone numbers and emails to improve voter education and voter participation.

6 Improving the administrative functions of Islamic Centers & Mosques

Everyone gets excited when we discuss Islamic Centers and mosques, because most of us are invested in them both financially and emotionally. Frankly those are our signature institutions. Yet if we were to look at the big picture, no more than a meager 10 percent of us frequent them on a regular basis. For those 10 percent however they are symbols of pride and power. For the past 50

years or so we have been running these institutions with mostly volunteers. With time our activities in these centers have multiplied but our approach to administer them has remained unchanged. It is obvious that hired administrative staff is sorely needed to bring in new efficiencies and improve services. Delaying this transition will only hurt us and ultimately lead to making these institutions irrelevant except as gathering grounds for ritual prayers. Other institutions geared to serving the community will come to fill the void. Such institutions have already started to form and exert a greater influence in our community's life. I have therefore placed the revamping of our Centers as a low priority issue because the larger community does not seem to care what happens within them.

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Character Development

Necessary traits:

Habits

Trustworthiness/ Loyalty
Fairness and Justice
Compassion / Unconditional love
Patience
Service and Sacrifice
Open communications
Humility
Discipline
Courage
Proactivity
Respect
Charity

Paradigms

Law of consequences
Abundance of nature