

Youth alienation.

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Recently I gave a short talk during the *Taraweeh* prayers in the month of Ramadan. The topic of my talk was “Muslim youth”. My talk was nothing out of the ordinary, according to my judgment; however, the response I received from the youth who were present was overwhelming. Not only did they welcome the talk, but they expressed a sense of relief that an exclusive talk was dedicated to their issues and concerns. One of the youth commented: “we are always told to respect elders, but rarely do we hear similar talk of the need to respect the youth”. A parent commented: “our youth face mounting pressure to divert; they need constant reinforcements and words of appreciation and encouragement from within their community”. Among the themes of the talk that resonated well with the youth were “respect”, “understanding”, “opportunity” and “appreciation”. I was certainly happy to hear such a positive response from the youth, but at the same time I was very much concerned. I felt the response I received wasn’t a reflection of the talk I gave, but possibly a reflection of the reality that we, as elders and adults, are not doing enough to show our youth how much we value them, how much we appreciate their presence and how proud we are of them.

The youth is an important segment of any given society. They represent not only the future, but also the community’s potentials, its vitality and strength. The greater the energies and resources a community directs towards the youth, the brighter its future will be. Respecting the youth, showing compassion to them, understanding the challenges they face, appreciating their contributions, giving them encouragement and stretching a hand of help to them are key elements towards creating a thriving body of youth within any community. These elements have deep roots in the Sunnah of the Prophet (peace be upon him) and it is part of our rich Islamic history. The challenges our youth face –given the existing social and ethical context- are not only huge, but unique, compounded and complex. With the widespread use of internet and the unprecedented rapid change in the surroundings, the world of our youth today is way different from the world of their parents. New, innovative, well informed and sophisticated approaches are critical in addressing contemporary youth issues. The following paragraphs, present a discussion of three key elements in the social development of the youth. These three play a pivotal role in protecting the youth, transitioning them to their adult life and carrying them to the future.

a) Respect: Respect is pivotal for healthy growth as well as fostering a sense of belonging and connectedness among the youth. Respect is not mere talk, but more importantly, a sentiment, an attitude, a relationship that is expressed in subtle and overt ways as well as by way of omission and commission. Communities that are conscious of the needs of the youth show their respect of their youth, by being youth friendly, youth sensitive and youth inclusive. A center that has sports facilities for the youth would send a more youth friendly message than a center with no such facility. A center where announcements and sermons are conducted in a language clearly understood by the youth would be friendlier than a center where the language is foreign or poorly spoken. Even in community events the type of food served, the nature of the program, the set up, the moderators, the volunteers, all of that collectively send a message of the level of friendliness of a community towards the youth. Further, the attitudes of the Imams and official leaders, their ability to interact, to play, to amuse and communicate with the youth is another important

reflection of how friendly a community or a center is towards the youth. Our Prophet had a deep sense of respect and regard for the young. He treated them with reverence and great consideration. In one incident the Prophet, peace be upon him, was offered something to drink. He drank of it while on his right hand was a boy and on his left were some elderly people. He said to the boy, "May I give these elderly people first?" The boy said, "By Allah, O Prophet of Allah! I will not give up my share from you to somebody else". Thereupon the Prophet, peace be upon him, placed the cup in the hand of the boy (reported by Bukhari). There are many aspects to this hadith, as elaborated by Al-Imam Ibn Hajjar; but it is evidently clear in the hadith the respectful and considerate manners the Prophet displayed in dealing with this young person. Further, Imam Bukhari under the chapter of "Greeting minors" reports that Anas –the companion of the Prophet - (May Allah be pleased with him) passed by some children and greeted them. Then he said: "Messenger of Allah (PBUH) used to do the same". Greeting is a display of respect; offering it to the young is certainly a form of high regard and consideration. Moreover, Anas –as reported in the book of Imam Muslim- says: "The Prophet was the best amongst people in conduct and manners". He goes on to give an example of how attentive and friendly the Prophet was towards the young. He says that he had a young brother known as Abu Umair who had a bird known as "Nughair". When the Prophet met him he used to talk and joke with him. He would ask him to tell him about his bird, saying "O Abu Umair what did the Nughair do?".

b) Mentorship: Mentorship of the youth is critical for their healthy growth and development. Youth need to be given opportunities to lead, to participate, to take greater roles; however, this must be accompanied with adequate mentorship and training. Mentorship isn't censorship nor is it killing the creative and innovative intuition in the youth. Mentorship is a process of training young people to take greater roles by way of equipping them with the essential skills, the proper ethical framework and the tools necessary for unleashing their potentials. As noted by Dr. Qaradawi, lack of mentorship not only deprives the youth from the rich experiences and wisdoms of the elders, but makes them, potentially, easy prey for extremists of all kinds. The Prophet had keen interest in the youth. He took time to mentor them, to guide and teach them. Among many of the young he mentored was Abdullah Ibn Abbass who was a recipient of the Prophet's advice, companionship, blessings and dua. The following selected narrations highlight some aspect of that mentorship.

- Abdullah related the following incident about himself: "Once the Prophet, peace be upon him, was on the point of performing wudu. I hurried to get water ready for him. He was pleased with what I was doing. As he was about to begin Salat, he indicated that I should stand at his side. However, I stood behind him. When the Salat was finished, he turned to me and said: 'What prevented you from being at my side, O Abdullah?' 'You are too illustrious and too great in my eyes for me to stand side by side with you,' I replied. Raising his hands to the heavens, the Prophet then prayed: "O Lord, grant him wisdom".
- Abdullah bin Abbas also narrates: one day I was behind the Prophet and he said to me: "Young man, I shall teach you some words [of advice]: Be mindful of Allah, and Allah will protect you. Be mindful of Allah, and you will find Him in front of you. If you ask, ask of Allah; if you seek help, seek help of Allah. Know that if the Nation were to gather together to benefit you with anything, it would benefit you only with something that Allah had already prescribed for you, and that if they gather together to harm you with anything, they would harm you only with something Allah had already prescribed for you. The pens have been lifted and the pages have dried." (reported by Imam Termizi)
- Abdullah Ibn Abbass is also a beneficiary and narrator of the famous hadith, where the Prophet says: "Take advantage of five matters before five other matters: your youth, before you become old; and your health, before you fall sick; and your richness, before you become poor; and your free time before you become busy; and your life, before your death." (reported in Musnad of Imam Ahmad)

The tradition of mentoring the young continued throughout Islamic history. Some of the most prominent figures in Islamic history were beneficiaries of great mentors. To mention a few: Imam Al-Shafi (d. 820) was mentored by Imam Malik (d. 795); Imam Abu Yusuf (d.798) was mentored by Imam Abu Hanifa (d.767); Imam Ibn Alqaym (d. 1350) was mentored by Imam Ibn Taymia (d. 1328).

c) Understanding: The youth experience various transitions in their lives and alter between various identities and go through phases in their lives. Issues pertaining to their sexual life are becoming more pressing to them than their parents generation. Further, issues pertaining to their Islamic identity and their faith are becoming intellectually and emotionally draining. To overcome these transitional challenges, the youth need a sympathetic ear, an understanding counselor and a patient mentor. The last thing the youth need is to be scolded or to be told how ungrateful or bad they are. A young man once came to the Prophet one day and said: "O Prophet! Give me permission to commit adultery." Some of the Companions who were present, seeing this request as being against Islamic morals, told him to be quiet and scolded the young man. Prophet Muhammad was very calm and told the young man "*Come over here and sit down.*" Then he turned to him and started to talk with him. "*Tell me, would you like for another to commit adultery with your mother?*" The young man said, "O Prophet of Allah, I would never desire such a thing." The Prophet said: "*No one would want such a thing for their mother.*" He continued, and said: "*Would you want someone to commit adultery with your daughter?*" The young man said, "O Prophet of Allah, I would not." The Prophet said: "*No one would want for their daughter to commit adultery.*" Then he went on to ask if the young man would approve of his sister, paternal aunt or maternal aunt committing adultery. Each time, the young man answered: "No, I would not want that." When he saw that the youth had understood his error the Prophet put his hand on the young man's shoulder and said, "*My Lord, forgive him his sin, clean his heart and protect him from committing sins.*" The young man, according to his own words, did not allow the emotion of lust to enter his heart again (reported in Musnad of Imam Ahmad). In this hadith we notice that the Prophet was not only understanding, but he was equally convincing in his logic, gentle and compassionate in his response. The kind words of the Prophet and the touch from his blessed hand was a remedy for this troubled young man. This sort of understanding, empathy, sensitivity and consideration is something that our youth are in need today, especially when they divert and fall behind.

Conclusion:

Youth alienation from their Muslim community is a reality that can't be overlooked. Jeffrey Langs, goes as far as referring to it as an 'exodus' of the young from their communities and mosques in North America. The Muslim Community in North America can't sustain itself through immigration, it needs to urgently foster a sense of belonging among its youth and keep them connected, engaged and fulfilled. Investment in the youth is an investment in the future. What the youth need isn't necessarily limited to a place of worship or Quran classes, or weekend schools; the needs of the youth are all encompassing: intellectual, physical, emotional and spiritual. A comprehensive and holistic approach where the youth are an integral part is of an urgent and paramount importance.

References:

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