

*Faith & Death:
Arriving in the Light*



*End-of-Life Approaches,
Faith & Tradition in Southern
Arizona Muslim Communities*

Welcome



﴿ البقاء لله ﴾

Introduction

The interplay between culture and religion is a complex one. Rituals of mourning and transition are shared in all faiths, and facilitate in unique ways a rite of passage for both living and dead.

In the course of Southwest Folklife Alliance fieldwork for the 2018 Continuum program, we have seen a weave of culture and faith that is multi-purposed and that remains most important in shaping response to death, and in helping find healthy pathways to continue lives after loss.

Although Islam is one of the three most populous religions along with Christianity and Hinduism, and the fastest growing religion in the United States, it remains largely misunderstood.¹ Universally, Islamic beliefs shape a code of life and death: A Muslim recognizes that death is a natural act of God. The Qur'an (central religious text of Islam: Qur'an, Koran, القرآن) says, *To God we belong and to Him is our return.*²

Sitting at our Continuum table, we respond to the universal need to understand death's shadows. Although there's no escape from death, community shows us that shared points of light in culture and faith are the stuff from which all life springs.

--Dr. Maribel Alvarez

Appetizers



Fruits of Comfort

Sweet dates and steaming coffee: This is an essential symbol of comfort and welcome in most Muslim homes.

Sticky and nutritious, sprinkled with cumin or baked in desserts, the date is an important part of Muslim ritual in observance of life and death ceremonies. Traced back thousands of years, dates were cultivated as early as 4000 B.C. in Southern Iraq - Mesopotamia (Popenoe, 1913; 1973).³

The holiness of the date and the date palm are underscored in Islam, with the date palm mentioned 22 times in the Qur'an. It is "the fruit of heaven," with Muslims sharing dates in funeral foods, in weddings, or to break the fast each evening during the holy month of Ramadan, which begins this year in May.⁴

Note: All food consumed by Muslims, including those served at funerals, must adhere to specific dietary standards as outlined in the Qur'an (halal).

Today's Specials



Dua for the Dying or Dead

اللَّهُمَّ اغْفِرْ لَهُ وَارْحَمْهُ، وَعَافِهِ،
وَاعْفُ عَنْهُ وَأَكْرِمْ نُزُلَهُ وَوَسِّعْ
مُدْخَلَهُ، وَاغْسِلْهُ بِالْمَاءِ وَالتَّلْجِ
وَالْبَرْدِ، وَنَقِّهِ مِنَ الْخَطَايَا كَمَا نَقَّيْتَ
الثَّوْبَ الْأَبْيَضَ مِنَ الدَّنَسِ، وَأَبْدِلْهُ
دَارًا خَيْرًا مِنْ دَارِهِ وَأَهْلًا خَيْرًا مِنْ
أَهْلِهِ وَزَوْجًا خَيْرًا مِنْ زَوْجِهِ،
وَأَدْخِلْهُ الْجَنَّةَ، وَأَعِذْهُ مِنْ عَذَابِ
الْقَبْرِ وَعَذَابِ النَّارِ.

O Allah, forgive and have mercy upon him, excuse him and pardon him, and make honorable his reception. Expand his entry, and cleanse him with water, snow, and ice, and purify him of sin as a white robe is purified of filth. Exchange his home for a better home, and his family for a better family, and his spouse for a better spouse. Admit him into the Garden, protect him from the punishment of the grave and the torment of the Fire.

Main Dish



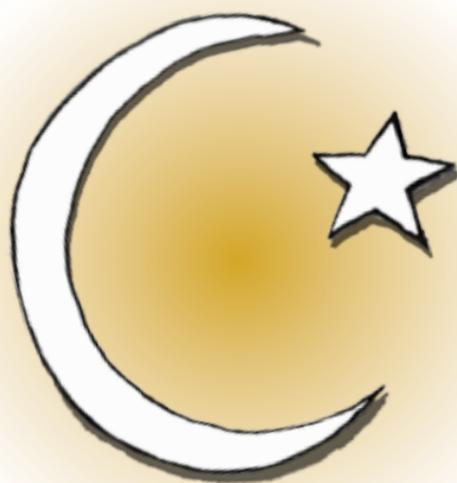
Field Work: Faith, Death & Life Values

We are all natural storytellers, and global perspectives, life adventures, family and tradition have greatly shaped the strong narratives of two Narrators from Tucson's Muslim communities. Their memories have been kept warm by everyday conversations involving practice and faith. Education has taken them far, but they are bound to the roots of Islam, a comfort and a foundation of community.

👁️ • Hoda • 👁️

Narrator “Hoda” was born in Cairo Egypt as a Muslim. A female physician of hematology and a woman now in her 50s, Hoda came to the United States in late 1988, and ultimately to Tucson in 2002. Hoda began to wear the hijab after visiting holy Mecca for the first time to perform “umrah” (**عُمْرَة** - visiting the holy place Mecca, a voluntary ritual visit that takes place outside of the time of “Hajj” (**حَجَّ**)). Shortly after that visit, Hoda lost both her aunt and her aunt's husband with only a few months apart leaving behind three little orphans ages 5, 3 and 2. “That had a huge impact on me and made me commit to my hijab...” Hoda has always been active in the Tucson community, tutoring to teach proper reading and memorization of the Qur'an and volunteering to help refugees.

Main Dish cont.



• Lynn •

Narrator “Lynn” is a Muslim convert in her 40s, who answered the call of her faith in 1987. Born and raised in a tiny town just north of Manchester, UK, faith revolved around a homogenous community bound to the traditions of the secular Church of England. Was Jesus God, or a prophet? These were questions you did not ask back then. When she was 18 and entered college, Lynn began asking those philosophical questions. Graduating from the Royal College of Radiology, she took a job in London – where diversity of religions and peoples allowed her to continue to ask important questions involving faith. She began to read the Holy Book and “realized God, feeling it deep inside.” After her testimony (or formal acknowledgement of her belief in Islam, called the Shahada) was made, she moved to the United States, first to New York, in 1990. She came to Tucson in 1996 and is currently on the board of The Islamic Center of Tucson.

Main Dish cont.

• 1 •

Explain the unique elements of Islamic faith and how it influences perspective on death?

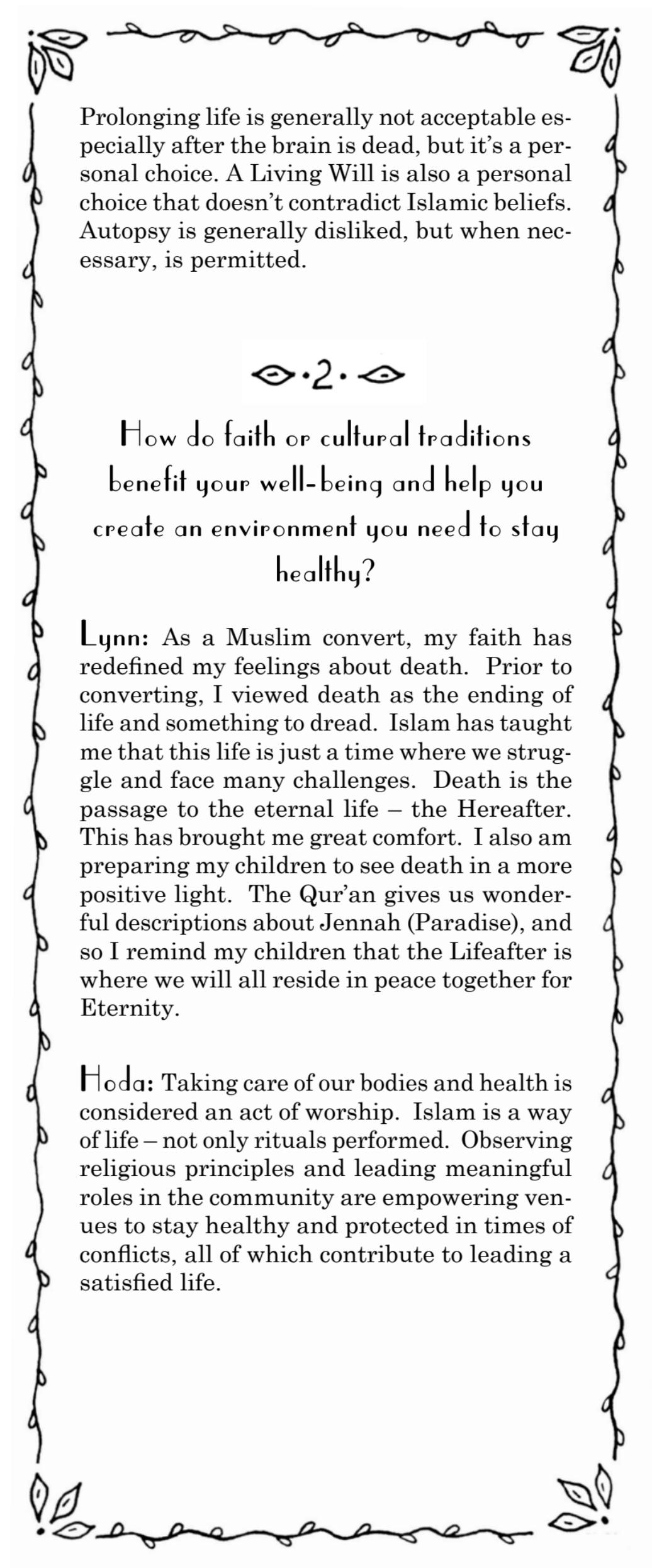
Lynn: In Islam, a human being is comprised of two components, the body and the soul, (physical and spiritual). Both are from Allah (God), therefore, we do not possess absolute ownership over either. Instead, we are stewards and it is incumbent upon everyone to take good care and nurture both.

During life, we are forbidden to harm or mutilate the body and this continues after the soul has departed. It is not allowed to mutilate or contaminate the body of the deceased; therefore, postmortems are frowned upon, and preservatives are never used.

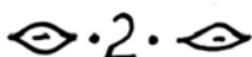
The body is always buried – never cremated - and the burial should take place as soon as possible. The burial is very simple and we are asked not to build shrines or monuments, instead, using only a simple marker stone. There is an ongoing debate concerning organ donation, as it is acceptable if it is done to save a life. However, this is up to the individual and his/her family. Prolonging life through artificial means is also frowned upon.

Hoda: According to Islamic views, the body is a gift from God; therefore, the human being does not possess absolute ownership of his or her body. One should not practice harmful habits such as smoking, doing drugs or become an alcoholic. Suicide is considered a major sin as it is a sign of disparity of God's mercy.

Cremation is not allowed. As for organ donation, it is a controversial issue, but becoming more acceptable as it is a mean of saving lives which is honorable in Islam.



Prolonging life is generally not acceptable especially after the brain is dead, but it's a personal choice. A Living Will is also a personal choice that doesn't contradict Islamic beliefs. Autopsy is generally disliked, but when necessary, is permitted.



How do faith or cultural traditions benefit your well-being and help you create an environment you need to stay healthy?

Lynn: As a Muslim convert, my faith has redefined my feelings about death. Prior to converting, I viewed death as the ending of life and something to dread. Islam has taught me that this life is just a time where we struggle and face many challenges. Death is the passage to the eternal life – the Hereafter. This has brought me great comfort. I also am preparing my children to see death in a more positive light. The Qur'an gives us wonderful descriptions about Jennah (Paradise), and so I remind my children that the Lifeafter is where we will all reside in peace together for Eternity.

Hoda: Taking care of our bodies and health is considered an act of worship. Islam is a way of life – not only rituals performed. Observing religious principles and leading meaningful roles in the community are empowering venues to stay healthy and protected in times of conflicts, all of which contribute to leading a satisfied life.

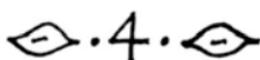
Will you share what you think is important about the Islamic custom and ritual involving death and washing of the body?

Lynn: Once the soul departs from the body, the body is washed in a specific way. It is covered with biodegradable, precut white pieces of unsewn cloth, usually cotton. When the body of the deceased is washed and covered, a woman will have an extra cloth used as a hijab (head covering). Once the washing is completed, and before the actual burial takes place (there is a Muslim cemetery in Tucson; see Resources), the body is taken to the local Masjid (mosque) where the community is asked to pray a special congregational prayer for the deceased, called Salat Al-Janazah. This prayer is performed the same way for every Muslim regardless of his/her status or level of faith. If the deceased was in debt it is recommended that all debts be paid off before the body is interred. Burial expenses are usually paid for by the immediate family of the deceased, but if they cannot afford it then the community pays for it.

Hoda: Washing the body in a certain way according to the Sunnah (teachings of the prophet, peace upon him) and performing the Janazah Prayer by members of the community, are essential rights of a Muslim upon his/her death. We all aspire to meet God in a most clean and pure form. The "Ghusl", washing of the dead, is the Muslim practice which allows us to return to God with purity. Ghusl (غسل) is to wash the whole body (water touches the whole body). I am part of a volunteer group in the community who washes the dead, to get them ready to meet God.

There are classes held in the community for those who wish to learn the formal procedure

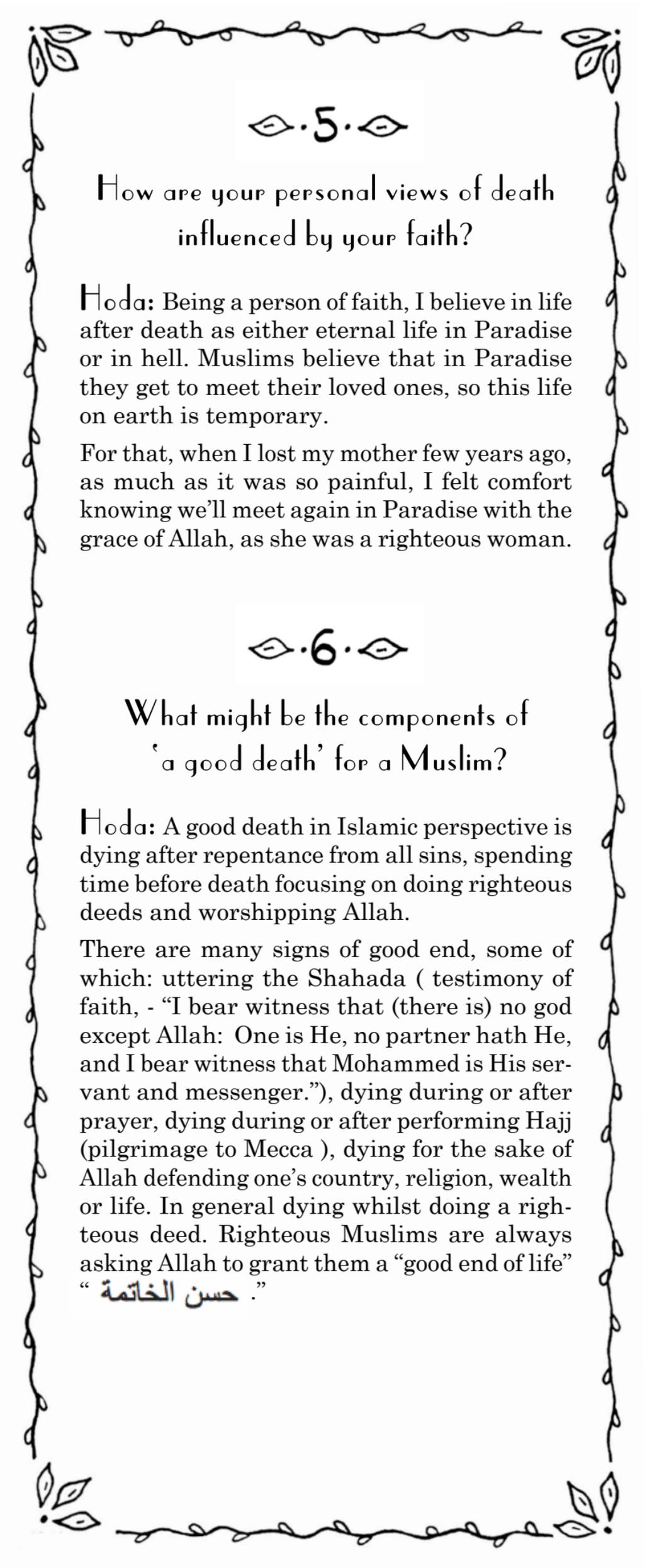
for this ritual. There are usually at least three people attending the washing. A natural musk or camphor is an essential oil used in the water to add a pleasant fragrance. The privacy of the deceased individual is extremely important, as washing is a sacred duty performed by a family member or trusted person.



In what other ways or traditions do people find comfort?

Hoda: People feel comfort in reciting the Qur'an during mourning, and by making regular Dua (asking for forgiveness) for the deceased. Muslims also find that giving to charity, and praying to Allah to be accepted on behalf of the deceased, are sources of comfort. One can never repay their parents, but praying for a parent and performing the Hajj on their behalf if they were unable to perform it, during their life, is a great thing to do.

The mourning period for the deceased is only three days, except for the widow, whose mourning period is four months and ten days. Songs and music are not allowed during the mourning period; this is considered a form of disrespect. People do visit the family of the deceased to keep them occupied during the difficult times. Back home (Egypt), some people used to bake or buy certain non sweet pastry (koras قرص) when visiting the grave yards, to be given to the poor. This tradition is becoming less practiced nowadays. Cooking for the inflicted family is a common practice.



5

How are your personal views of death influenced by your faith?

Hoda: Being a person of faith, I believe in life after death as either eternal life in Paradise or in hell. Muslims believe that in Paradise they get to meet their loved ones, so this life on earth is temporary.

For that, when I lost my mother few years ago, as much as it was so painful, I felt comfort knowing we'll meet again in Paradise with the grace of Allah, as she was a righteous woman.

6

What might be the components of 'a good death' for a Muslim?

Hoda: A good death in Islamic perspective is dying after repentance from all sins, spending time before death focusing on doing righteous deeds and worshipping Allah.

There are many signs of good end, some of which: uttering the Shahada (testimony of faith, - "I bear witness that (there is) no god except Allah: One is He, no partner hath He, and I bear witness that Mohammed is His servant and messenger."), dying during or after prayer, dying during or after performing Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca), dying for the sake of Allah defending one's country, religion, wealth or life. In general dying whilst doing a righteous deed. Righteous Muslims are always asking Allah to grant them a "good end of life" "حسن الخاتمة".

Do you think health care providers and facilities respect Muslim beliefs and attitudes towards death and comfort in end of life?

Hoda: Once needs are expressed by family members, it is respected. Because I witness how the people who have died in our community were dealt with—I feel this is so. However it is important for individuals to understand they have a responsibility to explain to medical practitioners their needs. For example, a friend was in the hospital, and because she didn't want to be wearing the head scarf all day, there was a sign on her door instructing that no males were to come into the room without knocking. This was honored. Many Muslims practice with individual differences – we need to inform our health care practitioners so they understand, and do not assume that they should know.

We are lucky to have Islamic leaders in the community that can educate people on the issues. We can also assign certain trusted people, during our life, to carry on the washing and prayers after our death. This will be considered as a “will” (*وصية*).

Lynn: I feel that the Western culture is concerned with preserving life. This may not be in alignment with the Muslim tradition. A human is considered to be deceased when the soul departs from the body. It is at this point when the body should be released and prepared for interment.

Dessert



Resources & References

All Faiths Memorial Park, Islamic Cemetery

2151 S Avenida Los Reyes, Tucson, AZ 85748
(520) 885-9173

Islamic Center of Tucson

901 E 1st St, Tucson, AZ 85719
(520) 624-3233

Muslim Funeral Practices, the Ghusl Procedure of Washing and Shrouding

<https://www.mfs.asn.au/ghusl--burial-steps.html>

NOOR Women's Association

3401 E Linden St, Tucson, AZ 85716
(520) 370-1459

Sema Foundation Center

2843 N Alvernon Way, Tucson, AZ 85712
(480) 427-0050

The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR)

1819 S Dobson Rd #214, Mesa, AZ 85202
(480) 704-3786

1. Muslim 101 presentation, The Islamic Center of Tucson, Lynn Hourani

2. *http://www.islamicbulletin.org/newsletters/issue_11/cover.aspx*

3. *<http://www.fao.org/docrep/006/Y4360E/y4360e06.htm#bm06.1>*

4. *<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/why-date-is-so-important-to-muslim-world-180962011/>*

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