

The Oasis of the Heart

One morning I awaken and realize I need to go to Morocco to see our Beloved Sheikh. The call is strong and deep. Three days later I, who normally need time to "ponder" such an undertaking, have purchased the ticket, and everything else - a house sitter, rides to and from the airport, and a substitute at work, falls into place. My mother, one of my angels in this life, graciously offers me a check for the journey. It more than covers the cost of the ticket. A month later I am on my way to Morocco.

Passengers applaud as the plane lands; the train from Casablanca to Rabat bumps along and my eyes take in the small towns and open spaces; dusty roads and donkeys, graffiti and olive trees, small children and dark-eyed men and women.

My friend Amina meets me at the train station. I am blessed to be staying at her home, embraced by the spirit of generosity that overflows from the heart of this family and from all I meet. Their home becomes the bookends of my journey to the north; a place of respite, prayer, and love.

A few days later I visit with our brother and mentor Sidi Ahmed whose tireless efforts in service of the One have helped sustain me - and so many others in our journey on this beautiful path.

Sidi Ahmed asks me, "Have you been reading your Qur'an"? Some time later I come to understand that he is asking about the inner pilgrimage, "Have you been listening to your heart"?

A few days later my friend Sanaa, and I share the nine hour journey from Rabat to Oujda. We rest and do dhikr. The landscapes slip by; sloping hillsides plowed by donkey and horse, olive groves and eucalyptus forests; one replete with beehives spinning pollen into gold. The green of the earth turns into sand and stone. The Atlas Mountains, proud and majestic, outline the distant horizon.

My memories travel ahead of me. I think, with tenderness, of the many beautiful women who sang the casidas, the songs of remembrance, as they cooked and cleaned and tended the needs of the wayfarers coming to visit

our Sheikh. I am reminded of the words of the Lebanese poet Khalil Gibran, that "work is love made visible". Like honeybees turning pollen to gold, they transform everyday tasks into a living dhikr.

We come to Sidi Hamza's farm; an oasis in the dry and dusty landscape. We are here, seeking the oasis within our own hearts. Roses are in bloom and the deep scarlet bougainvillea reach up the great walls that encompass our place of retreat.

Lalla Asiya, Sidi Hamza's daughter, greets us. Her presence is strong and deep like the distant mountains. We spend our time in prayer and dhikr. Evenings are filled with voices chanting the wadifa and singing sacred songs. we eat and rest and slowly the world slips away. We are in the Home of the Sheikh.

Lalla Asiya announces that Sidi Hamza will see us -- now! I look for my sandals only to realize that someone else must be wearing them. My feet slide into someone else's shoes. We glide down the darkened hall and into his room.

No question is unimportant. Sidi Hamza listens with reverence and he speaks to the heart and soul of each mureed. The woman next to me is speaking, now, but I sense Sidi Hamza's glance deep within me. My head is bowed and I feel shame. The night before I left my home in Virginia and again before we boarded the train, I had cried and cried, questioning whether this path was the 'right one' for me. I had doubts and fears. How could this be? When my turn comes I can only say that "my nafs (ego) has been dancing on my head." He offers simple reassurance and there is healing in his words.

In this beautiful Tariqa of Remembrance, the rough edges of our world-weary hearts are softened in the presence of Divine Love.

Islam is not a complicated religion. Our Sheikh has simply asked us "to love each other, to love God, and to let God love you".

The gifts of this journey continue to unfold. By God's grace, Sidi Ahmed, I am learning to read my Qur'an.

Amina Anne