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In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful

I can't believe I'm actually here! Even though people had described it to me and had told me what to expect, it is all completely different from what I had imagined. I have never seen so many people – so many Muslims – before in my life. I was at the Haram today and because of the overwhelming crowd, I somehow found myself in the center of a tornado of people and was almost suffocated. But it didn't matter as long as I was near the Kaaba, where nothing could possibly hurt me. I don't even feel the intense heat there. I even got the chance to touch the Kaaba! It is all so amazing! I can't be the first person to think that Hajj is the best experience of my life . . .

I have spent the majority of my 17 years living in the Western world, in a society of mostly non-Muslims who are quite ignorant about my religion. This is the reason that those few weeks that I spent performing Hajj seemed like I had stepped into another world. The entire pilgrimage was characterized by an aura of reverence that was alien to me. Everywhere I went, I kept thinking that our Holy Prophet (S.A.W.) may have walked in the exact footsteps that I was taking. The atmosphere was almost ethereal to me, and the little things most people took for granted were the ones that fascinated me the most .

When we reached our destination, I was amazed to see so many Hujjaj. On the plane to Medina, I was filled with wonder when I heard the pilot recite over the loudspeaker a chapter from the Quran and a supplication for traveling before ascending. I couldn't get over the fact that there were areas for worshipping in all of the airports, and in one instance, our entire flight was delayed while we waited for the pilots to finish their evening prayer.

While observing this I made a discovery: here was a place where I could belong as one of Allah's servants. I realized that no matter how long I had lived in a non-Islamic environment, and despite the fact that my faith in religion is strong, I will never really fit in or feel completely at ease practicing Islam because the people around me don't appreciate the essence of Islam's beauty.

During Hajj however, I saw devotion to Islam everywhere I went. Before we had even reached the

Jeddah airport, I heard inspiring cries of

Labaik, labaik, Allahumma labaik

and I really felt like I had come to Hajj by invitation from Allah.

Wherever we were, whenever the adhaan was heard, everyone rushed to pray. The streets filled with people prostrating before The Lord of the Worlds while His name echoed throughout the city. This was a routine, and it was considered not as an interruption of daily life, but as a part of it.

My suggestion to anyone who would like to go to Hajj is one should always expect the worst, for many things can go wrong. Hajj is not just a tour of the Holy Lands, but a spiritual journey. It requires one to be physically and mentally prepared. Only then can the soul grow with experience.

Because the crowds had been so enormous, I didn't get a chance to do Tawaaf-al-Wuada' (the Tawaaf of Farewell). Though it is not required, I was very disappointed. Then somebody told me that because I was unable to say my farewell to the Sacred Kaaba, I will be granted a visit to return again soon. I hope and pray that this is true.

This essay was written in Rabi-ul-Awwal, 1413 (September, 1992) by a 16-year old, and won the North American Contest for writing about the beautiful experience of al-Hajj (the Pilgrimage).

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