

Egypt Air 990 Reflections on Loss, Culture, and Faith¹

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Questions to Consider While Reading:

1. The author's religion is an important factor in how she approached her work at this disaster. How does your religious belief system help or hinder you when dealing with others who believe differently? If you subscribed to a religion, how would it help or hinder you in your work on disasters? Do you believe that everything that happens is "God's will?"
2. What is the purpose of ritual in resolving grief from death due to disaster? What strengths and skills might you be able to bring to an interfaith memorial service after a disaster such as this one? What challenges might such a ritual pose for you?
3. This disaster involved people from several different cultural backgrounds. The author already had some knowledge of Muslim beliefs and traditions. How much do you know about other cultures, and what kinds of information do you feel would be important to have in such a situation? How can you go about increasing your knowledge of other cultures and their religious beliefs?

On Tuesday, November 2, my routine day as the Director of Social Work at Hutchings Psychiatric Center is interrupted. I am activated by the American Red Cross to provide Aviation Disaster Mental Health Services, and twenty-four hours later I am at the Doubletree Hotel in Newport, Rhode Island. Working in the Family Assistance Center, I am surrounded by the profound grief and loss of families of the 217 victims of the EgyptAir Flight 990 Disaster.

Over the next eight days, I experience and face questions of mourning, faith, prayer and culture: I enter a multifaith, multicultural world bound by shared loss. From seven countries and Muslim, Christian, Jewish faiths, the families are joined in numbing reality of sudden catastrophic loss of parents, spouses, children, siblings and friends.

First come the personal questions of my own adequacy to provide comfort in the face of such a tragedy. I learn to be present, to listen, to assist in many small ways, linking families to health, spiritual, child care and other services. I hear about the lost lives and the final days and hours shared with their relative. I am shown photographs. Over the days, I connect strongly with a number of families of all faiths and try to support them in their grief and mourning. Sometimes families ask if I am Egyptian or a Muslim, and I explain that I am Jewish. It is apparent that, in this community, the human connection transcends religious boundaries.

Nonetheless, there are complex cultural and interfaith questions as predominantly white, Christian, American volunteers work with families who are predominantly from Egypt and of Muslim and Coptic Christian faiths. Over the past year, I have been fortunate to participate in the InterReligious Council Community-Wide Dialogue. At the end of the six sessions, I continue to meet with an African-American Muslim from my Dialogue Circle to share information and correct misinformation about Islam and Judaism. Because of this experience, I carry articles on Islam, some knowledge, and increased comfort on this journey.

The strength of belief among the Muslim families is immediately apparent. Their sorrow and pain is paired with their repeatedly stated belief in God's will. "Allah Akbar"—God is Great—is heard over and over. Everything that is or that happens in the universe, from the smallest to the greatest events, is governed by God's will, an integral part of His eternal plan... Nothing can take place without His ordaining it, nor is there such a thing as a random, chance event. As families deal with their grief, they struggle to be accepting of their loss without questioning God's will.

¹ Suggested Reference: Haneef, S. (1996). *What Everyone Should Know About Islam and Muslims*. (Paperback Edition) Chicago: Kazi Publications.

I hear constant references to the afterlife. Belief in the hereafter—what pertains to the day of judgment, bodily resurrection, and heaven and hell—is another basic article of faith in Islam. Families recount the good deeds performed in this world by the crash victims. They describe their relatives' pilgrimages to Mecca. I learn that children under twelve and those dying by drowning are seen as martyrs and are treated with special benevolence by God. This is a source of great comfort to Muslim families.

Islam lays the greatest stress in the individual's accountability to God. The human being's life in this world constitutes a trial...during which he prepares himself, either for good or for ill, for the next life of indefinite duration.

A temporary mosque is set up next to the Family Assistance Center for the customary prayers held five times a day. Unadorned, with white sheets on the floors, the men sit in front and the women behind facing east toward Mecca. At noon on Friday, the Jumah prayer service includes a special memorial to those not present, Salat al-Ghaib. Standing toe-to-toe in lines, the mourners pray for their lost relatives as though over their bodies. The prayer starts with praise for God's greatness and ends with a final farewell. Invited by several of the women to join them, I sit and then stand with them in the back. The strong sense of connection between the women is powerful and they clearly find peace in the prayers. "If we accept the calamities that befall us, then we are good believers" urges Nihad Awad, Executive Director of the Council of American Islamic Relations.

Healing

Families strongly lobby the authorities to be allowed to see the wreckage of the airplane, and a bus pilgrimage is made to the Quonset Point Air National Guard Base with Red Cross Workers to provide assistance. In the hanger are fragments of the plane; only 5 to 10 has been recovered from the depths of the ocean. A piece of the tail with the EgyptAir insignia makes it very real, and it is terrifying to see the tiny pieces of plane and to imagine the impact and disintegration of lives. Small groups of men and, separately, women are crying and the Imams and other religious leaders chant prayers. Some families move towards the rocky shore and pray, cry and shake their fists at the sky. I find Rabbi Andrea Gouze from the Rhode Island Interfaith HealthCare Ministries. I ask if we can say Kaddish together, since the few Jewish families involved with the crash had already left Newport. The Kaddish is highly emotional for me and her words to me are of enormous comfort.

Over the week, families arrived in Newport in shock and hoping their family member somehow survived or that their notification was a mistake. They learn that all passengers perished. The visit to the recovery site makes that more vivid and real. Families then hope to bring their loved one's body back to honor and bury them.

"As does the Jewish faith, Islam mandates that the burial take place as soon as possible," says Javid Malek, Islamic Society of Boston. But, there are no bodies to bury and conclusive DNA matching is not likely. Families then hope to receive a death certification and instead are told that a "presumptive death certificate" will be sent to them after they return home. How can families begin to heal without the usual rituals that customarily bring comfort?

The next day a Multifaith Memorial Service is held at Brenton Point State Park, at the southern tip of Newport and the land closest to the crash site in the ocean. As the buses carrying the families and Red Cross volunteers leave the Doubletree, we see the people of Newport lining the sidewalks, some with their hands over their hearts, some sending kisses, some standing respectfully. At the Park, we enter a big white tent with plastic windows opening to the ocean, the flaps shaking noisily in the wind. I sit with a Russian Jewish family who arrived yesterday. There is a son, whose parents had retired and gone for a vacation in Egypt, and died in the crash. His two aunts and cousin are there to support him. They carry a Jewish prayer book in Russian, and I arrange for them to meet with the rabbi privately after the memorial service.

The service is in both English and Arabic, with Christian, Coptic, Jewish and Muslim faiths represented. Rabbi Gouze recites Psalm 121 - A Song of Ascent. "The Lord will guard your going out and your coming home, now and forever." She is followed by Rabbi Jagolinzer, President of the Rhode Island Board of Rabbis. His words address the interfaith community created by the tragedy:

"The Muslim, Christian and Jewish people have come together to share their grief, their loss, their love." He continues, "Although death can take our loved ones, yet there is so much death cannot touch. Death cannot rob us of our past, the years, the dreams, the experiences we have shared. What we have had, we shall always have." The Islamic speaker, Ahmed El Hattab, Assistant Secretary of the Islamic Society of North America says, "Let us remember it is God who grants life, and it is God who takes us back."

A Corridor of Honor is formed by the Red Cross, Navy, Coast Guard, National Transportation Safety Board and EgyptAir, and we line the path to the rocky waterfront. Families are given a white rose to bring to the waterfront. They walk alone, or in small family groups, with great dignity. Some almost in crippling grief, crying and stumbling. The cold wind whips at us from the ocean. A very tall, immense, Egyptian man cries as he walks, the small rose in his large hands. The mother of a four-year-old who died in the crash keens, "my baby," and almost falls as she walks. It feels endless as the lives of 217 people pass by. We go to the water's edge and I meet the Muslim family that is crying for the four-year-old. An aunt is holding a teddy bear and I ask if she would like to send the bear to her nephew. She nods and we unwrap the plastic and she places the bear in the ocean. We watch it and all the white roses float off into the ocean and out to sea. We assist her and others from the rocks. A woman who lost her husband cries, "Goodbye. This is it. I must accept it. It is God's will." She and I walk together and watch the red helicopter carrying a white wicker basket of flowers hover over us and then turn and head out to the crash site to scatter the roses. The ride back to the Doubletree is very quiet.

The families leave for their homes all over the world that night and the next day. The ballroom where the Family Assistance Center existed, just the day before, is now filled with a Trade Conference. Soon after, I fly home on a small, nineteen-passenger commuter plane. I reflect on the lessons of faith learned this week; I am filled with a great peacefulness and a greater acceptance of what is beyond my control. At home, I seek my own healing. I find support from family, friends and colleagues. I find spiritual consolation in the peace and beauty of Green Lakes. I find renewed religious meaning in my synagogue and in talking with my rabbi. I find great comfort in the rituals, melodies and prayers and the caring of the congregation. The strength within my own faith tradition welcomes me back.

And the words of Nihad Awar return and linger in my mind: "To this crash, the best answer is in faith."