



One
Breath
at a
Finding
Solace
in Faith
Time

SALATU E. SULE

One Breath at a Time

FINDING SOLACE IN FAITH

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One Breath at a Time: Finding Solace in Faith

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Dedication

For Nura Udu (1979 - 2011) and Dhakir Udu (2010)

May you be granted high stations in paradise;

For our families who grieved and still grieve;

For two women whose personal stories of grief gave me strength;
and everyone who has been touched by adversity.

Table of Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>vii</i>
Simple Dreams	1
Shaken Once—Now I See	4
Shaken Twice—A Baby in the Picture	7
Anchors in the Storm	10
Fighting a Mutinous Soul	13
Shaken Thrice—A Stranger on the Line	17
Breathe	19
Don't Push Back	21
Day 1: The Next Few Hours—You are not Alone	24
Day 1: The First Dusk	27
Day 2: Clinging to Hope	29
Day 2: Saying Goodbye	32
The Week After: Communicating with the Dead	35
My Voice is the Loudest	40
Words and Labels	42
The Next Few Months: Breathe, Be	44

Emotional Scars	47
Redesigning my Mental Landscape	50
Seeking Solace—Calling out to Allah	53
Seeking Solace—Listening to my Lord	56
Keeping my Lord in Mind	59
Why does it Hurt so Much?	64
Understanding the Pain	66
When will the Pain End?	69
Asking ‘Why?’	71
The Gift of Hindsight	76

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I thank Allah whose words gave me solace when I reached low points. He gave me insights which helped me see the meaning in death and life.

“Whoever does not thank people has not thanked God” according to a well-known hadith in the collection of Ahmad.

Therefore, gratitude to Him is insufficient if I don’t acknowledge those around me whose contributions led to the book being written.

So, I say, ‘May Allah reward you abundantly’ to the following:

Halima S. Abubakar, my sister-friend, who carefully read the drafts and gave me valuable feedback on how the words felt, hard as it was for her because she grieved too when Dhakir died and when Nura died.

Nuruddeen Lemu, my husband, who has always given me thoughtful counsel and unflinching support in every undertaking of mine, this book included.

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My gratitude goes to Allah for the strength He gave me, one breath at a time, during those difficult times; and for the insights He gave me so that I could make meaning of grief.

Simple Dreams

When I was a teenager, I had dreams of my future life. I would get a degree, get a nice job, marry a nice man and have children: two boys and two girls. Uncomplicated and neat, these dreams were as devoid of details as they were of trauma, upheavals or death.

Like many people, the life I imagined was clear, simple, and nice. Now I look back on my life and I see the many things, both pleasant and unpleasant, that I hadn't dreamt of—such as death. The only death I foresaw in my teenage imagination was my own death at a ripe old age.

Death was a distant thing that occasionally crossed the edges of my imagination. Acquaintances and relatives had died but I wasn't close to any of them. My parents are in their seventies, both are alive and quite healthy for their age. I am the fourth child of six—all my siblings are alive too; some of them have spouses and kids who are also all alive. So, when death did come out from the fringes of my existence to stand close to me, it was a strange feature on the canvas of my life.

We each have an inner world, a mental landscape which we subconsciously build from the experiences, people, and things that

make up our lives. We include our plans, expectations and aspirations. In that inner world these are as real as the daily encounters we have. All the experiences, people, things, plans, and aspirations which mean the most to us stand in the foreground, like precious landmarks that give us a sense of stability, purpose, and direction. When we lose one of these major landmarks our world shifts massively.

Handling the effects of a loved one's death is one of the greatest battles our soul will ever face. Other losses which shake us deeply include divorce, loss of a limb or organ, debilitating illness, the crash of a business, miscarriage and a relationship which fails to lead to marriage.

In Surah *al-Baqarah*, Allah tells us:

*And surely We will test you with something of fear and
hunger and loss of wealth, lives and fruits (of your toil)
(al-Baqarah 2: 155)*

Such tests naturally lead to grieving, which can be incredibly painful and lonely.

When I experienced grief, two women shared their experiences in dealing with loss. Their narratives made me feel less alone.

I hope that by writing about my journey through grief I might provide some company for anyone else in a similar situation. The lessons that came to me along the way might provide some insight

into what to expect and how one might overcome the challenges inherent in living with adversity.

A major lesson I learnt is that the path is turbulent and sometimes desolate but it is not without hope, light or relief. One simply has to endeavour to keep moving towards relief, one breath at a time.

Verily, with hardship comes ease.

(Al-Sharh 94: 6)

Shaken Once—Now I See

DATE: 24th January 2008

It is past noon. I hear the *adhan*, the call to prayer. I focus on it briefly. My main attention is on my unborn son. A short while later, I am anaesthetized, cut open and my first child is born.

It was evening when I came to. My son was healthy, strong, wide-eyed and feisty. I was in pain, feeling groggy and dissatisfied.

During the pregnancy, I had taken care of myself. I had eaten healthy meals and increased my daily intake of fruits and vegetables. I had avoided caffeine and rested a lot. I had also recited the Qur'an more, talked to my baby, prayed for him and, together with his father, named him Sabir which means 'one who perseveres'.

Labour had progressed smoothly until contractions stopped and a caesarean section had to be carried out.

I couldn't understand how it could have begun well then ended so poorly. How could I have missed his first cry? How could my first sight of him be through the cloud of anaesthetics that blurred my

vision so much that all I could make out was a headful of hair and wide eyes? How could it be that I was unable to cuddle or rock him in my arms comfortably over the weeks that followed?

A lady whose sister was a patient in the hospital visited me; her sister had also undergone a caesarean section but had lost the baby. 'You are lucky,' her gaze seemed to say, as she looked at me and my healthy son.

Now, of course, I see that I should have been joyful at my son's alert eyes and full head of hair rather than be grumpy about my blurry vision. I should have been joyful that my mother, cousin, friends, and husband were available and willing to cuddle and rock my son instead of being unhappy about the operation itself getting in the way of my doing so. I should have simply been joyful that my son and I were both alive. Now, I see that. At the time I didn't see it, not straight away.

A little time passed before I began to feel that my faith was not as solid as I had previously thought. I had been shaken by a delivery gone awry. Then I had been startled and felt sad at seeing how easily I could be shaken.

I struggled to push away my dissatisfaction. I battled with thoughts such as: 'I prayed for safe delivery. Why didn't it go as I expected? Why do others have a better birthing experience? How can other women give birth naturally while I had to have my baby through artificial or assisted means? Am I a worse person than those fortunate women?'

I believe that when I asked those questions, I became like the person Allah describes in Surah *al-Fussilat*:

Man does not get weary of asking for good but if ill touches him, he gives up all hope (and) is lost in despair.
(*al-Fussilat* 41: 49)

Alhamdulillah, at one point I realized that I needed to get out of that zone of despair and comparison. I intensified my reading of books which targeted the soul, notably Ibn Taymiyyah's *The Purification of the Soul*. These helped me face my weaknesses and work on re-building myself.

Eventually I pulled myself together and began to be joyful again. I focused on my son's growth and health, my marriage, my home and my work. I was back living my uncomplicated, textbook life.

Redesigning my Mental Landscape

No matter what you are dealing with, life moves on. When it does, as it must, it will take you with it whether you are ready or not.

At some point you will need to move. You can't stand still forever. Your mental landscape has changed so you need to redesign it.

I knew that after I had taken time off, I needed to redesign the world within my head.

Pain and emotional stress come from feeling the emptiness of the spot where a precious landmark once stood. Find the strength to turn away from that spot and focus on creating other landmarks.

Do not attempt to replace the loved one that has gone by remarrying, having another child, pursuing the next available relationship or trying to resume life exactly as it was before the accident or illness.

If you were bedridden for months or years as a result of illness or an accident, life would go on without your usual input. Someone or something would fill the gap you have left, or the space might simply be ignored and a new way of doing things would evolve to replace you.

You therefore have to accept this and start thinking in terms of 'Now, let me ...' rather than, 'But I used to ...'

Before Nura's death, I used to go for walks after morning prayers. After his death, I resumed the walks but made them longer and more regular.

I wrote articles and sent them to *SISTERS* magazine, which published them.

I signed up for online courses. I was redesigning my life, aligning my focus with what was with me and ahead of me, so as to give me less time to dwell on what was past.

I knew that there was no going back to things as they were before. The landscape of my life had shifted, things had changed and I had changed. I knew that I could find goodness in the altered landscape—and now I *have* found goodness.

When your life changes in this way, you need to follow the new direction of your life's journey. To do this, you will have to give a lot of yourself and you will restrain and push yourself in turns.

Find new interests. Immerse yourself in something positive, especially if it involves doing something for someone else.

I found that when I focused on giving time, effort or attention to someone else, the sadness that I felt reduced. It is one of the best therapies for grief and depression, and science bears witness to this.

As I mentioned above in the 'Shaken Twice-A Baby in the Picture' chapter, seeing a woman with a baby made me envious, but then this then helped when I learned to make pleasant comments about the baby and prayed for the mother and child.

This experience showed me that nothing beats back envy, self-pity, and lamentation better than praying for others and to sincerely wish them well. Wishing people well can be done even when you don't really feel like it but the sincerity comes eventually when you keep your intention constant.

I think about the Prophet's teaching that when we pray for others, the angels pray for us. I feel as though angels prayed for me too when I prayed for those who had what I didn't. I feel that their prayers were answered; I know that I started to feel better with time.

Seeking Solace—Calling out to Allah

I talked to myself about overcoming fear. I recited verses of the Qur'an and reflected on the meaning of the words I was reciting and I reminded myself of the lessons taught in the Qur'an.

I'd say to myself. 'You are strong, Salatu, strong enough to handle this, because *la yukallifullahu nafsan illa wus aha*. (Allah does not place on any soul a burden greater than it can bear – *al-Baqarah* 2: 255). Allah has given you the strength for this otherwise He wouldn't have permitted it to happen; He is not unjust.'

I took the following verse to heart.

Seek help through patient-perseverance and prayer; and it is truly difficult except for those who are humbly submissive.
(*al-Baqarah* 2: 45)

To exercise *sabr* (patient perseverance) is to stay steady even though the journey through adversity and grief is difficult. It is refusing to seek shortcuts and to be ready for the long haul.

When will the Pain End?

On the day of Nura's death, I wondered how I was supposed to survive the heaviness of grief that had descended on me. I asked, 'When will this pain end?'

Often while grieving the loss of someone or something precious, we ask when the grief will end, we want to know when we will start to feel normal or whole again.

Think of a race car and the circuits it makes repeatedly until the race ends. Grief feels that way: you'll start feeling somewhat better, then a slight trigger will get you back to a point you believed you had passed. A word, a sound, a memory or nothing at all could trigger a wave of sadness, a flood of tears, a feeling of anxiety or a bout of heightened depression.

In the same way that old wounds sometimes flare up and scar tissue gets itchy, grief can reawaken. When this happens, slow down. Remind yourself that this is normal for anyone grieving. Try any of the coping mechanisms you have adopted to get this far. It will pass and such episodes will become less frequent over time.

The scars will fade but their effect may remain even after the real pain has abated. It took about eight years for my bouts of insomnia to stop and it took me about six years to get really comfortable behind the wheel of a car. My anxiety about travelling has reduced but even as I write this line, I am preparing for a trip which I'll undertake alone and I am very aware of a layer of disquiet. I know it is a wound that hasn't fully closed, so I am breathing through it.

One doesn't side-step grief or sprint through it. One must slow down, take stock and get one's bearings. Remember: the landscape has altered so you need to move slower than usual. This is necessary though it might be a lonely place to be as others carry on with their lives.

With the right mindset, the right kind of reminders and company, everyone who grieves will make it.

Just make your way along your path, breath by breath, one breath at a time.

Asking 'Why?'

Almost everyone who experiences adversity asks 'Why?' We ask 'Why me?', 'Why now?', 'Why this?'

We direct the question at God, 'fate', the 'universe', people around us or at no one in particular.

Like the character in the commonly told story who is told to pick one of several doors or boxes without knowing what lies behind each door or within each box, when we ask 'Why?' or any of the other variants of this question, we are not quite certain what opening the 'Why?' door or box could lead to.

It could just as easily lead to the search for meaning and understanding of one's experience and situation as it could open the way to rebelling against one's situation.

This is the reason why some people believe that rather than ask 'why' one should just accept the adverse event without questions. While I understand why people hold this opinion, I know that the question needs to be asked. The mind frame from which the question springs and the mind frame with which it is pursued is important.

When a loved one dies, our world shifts. The pain rises up front and centre of our minds, blocking out a lot of what we know and understand. Realising and coping with the shock and trauma is never an easy task.

When Prophet Muhammad ﷺ passed away and people were talking about it, Umar threatened to kill anyone who said that the Prophet was dead. He was deeply affected by grief, as were other companions. It took Abu Bakr's recitation of the words of Allah (*'Muhammad is no more than a messenger, and indeed messengers have passed away before him'* *Al-Imran 3:144*) to calm Umar and other companions.

Faith, and knowing that we are never alone, shines a light in the dark spaces that grief creates within the heart. This book offers faith-inspired insights about grief and how to build resilience, *one breath at a time*.

Salatu Sule, a lawyer who transitioned into education in 2003, is a coach, international speaker and trainer in faith-based personal development, ethical leadership, character building, equitable gender relations, marital life and responsive education.

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