

WHEN DREAMS COME TRUE

DR. K. SOHAIL

2024

.....

FOUR DREAMS And FOUR CHALLENGES

When I reflect on my past as a writer, as a humanist and a psychotherapist, I realize that quite early in life I fell in love with literature, art and philosophy and I realized that they could be useful in discovering my truth, inspiring others and serving humanity. When I reflect on my life- long love to serve humanity I remember two couplets, one of Faiz Ahmed Faiz and the other one of Arif Abdul Mateen.

The first couplet is

Faiz thi raah sar basar manzil

Huma jahan pohunchay kamiyaab aaye

[Faiz, every step on the way was a destination
we were successful wherever we were]

And the second couplet is

Bas aik saboot apni wafa ka hay mairay paas

Main apni nigahiN main gunahgaar nahiN hooN

[I have only one proof of my love and faithfulness
I am not guilty in my own eyes]

At an early age I also realized that all creative people, whether poets or philosophers, artists or mystics, painters or playwrights, scientists or scholars, reformers or revolutionaries, psychologists or psychotherapists, have a creative personality and a creative philosophy that guides them in their creative expression and creative communication. They have profound and deep love in their hearts for humanity. Khalil Gibran once wrote, "Don't ever think you can guide

love. If love finds you worthy she will guide you.” I feel fortunate that love for humanity has been guiding me. It helped me overcome my fear that I expressed in my short poem titled

APPREHENSION

I am afraid

The noise of the outside world

Will drown one day

The music inside.

I realized that love was closely connected with creativity and creativity was intimately connected with freedom. I became aware that there were two kinds of freedom, inner freedom that dealt with freedom of thought and imagination and outer freedom that dealt with freedom of expression and action that was intimately connected with the limitations, restrictions and inhibitions imposed on the creative personalities by their conservative families, religious communities and traditional cultures. Success of the creative personalities depended on how they kept their inner music alive and how they coped with outer limitations. Let me share with you a few highlights of my creative journey.

When I was a teenager, I became aware that my life was a special gift that nature had given to me. I asked myself,

‘How can I make my life meaningful and successful?

What would be the best use of this special gift?’

So, I came up with four dreams about my life.

The first dream was to become a doctor and a specialist. I thought I would serve humanity better as a psychiatrist than a family physician, as I would be able to help my patients and their families, in their emotional suffering that can be more painful than physical suffering. I think watching my father have a nervous breakdown as a child and my mom looking after him must have unconsciously influenced me to become a psychiatrist. I wanted to study until the age of 30 and then

serve my patients for another 30 years and then retire. At the age of 16 I could not imagine living more than 60. This is an interesting coincidence that I received my FRCP in psychiatry 3 weeks before my 30th birthday in 1982. After getting my Fellowship I served as a psychotherapist in different hospitals and clinics for 40 years. So now at the age of 71, I can say that I successfully fulfilled my first dream.

My second dream was to become a writer and write a series of books. As a teenager I was impressed by writers like Saadat Hasan Minto and Ismat Chughtai, Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, Vladimir Lenin and Mao ze Tung. All of them had created a body of work. They were like marathon runners and I wanted to develop the attitude of a marathon runner rather than a 100-meter sprinter. So, for the last forty years, I have been consistently writing and I have been successful in creating forty books in Urdu and forty books in English. So, my second dream also came true.

My third dream was to travel the world. Rather than reading the books of History and Geography I wanted to visit different parts of the world and meet people of different cultures and see how they lived. So, after receiving my Canadian Passport in 1982 I went to Israel and South Africa, two countries to which I could not travel on a Pakistani Passport. After that I traveled in North America and South Africa, Latin America and the Middle East and visited Russia and the Scandinavian Countries. Of all the countries I traveled, three cities that inspired me the most were Jerusalem, Paris and Athens as they were full of history and art and mythology. After the 9/11 tragedy, traveling was not as enjoyable as before but I felt that I had already fulfilled my third dream.

My fourth dream was to create a circle of creative friends. After meeting Ashfaq Hussain, moving to Toronto, and getting involved in the publication of *Urdu International*, I met many creative friends like Jawaid Danish in USA, Abrar Hasan in France, Saeed Anjum in Norway, Nasar Malik in Denmark, Sain Sucha in Sweden, Yousaf Hasan in Pakistan and Zahir Anwar in India. I interviewed many scholars who visited Canada from India and Pakistan including Kishawar Naheed and Fehmida Riaz, Sharib Rudoulvi and Gopi Chand Narang, Abdullah Hussain and Saqi Farooqi and many more.

After I published my book *From Islam to Secular Humanism*, I met many humanist friends from different religious and cultural backgrounds and presented papers in many Humanist seminars and conferences. With the help of creative friends I also created a circle of friends called *Family of the Heart* that arranges seminars in Toronto. So, I fulfilled my fourth dream also.

While I was fulfilling my dreams I realized that I, like many other creative personalities, had to face different challenges and overcome different obstacles before I could be successful. I can share four challenges that I can identify. In Urdu they can be named as

rawayat,

hijrat,

dualat

and

shohrat.

[Tradition, immigration, wealth and fame]

The first challenge was tradition. My family wanted me to have a traditional marriage and live a traditional family life. I realized quite early that if I wanted to be a successful writer and therapist, I had to choose a non-traditional lifestyle. So, I did not choose a traditional family life. For me family life was a fulltime job and being a writer and a therapist was also a full-time job and I could not do two full time jobs in my life time. I know many creative people who tried to keep a balance between two full time jobs and finally left both of them unfinished and incomplete.

The second challenge was immigration. Very early in my life I had realized that my creative personality and non-traditional philosophy was incompatible with the traditional, conservative and religious environment of Peshawar, Pakistan. When I, at the age of 20, confessed to my poet uncle, Arif Abdul Mateen that I had become an atheist, he told me that he had also become an atheist at the age of 40 and his uncle, my grandfather, that I met later on, had become an atheist at the age of 60. He suggested that I keep quiet about my rebellious religious

views, leave the country after my graduation and move to a secular country where I could practice what I believed. So, I went to Iran and then came to Canada to study and to live. If I had stayed in Pakistan, it is quite possible that I would have been assassinated or sent to jail or landed in a mental asylum. Immigration was the second challenge I had to face.

My dear friend Rasheed Nadeem has a couplet

Ye shehy agar zarf kushada nahiN rakhta

main bhi yahaN rehna ke irada nahiN rakhta

[If my city is not broad minded and does not have a big heart,
then I have no intentions to stay here]

The third challenge was wealth. There are so many doctors and lawyers and engineers and businessmen who are obsessed with money. In my life I have had to sacrifice materialistic gains for the sake of my ideals of serving suffering humanity and my community. I chose to become a psychotherapist and have my own clinic and treat my patients to the best of my ability rather than becoming rich. Serving humanity was dearer to me than becoming a millionaire. That was the third challenge I had to face for my ideals.

The fourth challenge was fame. I have met many writers and artists who chose fame over art. For them public relationships and appearing in newspapers and radio and TV interviews became more important than their creativity and literature and art. I always focused on my new book and new project. I know many contemporary writers who have reached their creative menopause and have stopped writing and creating. I feel lucky that even at the age of 71, I feel young and enthusiastic and creative. I am always planning my next story and my next essay, and focusing on my next book. And in that process of planning my new creations my creative friends have always been a great inspiration.

Let me share with you a folktale that deals with freedom needed for creative personalities to survive and thrive. I heard that folktale as a child and it has remained a source of inspiration all my life.

The folktale is about a wolf and a dog. The wolf used to live in a jungle and enjoyed his freedom. When he was young, he was healthy and happy and energetic and he had no problem running fast and catching his prey. But when he got older and weaker he became afraid that he might not be able to catch his prey and starve and die a desperate and miserable death. One day while he was walking on the outskirts of the jungle, he met a healthy and handsome and well-nourished dog. He asked the dog the secret of his happiness. The dog said that he had a master who fed him and kept him in his house. The wolf asked the dog if he would introduce him to his master and the wolf could spend his old age with them. The dog had no problem and asked him to come to the same place the next day to meet his master. When the wolf heard that promise he became happy and hopeful about his future for a few seconds.

But when the dog turned, the wolf saw some hair missing on his neck. On asking the dog shared that his master had a bad temper and used to tie him down with a chain in the basement for a few days when he was angry. Missing hair was the reminder of the chain. Seeing the missing hair and hearing dog's story about his master, the wolf reflected for a few seconds and then withdrew his request.

That folktale of the free wolf and the chained dog has guided me on many occasions when I faced personal, professional and existential dilemmas in my life. I always identified with the struggling but free wolf rather than the well-nourished enslaved dog. I believe our freedom inspires us to face challenges and offer sacrifices for our ideals and make our lives meaningful. I feel fortunate that I could embrace my freedom and I was able to love and create and serve.

ANOTHER DREAM COMES TRUE

In the evening of my life, when I was 65, I had another dream.

What I saw was that I was in Peshawar. I walked into my street and knocked on the door of the house I used to live in Pakistan. An old man with a long white beard opened the door and welcomed me in with an affectionate and graceful smile. When I entered the house I realized that there was something different, something unique about the house. It did not take me long to become aware that there were only three walls of the house. The back wall was missing. When I walked outside

the house what I saw was a big herd of animals: sheep and cows and horses walking in a particular direction. There were shepherds who were looking after and guiding those animals.

After the herd of animals passed there came a big procession of men and women who were coming towards me. They were strangers. But when they came closer, they were excited to see me. Then I saw a double-decker bus that was open on the second floor. Those strangers invited me to come to the second floor of the bus. So, I climbed the stairs to get to the second floor. I was in the open as there was no roof. People were excited to see me. They were giving me regard, respect and reverence.

The bus started to move and all those men and women started to follow the bus. It felt as if they had chosen me to lead them. I was also excited to be their leader.

The caravan continued for a while and then I woke up from the dream.

Even after waking up, I felt euphoric for the longest time. I felt as if life had chosen me to play a big role for my community and for all of humanity.

.....

A weeks after that dream my friend Arif Waqar introduced me to his editor friend Wajahat Masood and suggested that I write for his internet magazine HUM SUB. So, I started writing regular blogs for HUM SUB magazine. In the last six years I have written 600 blogs.

Those blogs connected me with more people than I would have ever imagined.

Now there are so many people, young and old, who regularly write to me and want to discuss their personal, emotional, social, professional and philosophical problems with me.

In the last six years I, with the help of my friend Dr. Baland Iqbal, have produced more than sixty television programs on Canada One TV titled

In Search of Wisdom [Danai ki talash main]

and

many publishers of Pakistan and India have been publishing my books.

The number of people who read by books and articles and watch my programs are ever increasing. I was pleasantly surprised when, in a seminar in Islamabad Pakistan, a young journalist Abid Mir said,

"Dr. Sohail, living in Canada you may not realize that you have become an inspiration for our generation"

Now I think that the dream I saw a few years ago was a prophetic dream.

Gradually that dream is coming true.

.....

When people ask me about the secret of my creative success and popularity, I share with them that for me creative journey was always more of a marathon race of forty miles rather than a 100-meter sprint. That is why I have been reading, writing and creating for the last forty years with the dedication, commitment and stamina of a marathon runner. My motto is: slow and steady wins the race. My friends, colleagues and patients know that turtle has become the symbol of my creativity as well as psychotherapy. No wonder I have more than 300 turtles in my clinic.

In the last six years internet magazine, you tube, face book and other forms of social media played an important role in my popularity.

My popularity because of my blogs on HUM SUB and videos on you tube complemented each other. My blogs are also shared by the editors of other internet magazines that have their own following that consists of thousands of people.

For the last forty years I enjoyed my success as a psychotherapist as I felt that I made a difference in people's lives. But in the last six years that feeling has grown because my humanist philosophy and message of peace is no longer confined to my clinic. Because of social media it is reaching four corners of the world. When we organize zoom meetings I see friends from China, Malaysia, Pakistan, South Africa, Europe and

North America attending those meetings. One can experience the feeling of a global village.

I feel very fortunate that I am enjoying this success and popularity in my own life. That is rare and that is very special.

Realizing that my writings are inspiring so many people and making a positive difference in their lives, makes my life successful, purposeful and meaningful.

.....

SEVEN COLOURS OF A HUMANIST RAINBOW

After my book *From Islam to Secular Humanism...A Philosophical Journey* was published in September 2001, and I appeared on a number of radio and television programs, I was asked a number of questions privately and publicly about my philosophy. Of all the questions that my religious, spiritual and atheist friends asked me, the one that inspired me the most to reflect and introspect was:

What does *humanism* mean to you?

The more I thought about the question the more I realized that *humanism* meant different things at different stages of my life and now it has become a multi-dimensional philosophy and lifestyle for me. I also realized that different people have different interpretations of *humanism* and there might be as many definitions of *humanism* as there are humanists in the world.

When I reflect on my past as a whole, I realize that for the first few years of my life, I travelled in the dark tunnel of blind faith that was surrounded by the dark clouds of rituals and superstitions. Gradually I saw the sunlight of humanism and then explored its different colours. So far, I have discovered seven colours of the humanist rainbow that I will share in this article.

1. *FIRST COLOUR...HUMANIST PHILOSOPHY*

Over the years I realized that to become a humanist I had to leave blind faith behind and study science and philosophy so that I could develop logical and rational thinking and use critical thinking to question all the myths and supernatural teachings of my family, community and

culture. In this journey writings of Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Bertrand Russell, Jean Paul Sartre and many other philosophers paved my way to my acceptance of atheism and humanism. I am glad that humanist philosophy helped me in making rational and responsible choices for myself and communicating with others who have a scientific attitude towards life.

2. *SECOND COLOUR...HUMANIST PERSONALITY*

When I realized that people's behaviours may not be a true reflection of their belief system and their personality may not be in harmony with their philosophy, I started paying more attention to people's behaviours and personalities. Now I have come to the awareness that humanist personality reflected in a caring, kind and compassionate attitude might be seen in different people with different ideologies and philosophies. As compared to humanist personality some people have a fundamentalist personality that is very critical, judgmental and aggressive. People with such personality try to convert others and get into angry and bitter debates with their opponents. It is quite amazing for me to see how some religious people have a humanist personality while there are some atheists who have a fundamentalist personality. Over the years I have tried to develop a humanist personality alongside acquiring a humanist philosophy.

3. *THIRD COLOUR...HUMANIST LIFESTYLE*

. After developing a humanist philosophy and striving to have a humanist personality, I realized that both of them had to be actualized in a humanist lifestyle. When I put my philosophy and personality in practice, I realized that other humanists welcomed it but it created a tension with the traditional friends and religious families I knew. I had to learn to be tolerant and accepting of their truth. It was a struggle to accept the reality that my truth is *a truth* and not *the truth*. It was a test for me to accept that other human beings have the right to their ideology and philosophy as long as they do not impose it on me or stop me from practicing my truth. In this transition I lost some of my relatives and friends who could not accept my humanism and associated atheism with an immoral and unethical life. Now I have a circle of friends from different cultures and backgrounds who are respectful of each other's philosophy and are willing to have a meaningful dialogue.

4. *FOURTH COLOUR...HUMANIST PSYCHOTHERAPY*

As I accepted my own truth and felt confident to acknowledge it publicly in my social life I also introduced humanist philosophy to my clinical practice. Reading the writings of Eric Fromm, Carl Rogers, Victor Frankl and Abraham Maslow helped me at a conceptual and philosophical level to accept my patient's experiences and truths and then help them decrease their suffering and improve their quality of life. Such a journey helped me create my unique clinical practice of my Creative Psychotherapy Clinic and with the help of my colleagues Anne Henderson and Bette Davis wrote a series of books about my Green Zone Philosophy. Such a philosophy and practice has helped me in helping my patients to develop a kind, caring and compassionate personality. I helped them in trusting their conscience more than the religious traditions of their families and communities that contributed in their concept of sin and feelings of guilt. Therapy also helped them either resolve their social conflicts with their religious relatives or dissolve their relationships with relatives and friends who have fundamentalist personality. As therapy evolved, they were able to create a healthy, happy and peaceful lifestyle. I feel very excited that now we are creating a face book page on Green Zone community so that more and more people can benefit from a Green Zone Philosophy and develop a humanist personality and lifestyle.

5. *FIFTH COLOUR HUMANIST EDUCATION*

After I realized that my religious upbringing had negatively affected my personality and had introduced me to the concept of sin producing feelings of guilt about sex and many other things and it took me years even decades to unlearn those values, I tried to share with others that it might be wise to teach religious traditions of the world at homes and in schools as a part of history rather than a part of their faith. Parents and teachers have the responsibility to pass on collective knowledge and wisdom to the next generation so that children can make rational and responsible choices for their own lives as adults. I had to share with parents and teachers that humanist values can be taught even without wrapping them in religious and faith-based practices. It is encouraging to see that more and more parents and teachers are realizing that education based on secular values married to science, philosophy and

psychology encourages children in developing a rational and critical mind.

6. *SIXTH COLOUR ...HUMANIST COMMUNITIES*

Since I am a poet and a writer alongside a psychotherapist, I became involved in the social and political dialogues of different groups in Pakistan and Canada. It has been my experience that as more and more people become aware of the effects of religion on people and how different religious and political leaders exploit and abuse the concepts of God and Religion to create holy wars between different sects and different religions, it is important for free thinkers to try their best to raise social consciousness. Being a writer, I have written many essays and books on these subjects and translated writings of atheist and humanist philosophers in Urdu so that we can promote humanism through education in Urdu speaking men and women. I receive many emails from Asia and Middle East from men and women who read my essays on website or in my book and share their struggles. I feel that free thinkers need a moral support as they are in minority and need a group where they can share their struggles and get into meaningful dialogue while they are in search of their truth. Creating a secular community is essential part of humanism so that there is not only freedom *of* religion but also freedom *from* religion. There are many communities all over the world that have very punitive traditions and persecutory laws against non-believers. In some communities atheists are afraid to be killed by religious zealots. Such an oppressive environment forces people to become hypocrites and not share their truth openly and honestly and lead a double life. I met some atheists and humanists from Muslim families who have kept their truth secret from their dear ones, as they are afraid to be penalized and persecuted, even executed.

7. *SEVENTH COLOUR...HUMANIST CULTURE*

It is my dream that we reach such a stage in human evolution where we can see a humanist culture all over the world. I am of the opinion that the unresolved conflicts of class, gender, race, sexual orientation, language, nationality and religion continue to be the cause of human suffering and we need to work together to create a just and a humanist culture. Such culture will help all of us to become fully human individually and collectively.

I am well aware that these are the colors of my humanist dream but I also know that we all have to dream before the dream comes true. We need a critical mass of humanists who are dedicated and committed and willing to work together to create humanist traditions in their families, schools and communities. We need more and more people to work together to create a peaceful world.

Let me end my story with my poem *Peace* as it represents the essence of my life and my philosophy.

Peace

There is inner peace and there is outer peace

There is emotional peace and there is social peace

There is religious peace and there is political peace

There is local peace and there is global peace

These are all the colors of peace

And we need all these colors

To create a rainbow of peace.

.....