

Thunder & Light

by Elizabeth Rahman

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Eight months ago I experienced the most devastating event of my life, the passing of my husband of 37 years. He had a sudden and totally unexpected heart attack and our lives changed in an instant. Eight days later he passed away.

I felt as though someone had reached deep inside me and yanked out half my soul. My body felt as though I had been kicked and punched all over. I felt as though the earth's rotation had come to a stop. Everything was happening in slow motion. My world as I knew it had come to an end. So many emotions were going on inside me: sadness, despair, anger, guilt, fear of the future. But all through those days when my husband was fighting for his life, and through the months following his passing, three vital elements have sustained me and given me hope: my faith, my family and my friends.

My faith has always been a powerful force in my life, but would it hold up when really put to the test? Well, for me, the eight days between my husband's heart attack and his passing were unquestionably a gift from God, a real spiritual journey.

The journey began when my husband was rushed to Peterborough Regional Health Centre, then airlifted to Kingston hospital. My daughter, son and nephew immediately came home, as did close friends of the family, so I had six "children" with me throughout that week and we stayed in a room in the hospital. In the Muslim faith prayers are said 5 times a day, so we were all up at 5 a.m. for the first prayer of the day, which we said in the worship centre across from ICU. The five prayers gave some structure to our day, as well as bringing immense comfort to us.

There were times during that week when we were hopeful and times when we were despairing. But hope or despair we prayed and trusted that everything was in God's hands, knowing there truly is a force acting outside of us.

And there were many signs to show us we were not alone. For instance my watch, which my husband had given me and which I still wear, stopped on several occasions for no reason, always at critical times, yet it started immediately once I reset the time. And on the last morning, when we knew things were not going well and we were particularly distressed, we had a very comforting experience. As my son's friend read aloud from the Holy Qur'an I was fiddling with my engagement ring, which has a large dark stone in the middle. Suddenly, I could see the word "Allah" (the Arabic word for 'God') in Arabic script clearly etched in black and gold on the stone. I told the others, convinced they would think I had totally flipped, but equally convinced that I knew what I was seeing. Each one looked at the stone, and each one could see the word! We all knew this was a positive sign, whatever the outcome. (My son later commented on why the word appeared on my engagement ring – I was feeling sad earlier that morning because I had not told my husband I loved him (something we both did every day) on the day of his heart attack .)

My husband passed away that night, and as my son said later, "You couldn't ask for a more beautiful death." I knew exactly what he meant. There was such an aura of peace and beauty. We had seen comforting signs all that week, and would continue to do so. A few days later at the funeral, as the coffin was lowered, the weather changed

dramatically and abruptly from a golden sun to a raging rainstorm with three distinct roars of thunder sandwiching two streaks of lightning. When the soil was covered to ground level, the rain stopped with uncanny precision and the sun returned. My immediate family and some friends all looked at one another, understanding the significance of the three roars of thunder. Muslims believe that at the moment of burial two angels come to the deceased and ask three questions: Who do you worship? What is your religion? and Who is your prophet? We knew my husband had got the answers 'right'!

God mentions various elements of nature in the Qur'an and says, "Here indeed are signs for a people that are wise." Indeed, He sent a rainbow as a sign to Noah following the flood. Signs are always there for us to see if we only open ourselves to them, especially at those times when our senses are heightened by intense stress and emotion.

Our friends were a huge support, too. During that week, the Muslim community of Kingston adopted us as part of the Muslim family, even though we were strangers to them. They brought us food, clothes, gave us a place to stay before the funeral and helped arrange the funeral itself. The Peterborough Muslim community was equally supportive in prayer and presence. Locally and across the globe friends and extended family phoned often and prayed. These were all examples of true faith in action.

As time passes for me now, some days are better than others. I think I'm doing well, then I'll see something or think of something that reduces me to tears. But tears are cleansing and healing. And God, in His grace, has given me so many blessings for which I am very thankful. My family is absolutely amazing, as are my friends of all faiths. I realize it's not just me who is in mourning; they are grieving with me.

Faith, family and friends play such an important part during times of grief. With my *faith* I know everything is in God's hands, and that there is life and peace after this earthly life. My *family* gives me courage, whether it is my daughter who asked me to knit her a sweater soon after my husband passed away (she swears she needed a new sweater, but I suspect it was something to keep me busy), or my son who made sure we rose before 5 a.m. for prayers. My *friends* touch my heart, among them the friend who stayed up with me all night despite her own serious medical problems, and the friend who tells me, "Be good to yourself, give yourself little treats."

I thank God every day for my faith, my family and my friends.

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