



LEARNING

Love

Self-Care Journal



UMM ZAKIYYAH

Learning Love: Self-Care Journal
by Umm Zakiyyah

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*For those yearning to learn love,
and live it, too.*

Author's Note

This interactive journal was inspired by a Zoom call that I had with my younger brother Akram, whom doctors say might need a liver transplant. I share the recording of our call in the course *Healing and Living Love: My Brother's Story* offered via uzhearthub.com.

So much of Akram's story as a divorced single father with health challenges resonated with me deeply and inspired me to reflect on my own journey through love, heartbreak, and healing.

In one part of *Healing and Living Love* entitled "Men Need Self-Love Too," Akram says, "*Self-love is self-awareness. You've got to love yourself. A lot of times, especially from a man's perspective as a maintainer and provider, we assume that self-love is already there. But as adults, especially as men, we are putting off our love for self to take care of others...*" And his words reminded me of my personal struggles with self-sacrifice as a woman.

I pray that my reflections here, as well as his in the course, touch your heart and inspire you to forever be a humble student of life and love.

Sincerely,



Umm Zakiyyah

July 17th, 2021

7th of Dhul-Hijjah 1442 AH

PART I

*Toxic
Love*



One

INHERITED LOVE

I think we all want to believe that we already know what love means. I think we all want to believe that we already know what love feels like. And I think we all want to believe that when we finally find true love, we'll just *know* we've found "the one."

At least this is the case for so many "hopeless romantics." And it's even more so the case for those of us who grew up in cultures heavily influenced by sappy romantic movies, tear-jerking love stories, and "happily ever after" fairytales.

I was no different.

Except that I'd genuinely imagined that my Muslim lifestyle (i.e. of chastity and "saving myself for marriage") would protect me from the seemingly endless heartbreak that I naively associated with non-Muslim *zina* culture.

It took repeated suffering in the name of love—in the context of marriage and seeking marriage—before I realized three painful truths that transcend faith or moral lifestyle:

1. Heartbreak is a reality of life, and it's largely unavoidable.

2. Unhealthy love is generally inevitable for anyone with unhealed emotional wounds, unaddressed childhood trauma, or unacknowledged transgenerational patterns of dysfunction, toxicity, or “survival mode” in response to daily fear and/or systemic oppression.
3. What many of our cultures, families, and faith communities define as a “good girl” (i.e. doing what she is told and putting others before herself) is very often merely the breeding grounds for toxic love.

With regards to number 3, raising females to adhere to what we define as a “good girl” is often rooted in our own unhealthy patterns of love passed down from generation to generation. In many cultures and families, this pattern often began with ancestors (i.e. the predecessors of our parents and grandparents). In this, what we don’t realize is that when our own grandparents or parents inherited these cultural patterns, they were actually living in survival mode—not in any ideal of life or love.

Thus, it was their extremely difficult circumstances that compelled them to do the things that they did, the things that we admire. Likewise, it was the traumatic backdrop of their lived experience that inspired the vast majority of the decisions and daily life patterns that resulted in what we view as their “success” in life and love.

Interestingly, it is their ostensible success amidst difficult circumstances in life and love that consistently blinds us to the fact that we should *build* upon their legacy, not clone their difficult life and choices and adopt them as our own. If we are not building on the invaluable life lessons that our parents and predecessors passed on to us, then we are not honoring or revering their legacy. We are denying our own.

“But they achieved so much!” we say, or: *“They were married for umpteenth years!”* or *“Divorce was unheard of back then!”*

Even when the very transgenerational patterns that defined our ancestors’ marriages (and the “love” we inherited from our grandparents and parents) were rooted in surviving oppression or trauma, we idealize nearly everything they did. Consequently, we clone their life choices as a means of “honoring their legacy” while ignoring the realities of our own lives.

Ironically, we continue on this path of cloning their life while calling it “honoring their legacy” even when our grandparents and parents themselves are open and honest about the limited options they had, options that were often limited due to their living during an era of emotional and socio-political suffering that they saw no way out of.

In this romanticizing of the pragmatic decisions that our grandparents and parents made amidst struggle and pain (i.e. while living in survival mode), we seek to imitate their life, step by step and brick by brick—even as they themselves express that the entire purpose of their own suffering and sacrifice was so gift *us* with the life, happiness, and emotional freedom that they never had.

Yet in our almost obsessive-compulsive need to imitate their life of pain to show our love and appreciation for it, we view the tiniest details of their life—even those that we know full well are unhealthy or incompatible with our own—as something to emulate instead of learn from and build upon.

In this, it is as if our hearts process their life patterns amidst pain and suffering as sacred writings in a divine scripture that was customized for us specifically. Then we tell ourselves that we are serving and obeying God Himself when we make unhealthy choices for ourselves, even as we have access to the

very knowledge, resources, and privileges that many of our ancestors literally died for at that time—hence the phenomenon of transgenerational emotional pain, wherein we embrace toxicity in our personal lives and relationships instead of self-honesty, emotional growth, and spiritual wellness.

Two

SUFFERING HEALTH FOR LOVE

A *toxic relationship does not necessarily involve toxic people, I wrote in my journal some years ago, just as there are chemicals that are harmless in themselves and become deadly only when mixed with something else.*

In my own life, there are numerous lessons that I had to learn from the “fire of experience.” And the reality and dangers of “love” in toxic relationships is one of them.

Before suffering very real health challenges due to exhaustive caretaking and emotional self-abandonment—a survival-mode “instinct” that I’d inherited from my ancestors—I simply wasn’t healed or self-aware enough to learn these lessons any other way. Hence this reflection that I penned in my journal: *Some lessons simply cannot be passed on in words, no matter how heartfelt, earnest and clear. Some of us must be touched by the fire of experience before we understand the destructiveness of the flame.*

Looking back, one of the most heartbreaking parts of my journey was coming to terms with the fact that my life fell apart just when I thought I was building it up.

When I was taking the path that would ultimately cause the breakdown of my emotional, spiritual, and physical health, I was just trying to do the right thing. I was just trying to be a “good Muslim.” I was just trying to do what so many people I loved and trusted said that Allah required from me. I was just trying to live love.

At the time, in my sincere naiveté, I had no idea that in doing the “right thing,” my emotional and spiritual health should matter more than combatting “rising divorce rates.” I had no idea that in being a good Muslim, my emotional and spiritual health should matter more than clinging to the ideal of having a lasting marriage. I had no idea that in seeking to please Allah, what I myself wanted and needed—especially in the context of love—should matter, too.

I didn’t know any of this.

Because I had no idea that I mattered at all.

It was only through Allah testing me with failing health—in which I suffered debilitating migraines almost weekly, in which I lost my ability to walk or stand at times, in which I sometimes lost my sight on occasion, and in which I felt dizzy and nauseated on a daily basis—that I was forced to take a step back and reevaluate how I was understanding what it meant to be a “good person” in this world.

My body wouldn't let me deny my trauma anymore, I recently read on the Instagram account of Tracy Principi. And *subhaanAllah*, in these nine words is the story of my life.

Today, as I look back on how far my Merciful Rabb has brought me in learning healthy love while healing emotionally and spiritually, it’s hard to believe that I didn’t realize my inherent worthiness all along.

It's hard to believe that I actually suffered health for love. It's hard to believe that I actually imagined that my exhaustive self-sacrifice was some form of divinely blessed patience and perseverance in pursuit of "happily ever after" and being a "good wife."

And it's hard to believe that I didn't realize this obvious reality of life all along: *Healthy souls, hearts, and bodies are far more important than lasting marriages, and they are far more important than seeking any ideal in the name of love.*

Three

A GOOD WIFE IN TRAINING

“**H**e is your *god*,” the man told me as if in rebuke, raising his voice as he underscored his last word.

I was eighteen years old and listening humbly—or at least as humbly as I could manage—to the father of the troubled young man whom I almost called my husband, and whom I call “Jabbar” in my book *I’m Divorced Now: Heartbreak and Healing*.

Jabbar’s father must have read the discomfort (and disapproval) on my face because he raised his voice even more, and I could hear the indignant self-righteousness in his tone. “Yes, he is your *god*,” he said again. “That’s how you need to see him. That’s how you need to serve him.”

I was trying my best to remain respectful in front of my elder, but what he was saying was difficult for me to stomach. His words went against everything that I knew about the rights of women in marriage, and even against the guidelines of my faith itself, especially with regards to avoiding the blasphemy of *shirk* (worshipping other than the Creator or assigning divine

attributes to His creation), the only unforgivable sin if one dies upon it.

“When Jabbar comes into the room, you prostrate to him,” Jabbar’s father said as if scorning a wayward child.

At this point, I must have opened my mouth to protest in respectful disagreement, but he interjected before I could utter a word.

“And this is from Islam,” he said as if reading my mind.

By then, my mind was now a storm of thoughts, particularly in recalling quite well that in Islam we make *sajdah* to only Allah, our Creator.

“Prophet Muhammad said that if *any* human being was going to be commanded to prostrate to other than Allah, it would be a woman to her husband,” Jabbar’s father said, the unwavering tone of his voice mirroring that of a confident imam delivering a sermon.

Wait... What? Stunned, my previously clear thoughts of protest that had been rooted in firm knowledge of my faith were now a whirlwind of confusion and disbelief.

His last words were delivered with finality, and a look of self-satisfaction crossed his face. It was as if he knew that should I voice a single disagreement with anything he said, then I’d have to accept that I was opposing the teachings of the Prophet, and thus Allah Himself.

At that time in my life, I was still a teenager (though having recently broached legal “adulthood”), so I hadn’t studied enough from the authentic prophetic teachings to know whether or not Jabbar’s father had fabricated a hadith to silence and humiliate me, or if he was in fact quoting something from the Prophet

himself that was being taken out of context to serve his own selfish motives.

But because I didn't see any other option—especially since I really did want to please Allah by pleasing my husband—I stayed silent and resigned myself to dedicating my upcoming married life to embodying everything it meant to be a “good wife.”

Four

RAISING GOOD GIRLS

In time, I would learn that while Jabbar’s father was heavy-handed in how he took selfish liberties in conveying the obligations of a Muslim wife, he was merely one of numerous Muslim men who genuinely saw it as the woman’s duty—and in fact her entire purpose in life—to shrink herself to near non-existence in servitude to her husband.

Like the lessons that Jabbar’s father tried to impart on me while prepping me to be a “good wife” to his son, messages of “inherited love” that have been passed down from generation to generation—especially in the context of marriage and religious duty—all too often compel the female soul to sacrifice her deepest needs, desires, and ambitions to make a man’s life easier, pleasurable, or successful.

Then in defense of asking the female servants of Allah to disappear themselves from existence, so many Muslims point to divine revelation to prove that they’re right. And as is the case with those men (and women) with mindsets like the father of Jabbar, at that point, all arguments are closed. *Because God said so.*

Except He didn’t.

Yes, divine scripture does indeed praise those who sacrifice for the sake of Allah. Yes, divine scripture does indeed encourage us to give freely from what we love, not only from our material wealth but also from our time and emotional resources. And yes, the Qur'an does indeed speak highly of those who selflessly put the needs of others before their own. But what's missing in *our* version of this narrative are three crucial points:

1. In front of our Merciful Rabb, not a single act of sacrifice, generosity, or selflessness is asked of anyone, let alone praised in His divine teachings, unless it is first and foremost rooted in nourishing the soul—not in exhausting or depleting it. In fact, anything that results in unnecessarily harming oneself (physically, emotionally, or spiritually) is blameworthy at best, and sinful at worst.
2. By definition, *ikhlaas* (spiritual sincerity) is nourishing the spirit-soul by doing a praiseworthy act humbly and sincerely—and voluntarily—while seeking the pleasure of Allah. As such, it is not considered spiritual sincerity to be motivated to merely uphold cultural or family traditions; to avoid social shame; and to “humble” female souls.
3. Most significantly, in the context of divine revelation and prophetic teachings, the spiritual loftiness assigned to acts of sacrifice, generosity, and selflessness are *not* gender specific.

In other words, according to God Himself, both men and women should “sacrifice for the sake of Allah.” Practically speaking, this means if we can point to Scripture to justify asking girls to give up their deepest needs, desires, and life goals in pursuit of love and marriage; then we can ask boys to do the same, too.

In fact, given that the vast majority of scriptural texts that praise and encourage righteous sacrifice are aimed at men specifically, it is fair to argue this point: If there were to be any gender differentiation in continuous self-sacrifice for the benefit of others, it would be men—not women—who carry the weightiest obligation in this regard.

In other words, logically speaking, if we are coming from a strictly literal scriptural point of view, it would be boys and men who should be asked to give up the things they need and love so that others are comfortable and happy in this world.

Yet chances are, there will be few (if any) takers in this regard, even with multitudes of *daleel*—religious proof. This is because cultures, families, and communities—from East *and* West—tend to pride themselves in raising boys who become healthy, happy, and successful men. So not surprisingly, there is absolutely no amount of arguing, even with clear scriptural evidence, that could convince them to ask their sons to sacrifice their own happy, fulfilled, and successful lives to make a woman’s life happy, fulfilled, or successful.

Moreover, when these cultures, families, and communities celebrate these successful men, they often feel a sense of pride when they claim that behind each of them is a “good woman.” However, they don’t tend to give much attention to whether or not this good woman is healthy, happy, fulfilled, or successful herself—even if we narrow down each of these traits to only her emotional, physical, and spiritual wellbeing (i.e. those traits that have absolutely nothing to do with her external worldly success).

Fortunately, in the context of the Qur'an and prophetic teachings, no human soul—male or female—is asked to sacrifice their emotional, physical, or spiritual wellbeing to make someone else's life better, pleasurable, or successful.

This then begs the question: Why then are *we* continuously adopting lifestyles from our respective cultures, families, and communities that ask females to be dutifully “patient” amidst perpetual harm? Why then is the female soul continuously guilted into—and praised for—remaining in environments and marriages wherein she suffers a plethora of emotional pain, mental exhaustion, spiritual starvation, and abuse?

From my own lessons in life and love, I believe the answer is this: *Because in our respective cultures—in East and West—what we routinely define as a “good girl” is really just a suppressed and silenced female soul.*

Deep down, this repressed female soul is remarkably unique and beautiful, but the messages she has received about her “duty” have made her give up her deepest desires and needs (emotionally, spiritually, and personally) in trying to be “good” as defined by her family and husband (and she assumes, her religion). In dutifully fulfilling this role, she has unconsciously imbibed messages that make her genuinely believe that being “good” as defined by her family and husband is synonymous with being “good” as defined by God.

However, here is the reality for so many repressed female souls: In embracing her role as a “good girl,” she will likely never know what it feels like to be loved, cherished, or valued for who she truly is in this world.

And no, I'm not talking about what so many practicing Muslims derogatorily refer to as *feminism* or *modernism*, or as encouraging “career girls.” In fact, these claims are generally

made to sidestep the issue of honestly addressing the fact that authentic Islam itself—as was practiced by the earliest Muslims—centers nourishing the female soul, while so many of *our* religious mindsets center crushing it.

Rather, I am talking about how too often, a beautiful female soul—though sincerely worshipping her Rabb—will likely never know what it feels like to love and value *herself* in this world.

Also By Umm Zakiyyah

If I Should Speak

A Voice

Footsteps

Realities of Submission

Hearts We Lost

The Friendship Promise

Muslim Girl

His Other Wife

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even if. bits and pieces from the heart of Umm Zakiyyah

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He Asked About Islam

Alone, But In the Company of Your Lord

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I'm Divorced Now: Heartbreak and Healing

What Did You Expect? Lessons on Spiritual Honesty

Dear Struggling Soul: Affirmations for Spiritual Self-Compassion

Nurturing the Nafs: Emotional Honesty for the Female Soul

About the Author

Known for her soul-touching books and spiritual reflections on the Qur'an and emotional healing, Umm Zakiyyah is a world-renowned author and soul-care mentor.

Umm Zakiyyah studied Arabic, Qur'an, Islamic sciences, *'aqeedah*, and *tafseer* in America, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia for more than fifteen years. She currently teaches *tajweed* (rules of reciting Qur'an), *tafseer* (explanation of the meaning of the Qur'an), and *tadabbur* (deep reflections on the Qur'an) via uzhearhub.com.

Daughter of American converts to Islam, Umm Zakiyyah (also known by her birth name Ruby Moore and her "Muslim" name Baiyinah Siddeeq) is the internationally acclaimed, award-winning author of more than twenty-five books, including novels, short stories, and self-help. Her books are used in high schools and universities in the United States and worldwide, and her work has been translated into multiple languages. Her work has earned praise from writers, professors, and filmmakers. Her novel *His Other Wife* is now a short film.

Dr. Robert D. Crane, advisor to former US President Nixon, said of Umm Zakiyyah, "...no amount of training can bring a person without superb, natural talent to captivate the reader as she does and exert a permanent intellectual and emotional impact."

Professor K. Bryant of Howard University said of *If I Should Speak*, “The novel belongs to...a genre worthy of scholarly study.”

Umm Zakiyyah has a BA degree in Elementary Education, an MA in English Language Learning, and Cambridge’s CELTA (Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults).

In 2020, she founded an online university to share the life lessons she learned on her emotional and spiritual healing journey. For information on UZ courses, go to **uzhearthub.com** and **uzuniversity.com**

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