The Spiritual Path

A Conversation Between
Professor Ali A. Allawi
and Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri

On His Life, Thought and Work

Publisher: Zahra Publications

ISBN (E-Book Version): 978-1-919826-99-8

ISBN (Paperback): 978-1-928329-11-4

http://www.zahrapublications.pub

Published in April of 2019

Table of Contents

About This Book i

About Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri ii

About Professor Ali A. Allawi iii

Growing up in Karbala 1

Life in England 63

Career in the Oil Industry 77

Time with Chinmaya 95

Sufism 115

America 148

After America 167

It's All About Oneness 178

Other Sages and Realized Beings 214

Reaching Luminosity 238

Spiritual Realm 252

Religion 273

The Sacred 309

Consciousness 324

The Teacher 360

Societies, Nations, and Civilizations 367

Imaginal and Natural Sciences 406

Glossary 428

eBooks By Zahra Publications 437

About This Book

This book is a transcription of extensive interviews between Professor Ali A. Allawi and Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri, conducted in South Africa during January-February of 2014.

In them, Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri discusses his life story, the spiritual journey and the path he has been on ever since.

Professor Allawi's questions highlight Shaykh Haeri's life-changing encounters with Sufi Masters and other spiritual teachers and his travels and teaching with Sufi communities.

Drawing out Shaykh Haeri's far-reaching views on the future of religion, Sufi orders and global spirituality, the conversations probe deeply into how one attains enlightenment and what it means to live in the light of the Absolute in a relative world.

Deeply engaging and inspiring for any serious seeker.

These interviews were transcribed by Julia Khadija Lafene and edited by Anjum Jaleel.

In order to publish it as a book, chapter headings, subheadings and footnotes have been added, many gaps within the conversations have been filled, and footnotes and a glossary have been added.

About Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri

Acknowledged as a master of self-knowledge and a spiritual philosopher, Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri's role as a teacher grew naturally out of his own quest for self-fulfillment.

He travelled extensively on a spiritual quest which led to his eventual rediscovery of the pure and original Islamic heritage of his birth, and the discovery of the truth that reconciles the past with the present, the East with the West, the worldly with the spiritual – a link between the ancient wisdom teachings and our present time.

A descendant of five generations of well-known and revered spiritual leaders, Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri has taught students throughout the world for over 30 years. A prolific author of more than thirty books relating to the universal principles of Islam, the Qur'an, and its core purpose of enlightenment, he is a gifted exponent of how the self relates to the soul, humankind's link with the Divine, and how consciousness can be groomed to reflect our higher nature.

The unifying scope of his perspective emphasizes practical, actionable knowledge that leads to self-transformation, and provides a natural bridge between seemingly different Eastern and Western approaches to spirituality, as well as offering a common ground of higher knowledge for various religions, sects and secular outlooks.

About Professor Ali A. Allawi

Prof. Ali Allawi has had a distinguished career in the Iraqi government, serving as Minister of Trade, Minister of Defense and most recently, Minister of Finance in 2006. Dr. Allawi has been a Research Professor at the National University of Singapore, and at Oxford University. In 2009-2010 he was elected Senior Visiting Fellow at Princeton University and at Harvard Kennedy School of Government. Dr. Allawi holds an S.B. in Civil Engineering from MIT and an MBA from Harvard Business School.

New York Times Book Review called his book *The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace*, the most comprehensive historical account of the aftermath of the American invasion.

Also, in October 2009 the Washington Institute for Near East Policy announced that Dr. Allawi's book *The Crisis of Islamic Civilization* was awarded the silver prize of its annual book prize.

In March 2014, his major political biography of *Faisal I of Iraq*, set against the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the formation of the modern state system in the Middle East, was published. In December 2014, the *Economist* placed the book on its list of Best Books for 2014.

In April 2016, Ali Allawi was nominated as the Distinguished Fellow at the Rajaratnam School of International Studies at the Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

He is presently working on a book commissioned by Yale University Press, entitled *The Chasm*. This will be an economic history of the developing world, tracing the evolution of development paradigms and policies from the end of World War II to the present.

Growing up in Karbala

Spiritual Lineage

AA: Al-Salaam alaikum, Shaykhna. Thank you for agreeing to hold this interview. I hope it will be more like a conversation or dialogue so it will not be structured in any way except along the lines that you choose or along the lines of the conversation itself.

We'll start at the beginning, which is your own childhood and youth. You mentioned it at some length in the book, '*Son of Karbala*', but I felt that there were a number of things that could have been elaborated on, but the length that this may have forced the book to take, it may have been unreal to go beyond the outline you provided in the book. But to me it's clear that in early childhood there are significant elements in the formation of a person's character and predisposition.

Before we get into that, I'd like to ask more about your lineage, for lack of a better word, your *spiritual* lineage, in the sense that again, following in part your own teachings, genetic inheritance is a significant element in the formation of spiritual predisposition, so can I know something more about the Haeris, before they came to Iraq, when they came to Iraq and something about your grandfather, if you can recall that? I'm speaking now of the paternal line.

SFH: I remember very well an inner certainty that my genetic, material or physical lineage, or background had been very blessed. I grew up feeling very confident and content since my earliest childhood – may be the age of two or three. And I didn't really dig a lot into that, except that I know, from relatives and others who dug into it, that the family had come from Shirvan, which is near Dagestan. They were Shirvanis, of Persian, Aryan extraction.

AA: Not Turkish?

SFH: They may have been a mixture – I don't know – my mother was half Turkish – Turkic – and they were landed people, leaders of whatever – both religious and secular

lands, and with the Russian wars, in the early 1800s, there were waves of killings, and they ended up in Northern Mazandaran, where they had family links and friends. They ended up in Babul – Mazandaran now – as of 1840-50. And they had a very strong affinity to the *Ahl al-Bayt* teachings of Islam and a very strong inclination towards *`Irfan* and Sufism without them being part of a *Tariqah*.

AA: Were they all religious teachers and *`ulama*?

SFH: They were both *`ulama* and landowners at the same time; they were merchant princes – land and *`ilm* combined.

AA: There was not a real distinction between being a landowner and an *`alim*?

Great Grandfather Shaykh Zayn al-`Abidin

SFH: Correct. For example, my mother's father was a great tradesman, wholesaler in Iraq, in Baghdad, and ended up in Karbala, and his library was known to be one of the best in terms of the handwritten manuscripts. As far as names, I know, my great grandfather, Shaykh Zayn al-`Abidin, was the greatest *marja`* of his days. His father was known to be a big advocator of combining outer and inner, and his name was '*Karbala Muslim*' – his title.

AA: You were not known then as 'Haeri'?

SFH: No. Haeri came with Shaykh Zayn al-`Abidin (1850/60). He ended up in Najaf as a youngster because there was no other teacher who could teach him in Northern Iran. So the people around said, 'this young man is worthy – at the age of 9 or 10 – of being under the best tutelage.'

AA: So this was around mid 1800s?

SFH: 1850-1860. So he ended up as being the greatest *marja`* in his 50s in Najaf – he was not married. Several people knew a lot more about him than I do – Ansari was his main teacher and he told them, 'I've never had such a being as this man.'

AA: He became then a *mujtahid* in Najaf?

SFH: Absolutely, in Najaf. And the story is that at the age of fifty, he would often go to Imam Ali's shrine and they would lock him up overnight. So that night – this story was told to me by Seyyed Mehdi al-Hakim, and others knew it. I never investigated it, I was so confident in the love of my parents – especially my mother. So I really did not have an unhappy childhood. I grew up quite content inwardly. Those were the happiest times for me. As a youngster, in Karbala, I often found myself sitting in the corner of one of the four houses that were all contiguous. I never needed any attention or toys or anything – I was quite happy singing to myself.

AA: Did you ever need confirmation of your part of the lineage or did you take that for granted?

SFH: I took it for granted. I remember the earliest time my father called me 'Shaykh Fadhlalla', my mother said, 'what is this?', and he said, 'he is a Shaykh'.

AA: 'Shaykh' in an endearing way or as a title?

SFH: I don't know – I really have no idea. I didn't care either.

AA: I suppose moving to Iraq, the Haeri *laqab* was attached to it.

SFH: Only when he moved from Najaf to Karbala?

AA: Karbala.

SFH: It may have been 1880s or 90s – I don't know my dates very well, but before 1890.

AA: Was he involved in the events of the period – the various religious disputes? Especially, this was the time when the *Babis*[1] had become quite a serious threat to the established religious authority in Iran anyway, and had an extension in Iraq, so in this period, when your great grandfather was active, it was also the period of religious and spiritual turmoil.

[1] An offshoot of Shi`a Islam who emerged in 19th century in Iran, generally considered heretics by both the Shi`a and Sunni Muslims.

SFH: My personal reading and interpretation of religious and political turmoil – later on in the British rule – is that this family was aware of it, but they were never embroiled in it.

AA: So they were sort of detached from it.

SFH: Absolutely. For example, I know there were a number of incidents with Shaykh Zayn al-`Abidin when there were disputes, when somebody saw someone else in the public bath doing *ghusl* and part of the back had not been wetted and he would call them to task – there were dozens of such stories. He would say: 'it is not your business – you are not religious police. If a man is doing his *ghusl*, what's that to do with you as an observer?' So he was in a way, I wouldn't say, above the law, but he was considered to be not embroiled in the day-to-day '*mullahdom*' activities.

AA: He had a kind of elevated station, didn't he?

SFH: No doubt about it. I know from all the stories I have been told from Shaykh al-`Abidin, 150 years ago, that these people were considered to have a voice of higher *haqq*, or original *Muhammadi Light*, without them taking a side line, if you like, away from the day-to-day activities. They were aware of the day-to-day activities, but, if you like, it touched them lightly.

AA: Did he teach Shaykhna?

SFH: He died in his 90s, still teaching.

AA: So he had a group of students.

SFH: He had more than that. He moved and went to Iran. He complained to Imam Ali [in his supplication], 'I am in my fifties, I am not married, I have lived on bread and water, and enough is enough.' Apparently Imam Ali came to him and reprimanded him: 'What are you talking about? I have never heard you before. You have never asked for anything. But if you want all of this, it's not here. Leave for Karbala.' This story was told to me by Seyyed Mehdi al-Hakim and many others. So in his early fifties he goes by caravan from Najaf to Karbala, then stopped half way at Khan al-Nus – with two or three donkeys

carrying his books, and Imam Ali tells him, ‘This is my son, Imam Hussain, he will take care of you. Don’t stay here, go to Karbala. This is a place of austerity and nothingness.’

Shaykh Zayn al-`Abidin’s Move to Karbala

AA: So his movement from Najaf to Karbala was inspired. When did he move?

SFH: In his late fifties.

AA: So he was given clear Instructions.

SFH: Yes, he was given instructions. So he comes to Karbala, and they say, as he is nearing the gate where the cemetery is in the desert, he sees a very distinguished man on a white horse with his servants, who calls him, saying, ‘I’m waiting for you. Are you Shaykh Zayn al-`Abidin?’ He said ‘Yes’. He said, ‘Last night I had instructions from Imam Hussain. I am the biggest trader and businessman in Karbala, if not in Iraq, and I have had instructions that I have to wait for you and I have to give you my daughter. You’re not married. You’re in your mid-fifties – it’s late.’ Shaykh Zayn al-`Abidin doesn’t know, he says, ‘I have a *madrasa* here, and I have my students. I’m going to the *hawza*. I’m not going to your house.’ So food arrives and after six months he ends up marrying that daughter, whose name was Khurshid. I have her *tasbih* of a thousand beads – it’s made of mud of Karbala. Apparently she was a very pious, a very beautiful, mixed Mazandarani, woman, and this fellow was also Mazandarani, but his family ended up being the founders of the Ottoman bank and it was said that if they withdrew their money the bank would collapse. So he was married to a big merchant, as was the custom. So in his mid fifties he gets married and they have four sons and maybe one or two daughters.

AA: No daughters?

SFH: I don’t know. Now there is Shahla Haeri you can contact – she is part of the same Haeri clan. Ha-er means, ‘next to Imam Hussain’. That’s where the name ‘Haeri’ comes from; there were no ayatollahs at that time. And then in 1890, or something, the Shah of Iran commissions the production of the first printed *risala* in Lucknow. I have one copy

from 1890 or something. And it is '*hajar*'[2] – I have it in type – no doubt the thing is already written but this was commissioned to be printed and made available by command of Nasreddin Shah – and his favorite wife was always at his side – you know, coming and going with him to Karbala, in 1890 or something.

AA: Has anything about him been written or researched?

SFH: Yes, yes, there are one or two pages.

AA: Within the literature?

SFH: Yes, yes no doubt about it.

AA: Such as [the compendium] *`Alam al-Najaf* by Ja`afar Khalili?

SFH: That's right – no, I think before that – I have some copies – I will show you.

AA: When did he die, Shaykhna? Before the turn of the century?

SFH: I really don't know, in 1910 perhaps. He died a very old man. My dates are not right – you need to string it together to make some sense out of it.

AA: Well I suppose if he came in his 40s and 50s in the 1840s, he died in the 90s.

SFH: 90s. And it was written that he died teaching. During the last half hour of his life he was still teaching.

AA: What did he teach, *Fiqh, Usul, `Irfan*?

SFH: I don't know if it was classified as *`Irfan*. It was a complete package, not a separate field. That's how I grew up – without having to classify something as '`*Irfan*' or 'Sufism.' It was the same. There is only one path. You do your best and live it.

AA: So it wasn't as structured formally.

[2] Printing using stones.

SFH: No, there well may have been structured in the *Hawza* but not in our household. I did not get a whiff of any of these things.

AA: Were there permanent students – I'm sure there must have been.

SFH: There must have been – I don't know.

AA: If he passed away at the beginning of the turn of the century, was the mantle transferred to your father?

Grandfather – Shaykh Muhammad Hussein

SFH: No, it was transferred to my grandfather, Shaykh Muhammad Hussein. He was one of the four sons. One of them was called Shaykh al-`Iraqain because he was very much involved in disputes, and the others were Shaykh Muhammad, Shaykh Ali, and Shaykh Muhammad Hussain.

AA: Your grand uncle, not your uncle.

SFH: I had one uncle – Shaykh Muhammad Hussain, who had two sons; one of them, my father, the eldest, Shaykh Ahmed his name was, and his brother Shaykh Baqi. He went to Iran and became exceptionally prominent. He was the head of the judiciary for many, many years – I forget now, but he had a title meaning, 'the son of the Shaykh.'

AA: *Shaykh Zadeh!*[3]

SFH: The Iranian brother was Shahla Haeri's grandfather and she is an anthropologist in Boston; she also tried to package it together, but there wasn't this separation of *zahir* and *batin* – they were one. You are accountable for all your actions, and you should be watchful of what you are doing and where your *qibla* is.

AA: Do you remember your grandfather yourself?

SFH: Not at all. I never saw him. My grandfather became exceptionally prominent in India because Shaykh Zayn al-`Abidin inspired the people in Lucknow, in 1860s, 70s.

[3] Son of a Shaykh.

AA: I read in Nakash's book on the "Lucknow legacy" which played a large part in financing the *Hawza*. When the British came, all the people in Najaf were trying to draw proximate to the rulers and a number of documents that dealt with the various, and sometimes groveling, way in which they handled the relationship with the British authorities [came to light]. Then there was a section on the *`ulama* of Karbala which mentioned your grandfather – how they were very distant and formal in their relationship [with the British] – they were not part of the bequest of the Awad[4] legacy. Your grandfather had some degree of financial independence that was probably not available to the normal *`alim*.

SFH: It began with Shaykh al-`Abidin around 1870's, and its influence with the kings of power was immense – especially with Mahmoodabad. Until now in Mahmoodabad, old palace there is a huge *ijaza* that says that this man can do this, he can do that. So he was a great influence on them, and my father, I remember as a kid, did something, which was very unusual, I remember it vaguely – he went to Baghdad to perform a marriage. He'd never ever done these things and I remember vaguely as a child that the story was that this was the son of somebody who mattered a lot to my grandfather and great-grandfather, and he was the Rajah of Mahmoodabad, father of Suleiman. They were getting married and wouldn't do it unless my father performed the marriage. So he went for them. So there was a strong link with that part of India, and also with further on away to the east. And there were also links with North Africa.

AA: Really?

SFH: There were links. I remember once a man from North Africa coming and staying with us, because we had a guest house – and there were always guests. This guest was from North Africa, a practicing alchemist. He was very upset – I remember at 5 or 6 years – screaming away at my father, saying, 'You are not showing me, you are not giving me, you are not telling me anything.' My father was a practicing alchemist, and I didn't understand what was going on – I just remember vaguely the notion of the conversation. This man wanted a recipe and my father was saying to him that: 'you are

[4] Arabic word for the Indian province of Oudh (currently known as Uttar Pradesh).

the recipe – you have to be transformed – YOU are the recipe, you are going to be the elixir.' So there was something like that, and it went on and on for a few hours.

AA: And you were listening?

SFH: I was coming and going and it had an effect on me, in that what this man was looking for in the outer, my father was saying, 'it's all about your inner?', that is what left an impression.

AA: So the term Ayatollah came into common use by then?

SFH: That time was after my grandfather, and they talked about Ayatollah Abu Al-Hassan Qasim, and my father said, 'People need them.' He was not elevating them, he was not being condescending; he was just saying that it's not our business.

AA: Need them for the outer definition of their religion.

SFH: People need them and that's it.

AA: But it wasn't in common use in Karbala?

SFH: Not at all; neither that, nor the name, 'Imam'. 'Imam' was always reserved for Imam Ali. So when I heard Imam Khomeini being called 'Imam', for me it was a new thing, and I accepted it. New thing, new life, new days.

Father – Shaykh Ahmed

AA: So now we come to your late father. How do you recall him? What are your first impressions of him?

SFH: There and not there. I felt there was a great – if you like – umbrella of referencing, because that is what Karbala referred to him also. Most of the *`ulema* every now and then would come over and so would be the governor. Every Thursday he would come quietly early morning to have 10-15 minutes with him and talk about the day-to-day affairs. My father was the voice of *haqq* not remote or distant from day to day, but he was not embroiled in the day-to-day. The same thing with me. Whenever I had something very

serious, I would ask and he would answer me according to my level of understanding. I felt his availability all the time.

AA: Was he a remote figure?

SFH: No. He was always available when needed. I never felt him remote, but I knew he was at another level than I, but would condescend to be at my level and talk to me and ask my help. Every other day he would be doing something, pottering around one of the four or five houses, fixing something; he would always be either planting and pulling plants and palm trees. We had four houses and each had a courtyard with gardens in it.

AA: Did you have orchards in Karbala?

SFH: We had a very big orchard, called *Bagh e Jamal*, within five minutes walk from the shrine.

AA: Was he spending much of his time there?

SFH: No, there were farmers coming and the people who looked after it would be coming and going – every other day there would be two or three donkeys coming with produce to the door so we always had fresh stuff available to us.

AA: You didn't feel any scarcity of food?

SFH: Not at all, no. In my grandfather's time, Indian envelopes arriving ... very tough envelopes... also during my grandfather's time. I remember he died young – he was stabbed..... for those people. He died in his late 60s.

AA: He was murdered?

SFH: He was stabbed coming back from the *salaat* to the house: apparently somebody was waiting for him in the *barani* and stabbed him because that day he had received a big envelope from the British agency with money in it. So he considered him as a British agent and stabbed him.

AA: He died of his wounds?

SFH: After a few months, of infestation. My aunt told me the story; he died of the wounds, and apparently the man who stabbed him ended up nursing him in the last two or three months.

AA: *Subhanallah!*

SFH: He nursed him, saying that, 'I really thought you were an agent and that's why I stabbed you. But now I know you aren't an agent, …'

AA: He then forgave his attacker!

SFH: Totally. This came clearly from my aunt, who was with him until he died.

AA: But it was a lingering wound, and it took a long time for him to die.

SFH: My aunt got married to the Asad Khan's family…

AA: So on your grandmother's side, who was your paternal grandfather? Were they Ayatollahs?

SFH: I don't know.

AA: So you don't have a connection there?

SFH: I really don't know. But I have inherited a few things. It is interesting that as time went by there remained only a few things that I inherited. For example, that printed *risala* from the 1880s or 90s. It was kept somewhere and it ended up with me. I also had the first printed Qur'an *hajjar* used by my grandfather and my father – all these ended up with me as custodian. Not that I wanted them. This Qur'an, for example, was given to my eldest brother – Sadreddin his name was from my father's first family. Sadreddin died 20 or 30 years ago in his 80s, and he inscribed on it: 'There is always a line of light and we have to follow it, and that line of light came to you, so I am sending you this Qur'an. I was only a keeper of it for you.' So I have about a dozen or twenty of these things that came to me. I'm also not that good a keeper – I don't really care for these things, but there are there.

Three C's – Connectedness, Continuation and Consciousness

AA: I have heard Shaykhna that you have described the exalted status of your great grandfather – the significant status of your grandfather – their orientation towards inner knowledge and *`Irfan*, their distancing themselves from power and authority and the common set of *`ulama*. Do you think these developed any kind of spiritual legacy that was somehow transferred generationally? Could that legacy be transferable?

SFH: I see the patterns of connectedness throughout life. I see the life force is based on three things: 'three 'Cs', I call them. First force is Connectedness: there is Connectedness, Connectedness, Connectedness, beyond our ability to imagine. That's why we want to connect, that's why we want the Internet and Facebook, etc. – to connect, connect. Everything is already connected. *Al-Jami`* is one. From that immensity of singularity the whole universe and apparent diversity have come about. So I see the most important power is Connectedness. The baby wants to connect with the nipple, the mother and with the father – on and on and on.

The second force is Continuation: Connectedness ends space; Continuation ends up as the illusion of time – the *fitra*, crack, it's an illusion, which Adam had to fall into. You and I also have to fall into it in order for us to get out of that prison and exile.

The third one is Consciousness.

So there are three 'Cs': Connectedness, Continuation – eternal – and Consciousness.

AA: If we visualize it as a kind of virtual spiritual pipeline which connects and continues, consciousness is the flow that goes through them, then would that prevail in terms of its transferability into the world of matter – across generations?

SFH: True, there is that. But I won't give it too much emphasis. I'm sure there is genetic, I'm sure there is culture, I'm sure there is nurture and nature – all of these do play a role, no doubt about it.

AA: No, I'm not trying to fix the contours, I'm not trying to say there is a kind of pipeline architecture that links generations, but it is a fundamental part of a network – the

end result is that the flow of consciousness through this virtual pipeline can be a conflicted pipeline or it can be a broad pipeline. If your starting point is infinite and then it becomes in the realm of finitude – it goes to individuals, that connectedness may continue across generations.

SFH: Yes, no doubt about it.

AA: There is a biological element.

SFH: No doubt about it, but also bear in mind, there are many biological or genetic advantages that get blocked later on. So many people have that potential – they have inherited something but they are not worthy of it. It doesn't work for them.

AA: That's the other side of it.

SFH: The other side. I have absolutely no doubt. In my case, I really had no qualms about the fact that I – it wasn't egotistic, it wasn't *nafsi*, it wasn't a *selfie*; it was just that I took it for granted. I grew up quite naturally with that confidence. All is there already. So, I had realized that I needed to participate in this world and needed to have some skills. Fine – I took it quite naturally. If you look at it from a biographical point of view, eight times I was uprooted in my life. Eight countries, eight different times.

AA: But the travel was in your family. The big up-rootedness was when your family moved across continents – moving from Mazandaran to Najaf.

SFH: …and before Mazandaran, from Dagestan.

AA: From Dagestan one *hijra*; from Mazandaran to Najaf, and then from Najaf to Karbala.

SFH: You're right. I remember as a fourteen year old ...

AA: So the aspect of movement in order to achieve a degree of spiritual realization …

SFH: …to be an exile in this world. You are happy to take that in your inner world. I remember as a 14/15 year old in Karbala, because the house had no fence or no distance

from the shrine. I remember being on the roof – clearly it was Muharram and the black flag was waving on the roof – I could hear the flag, it was next to me – I asked Imam Hussain, because my birthday is the same as his birthday, the third of *Sha`ban*, so whenever they celebrate it I felt quite chuffed. .... without really being esoteric… but I asked Imam Hussain, 'What shall I do? I now have a scholarship; should I go abroad or stay here?' I wanted to do medicine in Iraq – I didn't want to leave Iraq and I could almost hear the voice that said, 'Flow with the wind of your destiny. Go with Selma, wherever she goes. And follow the winds of destiny wherever it turns.' And that came to me later. I knew my destiny wasn't there; I had to move and accept whatever came. And then when my name was announced as one of the earliest winners of the scholarships – and I was number two in Iraq – I was chuffed. I said, 'That's it, flow with the flow.'

Spiritual Pipeline Across Generations

AA: I want to go back to the earlier question – to go back to the idea of the movement across generations, the spiritual pipeline. If you think of yourself as the end of a parenthesis, you can alter the bracket, at your parents or your grandparents – you can open it at the ultimate point – with Adam and so on. So the whole thing with these brackets is to enclose something so that you can understand it within the limits of the mind. What I'm trying to ask is, if you take yourself as a spiritual teacher, and you close the bracket in the sense that that aspect will be closed with you; if you open the bracket with your great grandfather, you can see patterns, within this limited frame for this infinite pipeline where the three 'Cs' as you mentioned flow. You can see the movement but there are certain repetitions and characteristics. They may not be inherited equally; the characteristics of movement – call it *hijrah*, the characteristic of having an inclination. Now I don't know how many descendants there are of your great grandfather, maybe several hundred …

SFH: More.

AA: Thousands? You stand out from amongst them as the inheritor of that spiritual legacy. If I were to structure the question, I'd put it this way: Is there any, firstly, validity, and secondly, any purpose, in talking about this genetic predisposition?

SFH: There is. But I look at the other side of it to understand it. In other words, I am not the only inheritor, I am not the exclusive spiritual inheritor, I am not the selected inheritor, and I am not the exclusive being. What happened to me, fortunately, at a very young age is to realize my attention; my focus has to be to be weary of the shadow, not of the light. So I was very fortunate at a very young age to realize that my business is not to claim the light of God or the *ruh* – it is to realize the shield or the handicap of identity, of separation, of my reality, my ego. I was very fortunate at an early young age to discover that it is the removal of the 'I', it is *la ilaha – il-Allah* is already there – it was almost intuitive, that is, don't claim anything – higher, lower, inheritor of light; just watch out for the shadow that covers that light which is universal and in every soul. In other words, if you tell me now that there are another five hundred, if you like, *arwah* from Karbala, Muslim or whatever, who have that, I say, of course, but you personally, everyone personally, every individual has to know it. Everybody is enlightened, but to know that enlightenment or the potential enlightenment or illumination, or the *nur* of Allah in your heart, your *ruh*, is covered by your illusion that you are separate – that's all. So I accept the idea of the special people, selected people, exclusive people, but I think that is the cover up of everybody and it is inclusive. All human beings have that potential.

AA: It has to be earned by every generation.

SFH: Absolutely – by realizing the shadow that covers it. Not by wanting the light.

AA: No, but the outcome, the end result is that there are people who are more pre-disposed to that.

SFH: Correct.

AA: And there are others who are less able to receive that light.

SFH: Because they have simply looked at the shadow by their insight – when the shadow disappears the *nur* of Allah prevails – this is Reality.

AA: But the acknowledgement of the Reality in terms of action, in terms of personal characteristics, in terms of spiritual composition, requires a person to actually switch on

that light, or to say that there's always been light there. It's like you must have a pre-disposition to say that the emperor has no clothes.

SFH: True, and that pre-disposition needs to be encouraged, to be nourished.

AA: Every person in this world has that pre-disposition, but the degree to which it's opened is partly a function of spiritual inheritance.

SFH: Could very well be. Again, nature and nurture. I remember myself as a three or four years old, crying because they didn't wait for me to pray with them. So later on I eventually came to realize that the Muhammadi package has it all. The *wudhu* is to disconnect, for a little while, this continuing connectedness with your worldliness, with your *nafs*, with your body, your mind, your senses, your desires, and the connection will come naturally when you go into your prostration. For me a few things that Muhammad's[5] teaching – such as '*Assalatu mi`raj al-mu'min*'[6] – *mi`raj* is taking off to another zone of consciousness. I live that zone; I don't talk about it.

AA: But Shaykhna, I find a reluctance on your part to accept the elite functions of this knowledge, but its intrinsic limitation to a few. You said before that it's a question of *dhawq*; I think it's a question of *dhawq* as well as pre-disposition.

SFH: I accept all that, but I don't see it. I accept what you say make sense to the mind, but I'm not the mind, I'm the heart.

AA: If you look at most of the people.

SFH: I accept that ... in the Qur'an – most of them do not have an intellect, most of them do not see... of course… *Wama yu'minu aktharuhum billahi illa wahum mushrikoon*[7] ... I accept that, but I don't see it as such – I see it as the potential in everyone. The first thing I see in anyone is a *ruh* – really, it's the truth. So I can accept it.

[5] In the Muslim tradition, Peace be Upon Him, is invoked whenever the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) name is mentioned. When his blessed name appears in this book, PBUH is implied.
[6] *Salaat* is the *mi`raj* (ascension to Heavens) of a believer.
[7] "Most of them will only believe in God while also joining others with Him." (Qur'an 12:106)

AA: For yourself, it becomes transparent, but I mean those, the vast majority of people, even those who are on this path, are not yet at that level where they can only see.

SFH: Sure.

AA: So if you don't mind, I'll pull you back to the level that – in the sense that if you look at nearly all the great beings of the world, and all the great traditions, there's some peculiar characteristics about their make-up. They seem to have this in-born ability. It's very unlikely that, for instance, you'll find an accountant who suddenly becomes an accepted shaykh. There's something in their inner make-up.

SFH: Connection, connection, continuation – *Baba Jaan* – it is continuous... so watch out! *Bismillah* is there. Where are you putting your foot? Why are you doing this? Why are you talking to this fellow? Why? Because one thing will lead to another. Suddenly you find yourself in another valley. Somewhere else – you don't know where it is. Complete alienation, of course.

Family Life

AA: Shaykhna – about your family life, your father. Your father had two families – is that correct?

SFH: He had married one of the relatives from Mazandaran and he had five sons and two daughters. His wife died from cholera or something, and he remained without a family for five, six, seven years. And then he married my mother.

AA: His first wife died and then he remarried?

SFH: That's right.

AA: Was there any connection in your youth between the families of his first wife and his second wife, because there must be a generational gap between you and your step (half) brothers and sisters.

SFH: It was a very good, a very healthy connection. My mother was rejected for the first two or three years…

AA: By whom?

SFH: By the rest of the family.

AA: Were they living in the same enclosure?

SFH: Connected houses that were next door to each other. Karbala…

AA: A kind of *Haush*…

SFH: Three or four houses – for example, my aunt and her sister – two sisters – there were three aunts…living in a house next door.

AA: Married or not?

SFH: The aunt that told me about Shaykh Muhammad Hussain's fascination in a way was, as I said, was married to the Asad Khan family – that's why there's a …

AA: …Shams ul-Mulook's family…

SFH: She was married to Mulook's father's brother – he was the head of that family – Majid Khan was his name ...

AA: Kabulis – they were from Afghanistan?

SFH: Majid Khan – they came from Isfahan.

AA: Originally they came from Kabul.

SFH: They originally may have been connected. There was a direct link to the Agha Khan, he used to come every now and then to Karbala; he had connection with my father. So there were three aunts living next-door – the houses were connected outside and from the roof – you know fairly sizeable houses. So my mother was not accepted because she was an Arab, a Seyyed from Assad, Bani Assad. But within two years she learned

Persian, and she started writing poetry, so she was fully accepted, and they really honored her.

AA: Did you have any connection with your half brothers and sisters?

SFH: Very much so. One of them was...

AA: Was there an age gap?

SFH: Of course – a big age gap – one of whom was living in England – he looked after me as I went as a scholarship student.

AA: But when you were young, I mean, when you were seven, eight years old.

SFH: They would come and go and visit. Yes – there wasn't much interaction.

AA: I mean there wasn't a formal distance between you and them?

SFH: Not at all. I never observed this. I felt favored.

AA: I'm speaking about your relations with your aunts …

SFH: As I said, I felt favored by all of them.

AA: Really?

SFH: Absolutely. The eldest half-brother, Sadri – I took liberties with him, he allowed me to do anything, cuddle him, kiss him, jump on him – and the second one, the third one and the fourth – they all loved me – I was totally favored. One of them came to America, visited us, and stayed with us for a while. And he said he came to America to see whether he could live with his son, who was quite a successful IT top man in California, but he said, 'I can't stay here, there's no life here,' so he went back to Iraq. No, I never ever felt rejected by anyone.

AA: Would you say your household was culturally Persian, Arabized, Muslim or Karbalayi.

SFH: No – Persian culture to begin with, but Arabized in the Seyyedi/Muhammadi sense – Karbalayi and beyond. For example, during Muharram our house would be closed, we wouldn't go out for days, like being in a closed enclosure. I remember myself as a kid, the first language was Persian, but the Qur'an was in Arabic and I loved the Qur'an. I remember myself as a very, very young three year old, going up and down on different roofs reciting the Qur'an aloud. I enjoyed the sound of it. Persian was the first language, Arabic went with it, Qur'anic Arabic especially, and I grew up Persian, Arab, Iraqi, Karbalayi, without much of a difference – a seamless connectedness.

AA: So it all seemed to be part of multiple cultures.

Son of Karbala

SFH: Yes, I grew up really as a son of Karbala[8]. I mean I really felt I am the son of this town. Wherever I went I was respected, people knew who I was.

AA: But what did you feel as, within the fold of Islam – Iraq, the Arab world, southern Iraq.

SFH: Not so much – I never felt that barrier – I felt connected with Imam Hussein, with Ali, Muhammad and the universe. I really didn't see myself as an Iraqi.

AA: There was no sense of national affiliation?

SFH: No. None at all, none whatsoever.

AA: You dealt with authority, right? I mean with officials as something that has to be done?

SFH: I really felt I perched on this land for a while – it is my temporary abode, and wherever I am, it doesn't matter since it is a temporary abode. I never felt emotional, or, if you like, strong affinity to land or people – I felt they were fine, they were all good people, or bad people – it doesn't matter.

[8] See Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri's autobiography, "*Son of Karbala*".

AA: Were there *muhallas* in Karbala?

SFH: Of course.

AA: Which *muhalla* were you in?

SFH: This was *Baab al-Qibla – Zainabiyya*.

AA: So you were in the elite of the elite *muhalla*.

SFH: No, I didn't feel that elevated. I regarded all the poor as equals and I'd be very happy to sit with any one of them and enjoy them.

AA: But in Karbala was your geographical, sacred space.

SFH: That is right. You know I got into a lot of trouble in the oil company – I was among the first batch of Iraqis returning and I was covenanted staff, and there were nine different levels before being a staff. And I would love these people – I would go to town, I would sit with them in Kirkuk, with my employees. I'd sit with them and enjoy them – go to their houses. Occasionally, I was not reprimanded by the British top brass, but I would be questioned, and they'd say something like, 'Look you know you are a higher level…' ... but I enjoyed them … I really enjoyed them. It was one of my five degrees below me employee who would be a very good shoemaker, maybe make my shoes. I'd go to his little shoe shop in Kirkuk and I'd sit with him and I enjoyed that.

AA: What I know is that most of the rest of Southern Iraq disliked Karbalayis, because they saw them as introverted, arrogant and very, very elitist, and they always favored their own, and they were not prepared to accept others, and not just people from Najaf and Kadhimain with whom I have a connection through my mother. And there was long-standing feuding in the relationship with Karbala. Did you feel a sense of superiority and elitism?

SFH: None at all.

AA: ...that you were special people?

SFH: Not at all. I felt there was something about me individually as special and I felt everybody else was special too, potentially special. I really never had the sense of separation or elitist or whatsoever. Not at all. Not once. In fact the only time I was reprimanded was when I was going to school, swinging my new satchel bag with my books in it, and I hit somebody. He held my hand and said, 'Who are you? Ccome, come you can't do that.' So he took me back home and said, 'He was not behaving himself properly in the street.' That was the only time I felt reprimanded. I never felt special – I felt confident, without knowing that I was confident, without a reflection of confidence or elitism. So I knew I am chosen, but the same as everybody else.

AA: You came from a very secure family, and had a very protected life.

SFH: Totally. Totally, totally, totally! In every way.

AA: Did your father make a special effort to fend off the problems from the outside world?

SFH: I don't think he made any effort. I don't think so – not overtly. I don't think he made any effort because his presence was strong, as was my mother's and her friends'. No, I felt accepted by all. The men – I would go to the *burani*, I would sit with them, talk with them, say a few things. I never felt in any way having to be put in a place, or something. The same thing with the women. For example, I favored a few of my mother's friends – beautiful women – I'd go and jump on their laps and they'd accept it.

AA: Well, you were only 4 or 5… "Shame on you!" [smiling]

SFH: five, six until seven…

AA: So they made you stop around 7, 8.

SFH: Around 6, 7 – I remember going to the women's bath one day. This time when they admonished me, they were right, so I didn't go there again. …It was never hurtful. I never felt that I'd been deprived or I'd not been accepted. I never ever felt that.

AA: Did you have a special nurse or maid?

SFH: I had, of course. There was this Meshti – I wrote about her in '*Son of Karbala*'. Now, she was the wife of someone very well to do from northern Mazandaran, next to the Russian border. He had land, he had a lot of wealth, he had orchards and he had also fishing, and I think he was caught between two of the boats that he owned and died. Within two or three months her son died, so she was very bereft. They told her, 'go to Karbala, there is a sanctuary.' So she arrived in Karbala. I was the same age as her son who died, so she adopted me, she took care of me. And I would tease her, I took her for granted, used to pull her hair, kick her, whatever.

AA: Have you found any difference between those who are nursed by their mother and by a wet nurse?

SFH: I have come to know that you need both – you need a mother, you need others, you need an extended family. You need public school, whatever. Later on I realized I grew up in an extended family environment.

AA: But you were not wet-nursed?

SFH: I don't think so.

AA: I mean – this was a common practice amongst the elite of the Arabs.

SFH: I wanted my mother exclusive to me. I even prayed that everybody else should die except her. She'd just be exclusive to me.

AA: So what happened with the person who had a wet nurse?

SFH: I don't know. I think it's good – it's good to have more than one mother.

AA: As I said, it was a common practice.

SFH: The earliest memory in my life is – I was probably over two – when my mother tried to wean me unsuccessfully. I remember coming with a wet cloth to wipe her nipple because she put something on it – aloe which was bitter – to wipe that and suckle her.

AA: But you are the youngest?

SFH: yes....

AA: The word ‘Fadhl’ seems to run in the family.

SFH: yes, yes – my mother, her name was Fadhila.

AA: But you’re named by your father…

SFH: I think he liked that. There were four of them with the name ‘Fadhl’ – I was the third.

AA: I think there was – they probably ran out of permutations with the name ‘Fadhl’.

SFH: Whatever. No, also I think she didn’t want any more children after me. I would tease my younger sister that, ‘you were not expected’ …

AA: So your mother came from the Bani Assad tribe?

SFH: Correct.

AA: From the Karbala area?

SFH: Baghdad and Karbala. Her father came to Karbala as a wholesaler – he was a very big wholesaler, but based in Baghdad.

AA: There’s a common saying in Iraq that two-thirds of the person follows their maternal uncle – Did you have good relations with your maternal uncles?

SFH: I did. I had good relations with two that I knew – there were three of them – one of them was the first merchant in Baghdad to open a department store – the first ever in Iraq. His name was Mahmoud Assadi. And he was famous by having ready-made clothes brought to Baghdad.

AA: Before Orosdi Beck?[9]

[9] A department store.

SFH: Before Orosdi Beck he was the first merchant – an exceptionally successful young man. Brilliant. And he settled in Baghdad a famous person, and died in his thirties from an exploded appendicitis.

AA: Fatal…

SFH: Very fatal, he died. And the two others – one of them was a very cultured man of literature – Mashkur al-Assadi. He was very close to King Faisal and was very much in his entourage. A writer and author, he had at the time a very extensive library of culture and literature. He had his degrees from Cairo and elsewhere. He was also a withdrawn man, a man of literature. He was very much into his books. And the other one was a very successful *sarrab*, called Mohammad Hussain Sarrab. I remember as a kid we would brag and say, 'do you think I am like Muhammad Hussain Sarrab?' He made a lot of money through "*kacha*" – through the Second World War, through contraband. I remember very well he favored me. His car was called Karbala No. 1 – he had an American car. So some other people said, 'No you can't have it. You must give it to this other person.' So he became no 2.

AA: He gave it to the governor?

SFH: Or someone, and I remember once in that car coming from Karbala to Baghdad – because he favored me, he liked me – Muhammad Hussein, his name was. In the middle of the way between Karbala and Baghdad which was not asphalted, the car developed some trouble, so they called for another car, and I remember very distinctly sitting in the back; so they had to lift the thing and there were bundles of gold inside the car trunk.

AA: Really? Gold bars or ingots?

SFH: No I think they were *majidis* or something. Because there were about ten or twelve of them – heavy. So I was sitting there and wondering why was this in the car – that's why they were worried.

AA: You thought that all cars were stacked with gold!

SFH: Mohammad Hussein Sarrab and the driver were very concerned. So when I learned about the gold in the car, I knew why.

AA: You don't remember the make of the car?

SFH: I think it was Buick.

AA: Was this before World War II?

SFH: No – I don't know. I must have been 8 years old. So, yes, it was during the war.

AA: Do you remember anything of the war?

SFH: I only remember the end of it. Somebody was calling in Karbala, 'the war is coming to an end,' I said, 'what is the war?'

AA: You mean the war was going on and you didn't know?

SFH: I didn't know.

AA: How old were you?

SFH: I was born in 1937, so I was 8. Then somebody said, 'But don't you remember brown sugar? That was because of the war.' There was also white sugar in the house…

AA: This is quite an interesting observation. 8 is not very young. I remember, for example, at that age, the Suez crisis – I was in fact younger than that. But it means that you are not pre-disposed to be interested in public events.

SFH: But it also didn't affect me – didn't affect the household, didn't affect anybody.

AA: Were there any rations or shortages?

SFH: None at all; none at all. I remember British people coming to the house to see my father, especially British ladies. I had the first experience with the West, where two British lady explorers coming to the house, with police and so on accompanying them, because I suppose that was the only household they could come to without *hijab*.

AA: Really?

SFH: Yes.

AA: Your father allowed them in.

SFH: Of course. And they gave me two books. One of them was pictures of Hyde Park, with women pushing prams about London. I can't remember the other one – they were nice books with colored pictures.

AA: Did they make you want to visit these places or were you just curious?

SFH: Not really. I was indifferent. It didn't touch me. I was so content that it didn't make a difference. But I remember them asking my father – he was very hospitable to them – you know whenever there were odd things like this, the governor of Baghdad would send them to us.

AA: Because you were the only household –

SFH: The only household that was not questionable – people did not consider it as a wrong thing, because, as I said, he was regarded as a non-controversial and respectable man.

AA: Above the fray…

SFH: In a sense. Absolutely.

AA: What do you remember of the town?

SFH: I remember the two shrines of Imam Hussein and Abbas connected with the bazaar.

AA: Did you have daily contact with the shopkeepers?

SFH: Well, whenever I was with my father, they would all jump from the shops to kiss his hand and he would pass very quietly …

AA: Was it a pious town?

SFH: It was a very pious town.

AA: A town that lived off the pilgrims…

SFH: Also trade. They were workers, shoemakers, dressmakers of every nationality, every Kabuli[10] face was there.

AA: Even agriculture?

SFH: I remember the town itself was a bit of a microcosm. It was beautiful; I loved it.

AA: Did you go to the river a lot?

SFH: Yes, I did. I had one of the earliest bicycles in town, and I would go along the river.

AA: Swim?

SFH: Not really, I wasn't sure about that. But one day, I remember my friends trying to cross the river on a little steel bridge and one of them fell in, so we had quite fun pulling him out and the bicycle. No, I enjoyed myself going around the river and going to our orchard, and picking up fruits. There were all kinds of fruits under the palm trees.

AA: Was it a very verdant area?

SFH: Very verdant. Beautiful. I really had a good childhood; good friends; many, many friends. The son of a tailor, Sahab Mahsin, he was one of the top people, number one in Iraq for his scholarship. He went to *Dar al-Hikma – Kuliyat al-Malik Faysal*. So I had many friends like that.

AA: Who were your best friends? Did you have any best friends?

SFH: Yes, I had two or three very best friends – Sahab Mahsin was one of them, and there were a few others.

AA: Jamil Sami ...

[10] From Kabul (Afghanistan).

SFH: Jamil Sami was a relative – a grandson – great grandson of the fellow who was waiting for Shaykh Mohammad Hussein in the door of Karbala.

AA: So it was a self-contained, contented atmosphere.

SFH: Fantastic! It was beautiful. As I said it was really like a microcosm. I could go anywhere in Karbala. I never had any money – until I left Iraq, I only had a coin in my pocket once – somebody gave it to me.

AA: Didn't you want to buy something? *Lablabi* or something?

SFH: Whatever I wanted people would give me. Also, I wouldn't buy these things because I wasn't sure about their health. But things like pencils, books, magazines I would buy. There were about a dozen shops in Karbala where I would just go and take what I wanted, and they would always write it to my father's account.

AA: All on credit?

SFH: Yes, on credit. My father had a batman named, Baba Mahmud. My father died when I was in England. When I came back after his death, Baba Mahmud said to me, "Your father knew exactly when he was going to die. Two days before his death he asked me to go and settle accounts. So I never had so much money in my hand or in my pocket. And I went and they all were surprised – 'why are we settling accounts?' He said he should settle all the accounts." So when he died, he told the undertaker where he wanted to be buried. Ours was the only mausoleum closest to where Imam Hussain is buried. Even the Agha Khan lost theirs. Ours was the only one left. So it was a big thing that he told the undertaker where he wanted to be buried – way out, the furthest from the public cemetery in the desert. So there was a dispute. And according to my brother, the king sent his representative to read the *Fatiha* and he said whatever he [my father] wished you had to perform. And he got the undertaker who said he had wished to be buried there. And apparently the place where he was buried became very popular. So a year or so later when I came back from England, I didn't want anybody to accompany me; because Baba Mahmoud said, 'I'll take you.' I said, 'No I want to go alone.' I couldn't find it – it was in the middle of a huge new cemetery. So the next day I had to go with Baba Mahmoud.

And apparently next to where he was buried, there was some water coming out and they called it the 'Spring of Ahmed.'

AA: Did you travel at all or did your father travel?

SFH: To Baghdad.

AA: Did you have a car?

SFH: No. A few cars were sent to Baghdad and a few other places – between Karbala and Baghdad, Saddat al-Hindiyya[11].

AA: But you didn't go to Beirut or Lebanon for holidays?

SFH: No.

AA: There was no notion of ...

SFH: No, not in our case. In Saddat al-Hindiyya we stayed for a month. The government gave us a house as an official resident, and people who were responsible for it took care of us, and a few other places like that.

AA: And you didn't see any need of leaving the town.

SFH: I never did. I didn't want to – I wanted to stay. I never considered travelling was going to do much, except for the notion that Imam Hussain gave me – 'you have to go' – that notion was re-confirmed later on by some other *awliya*, like Sufi Barkat Ali. When I went to his place later on in life, it felt the same as Karbala. I said to Sufi Barkat Ali, 'I want to stay here'. He was on a fast of not speaking for thirty years.... and then he spoke a few times. He said, 'No place here for you.' I said, 'Why?' He said, 'You have to go north, south, east, west; you have no place here. I am here, I am you', he said. 'You go – you are my eyes, my ears, my mouth.'

AA: Pakistan does that to you the first time you see it. You think you are back in Iraq very quickly.

[11] The Indian Barrage, a dam near Karbala.

SFH: Except for Outch…

AA: that Illusion…

SFH: Except for Outch ... all Iraq – Outch Sharif. You go there, now you feel at home. And the cemetery, it is one of the most blessed places on earth. There's nobody around, a few stray cats and dogs. I wandered all around Outch Sharif many times.

AA: Trying to find a replacement for Karbala?

SFH: No, no. Smelling ... I said, 'These people are more alive than those living.' And I restored a few of the old cemeteries – ancient cemeteries, 800, 900 years old. Beautiful tiles. It's the only place livable...

AA: What was your food like in your youth?

SFH: Mixed. I think Iraqi, fresh, a lot of rice, a lot of *maragh* every day there was some rice. Normal Iraqi food.

Alchemy and Metaphysics

AA: Shaykhna, going back to our conversation, there's one thing I want to ask you – your father was known as an alchemist, and a physician who was engaged in transmutation of substances and so on – how did you understand this work?

SFH: I was very curious, because I would often go with him to his lab. It was stinky. There would be five or six different little primuses and heaters boiling things, and there would be quite a number of organic substances, burning, boiling, and there was a furnace – I'm sure the temperature was very, very high – a few 100 degrees. Every two weeks or so, the furnace would be stoked with special coal that would be brought from India. I've been to that lab maybe 50 times – once every week. He would go every day, in the morning, for about half an hour, and then in the afternoon, for, may be, twenty minutes to half an hour, to put things off and on. A lot of things were being distilled. I knew this was his hobby, I knew this was something he had a passion for and from his speaking I also knew it was not about a final product. It was the process and the process was to do very

much with himself. I knew then that this was something to do with inner development – I knew that. He mentioned it many times, because people would ask him – visitors or amateur alchemists would ask him.

He also had 3 or 4 books that were very handy. One of them I still have – it's a very rare book, maybe 5 or 600 years old. The paper – I think it's parchment or something. I have it; I can show it to you. Maybe I'll collect all these for you next time you are here – you can see them. It is a most incredible book. Every now and then I go to it. Again, it came to me in a most unusual way – it was rescued as one of the most precious things in his library. And it says, for example, 'and the sulfur of it will surface, and on the surface it will glow.' I read it, and it wouldn't make sense to me. So, after a day or two, I'd give up. And then it would say, 'when it glows, you know it is in the right balanced situation. Then, when you know that, you have to leave it until it again calls you back, and then you know you have to go back to it and do the same process again to it.' And on and on and on. A lot of symbolic stuff, a lot of physical stuff, and it would say things like, 'but do that; hold it until it burns so bright that you can almost not see it.' And on and on and on.

AA: Was the lab off limits to the family?

SFH: No, not at all.

AA: Anybody could walk in?

SFH: You had to go onto one of the roofs. We had seven roofs connected, of the different houses. This was tucked away on the back of his own quarters. He had his own quarters. He had his bedroom, his library, a small courtyard, and this lab – you go to the roof and the back of the courtyard. You couldn't get to it from the house. So it was not off limits and the entry to it was the *turshi* house, where they made all the pickles – a reasonable size room. You go to the *turshi* house and then you descend into this cave. A big cave, which was the lab, not really below ground because you were going into it from the roof level.

AA: Windows?

SFH: I think so. There were actually *shubbak* ...and light, it was there for a long time.

AA: You took it as part of the house environment…

SFH: Yes, absolutely …

AA: He didn't make a secret of it?

SFH: Not at all. There were a few occasions when someone would say, 'Well, you know, if we had more money, we could do more of this ... buy more clothes – ' (he would say?), 'Are you short of clothes? Don't you have everything you need? The biggest thing is waste, waste, so what do you want?' And then, two of the last years of his life, his rings, which were often like *aqiq* or *shadhar,* or something, became gold-like. And I remember my mother said that he had done it. And then he stopped, stopped going to his lab. A year or so before he passed away. So I asked him, I remember, before I left for England, I said, 'Are you content?' He said, 'Yes! I've done what I wanted and that's it.' And I didn't ask whether silver had become gold, or whatever... I knew I was interested only about the being.

AA: How it affected him?

SFH: How it affected him. He said it's done, all done.

AA: What is your understanding of alchemy?

SFH: My understanding is the connection of physics and metaphysics, and I have felt that a few times in my own life.

AA: And its manifestation is metaphysics in the unseen?

SFH: Yes. Although I can't describe a channel, a tunnel, if I have not been through it, the tunnel I've been through is that I've had occasions in my complete stages of abandonment when I've felt as though I've been given a glimpse of the ultimate power of the universe. And I'd ask myself, 'Can I make any changes in it? Isn't it perfection beyond perfection?' And I knew I couldn't do it. Occasionally in my youth I felt if I were

given power, or if I were the king of a land, or if I were the ultimate authority of a land, like my great grandfather, I thought that would be wonderful – I could do a lot of things, I could bring a lot of goodness, I could change the world, I could make a mark on the world. But I have had utter inner total experience of that. *farji`i albasara hal taramin futoor*[12]. You cannot make changes if you are given power, because then that becomes translated later on. If somebody comes to me now with a trillion dollars, I honestly do not think I can touch it. I'd say to them, 'please don't come near me. It's a problem. It's trouble. Getting it is a problem, keeping it, spending it; everything is a problem – I don't want it; please do not, I've had my troubles, you go for your troubles.' So I've come to the same conclusion in a different way.

AA: An extraordinary thing. But how can you teach others this kind of spiritual alchemy – it's only open to very, very few people who can see this dividing line or non-dividing line between physics and metaphysics.

SFH: You know in those few occasions in my life, when I've had night vigil, or two or three days of complete seclusion, I could feel that the empowerment is so immense that I've been frightened. I knew that if I touched a thing, the whole thing would change as I had wished or imagined or willed. So, in other words, I got close to that immense voltage of the power of Allah, of the '*kun*' or whatever it is ... billions of degrees of Celsius, before singularity exploded into universality. I could almost be the *qaba qawsayni aw adna*[13] – so it's not done – what are these fancies of wanting this and wanting that?

AA: Can you visualize it as the slowing down or freezing of the atoms and electrons, giving you the authority to rearrange them – was it something like that?

SFH: I almost felt everything was possible. The exchange of energy and matter, the seamlessness of it all. I remembered the *Shahadah*, it shows that everything is totally connected. It's the illusion of separation that makes one feels that one is the doer, that one can play at alchemy, this or that, or one can change things. I know that now. I have no illusion – it's not a question. Question doesn't arise; I can't even get near the question.

[12] "Look again! Can you see any flaw?" (Qur'an 67:3)
[13] "two bow-lengths away or even closer" (Qur'an 53:9)

AA: And once you know you don't need to go through the process of rearranging the atoms...

SFH: It's not knowledge any more – it is *Yaqeen*, not knowledge, not a quest.

AA: You don't need physical manifestations**.**

SFH: Nothing – physical, literal, nothing.

AA: Is it just a metaphorical process?

SFH: The only thing that I can say is that I have compassion for the rest of humanity, who have the same potential, the same purpose, being born as human beings, and they don't do it. It used to be sorrow, it used to be anger. Not any more. It's compassion now.

AA: Pity?

SFH: Not even that. The same compassion. And I will respond to those who are …

AA: Very Buddhist.

SFH: Fine, whatever you name it – I don't know names…

AA: The centrality of compassion in relation to humanity.

SFH: I don't know who is Buddhist. If he knows himself then he is wrong.

Schooling in Karbala

AA: This is a universal principle. It's interesting to see... in terms of categories... Shaykhna, coming back to your life in Karbala, what was your first school? Primary school?

SFH: Primary school… A nice [government] school near by, called *Madrassa Sibt-al-Hukumiyya*... excellent teachers – they were amongst my heroes. Especially Muhammad Jawad, one of the teachers – wonderful man.

AA: What did he teach you?

SFH: Arabic, *Hisaab*, a bit of this and a bit of that, and curriculum Arabic – Qur'an was a subsidiary subject. I enjoyed the Qur'an – Arabic, *qira'* – a bit of history, a bit of geography, rudiments of science.

AA: Who was the headmaster?

SFH: I can't remember, but I liked the teachers. There were three most likeable teachers that I had until six. I enjoyed Mathematics or *Hisaab* very much. I did very well in all of them.

AA: Grammar? Language…

SFH: Language, Grammar. I did very well in the *Baccalaureate*.

AA: Were they rigorous teachers?

SFH: Good teaching, good quality teaching.

AA: The teachers were interested?

SFH: Very interested. I was also considered the favored pupil, so I had to behave myself.

AA: Because you were the son of one of the most respected men in Karbala?

SFH: I think so, but I also remember the teachers coming to the *burani* with my father, and one of them was called Awad. So it was very good schooling, very enjoyable schooling. And then once, which was a little bit further, I went on a bicycle to the *madrasa*…

AA: You were not accompanied by anyone?

SFH: In my first *madrasa*, yes, by Baba Mahmoud, most of the time, specially the first two or three years.

AA: Wait for you?

SFH: No, they would come back for me. I remember also, the second or the first year, I fell into the toilet – it was a bad accident – it was a very old-fashioned hole in the ground, and I slipped in it, and I was very, very upset.

AA: So you had to go home and do ablution?

SFH: No, I wanted to disappear, to be whisked off, so someone took me home very quickly. I didn't want to be seen by anybody. I wanted to be elegant and nice and clean. So that was a bad accident. And I was scared…

AA: Were you pushed?

SFH: No, I slipped in it. I think only my leg got dirty.

AA: Scarring experience?

SFH: No. I remember that quite clearly now.

AA: Were you walking?

SFH: I went on my bicycle, I enjoyed it.

AA: ...bicycle? Hercules or Raleigh?

SFH: It was one of the early bicycles in town – Hercules. I remember my brother bringing it for me.

AA: A bell on it?

SFH: A bell – I think one or two, and a lock. I enjoyed riding on it. One or two of my friends also managed to get bicycles, so we would often go for a little bit of an out of town excursion.

AA: Did you form a group or a gang or something?

SFH: Not really, but we were a few close friends from *Karbalayyi* families, with me at school. One or two of them were a year ahead, and one or two were with me in the same year – The Awad Family and ...

AA: Kamal Khan?

SFH: Kamal Khan was older than I. His youngest brother Talib Khan whom you know was with me in the same class, in the primary and the intermediate. He wasn't doing very well, and every now and then the teacher expected me to help him more.

AA: So he became a businessman.

SFH: Yes – and then I ended up in England with him also – we went to the same town in England.

AA: Were you friends or just acquaintances?

SFH: We were his relatives and we really enjoyed each other's company.

AA: And you shared things in common.

SFH: A lot of things. In England, the first year, we were together in the same school, preparing for the GCE and we worked during the summer in a petrol station, both of us.

AA: Did they pay you?

SFH: Of course.

AA: How much?

SFH: Enough for two months for us to buy a little scooter each – a Vespa or Lambretta... can't remember. I always had a very good time with Talib. And he always had a good link. Soon after that I went to university, he went to some other schooling, and then he returned to Iraq. I took the challenge of the academic world and the profession far more seriously than he did.

Early Religious Life

AA: What about the role of outer religion in your daily lives? Were you strictly governed by the prayer times and so on?

SFH: The first year very much so. The second year I had a lot of difficulty with ablution and time for *salaat*.

AA: In Karbala?

SFH: No, In England...

AA: No, I'm talking about Karbala.

SFH: In Karbala there was a norm and I wanted to be part of it.

AA: When did you first start?

SFH: I remember at a very, very young age wanting to join the *salaat* with the others.

AA: Was it always done in *Jama`*?

SFH: No, in the house whoever was available at the time, the ladies and the men, they would be praying in one room…

AA: So no one actually taught you, you just followed the others?

SFH: Absolutely. No one gave me any strict formal or out of the norm instructions and training.

AA: It's something that you do.

SFH: I imbibed it and I asked and they answered.

AA: What about the various commemorations and anniversaries of Karbala and the *Shi`as*?

SFH: I was aware of it all, but it was never part of our household, and we were never in any way pushed or encouraged to join anything, or discouraged.

AA: Did you have *qurayyas* in your house?

SFH: Yes, *qurayyas* – there would be lady *qurayyas*.

AA: Who used to recite?

SFH: Mullah Zakiyyah in Karbala – women – I can't remember if there were any men.

AA: Did you see any of the leading clerical lights – the *`ulama*?

SFH: They would come to my father and the more senior they were, the more it would be one to one: otherwise there'd be two or three where he sat in the *burani*. The first two would sit next to him; it would accommodate about 30/40 people who were present in a nice pavilion in a courtyard with a big, big mulberry tree close by – people knew their position. So anybody would go and take a seat according to their perception of their own position.

AA: There was a natural hierarchy?

SFH: Natural hierarchy, absolutely.

AA: And did you sort of imbibe that natural hierarchy?

SFH: Totally. I remember once in England with *Bahr al-Ulum* We were sitting quietly in a very intimate atmosphere in the center. And there was a lot of noise downstairs. People were screaming and so on. So after five minutes we realized there were three people from Najaf scrambling to get to a man. The fellow at the door was saying, 'It's somebody, keep quiet'. But they came barging in in a most vulgar state, sat there, complaining and swearing at a distance. And after 15 minutes they left. He turned to me and said, 'Who are these people? Look, in Iraq, forty or fifty years ago there'd be a natural filter – it has gone, so your culture has gone. This is your future.'

AA: What a future! So in Muharram, you went along with the activities?

SFH: We hardly left the house; especially near *`Ashura*, we never went out of the house. Because the streets would be full of filth. People would be camping, sleeping, and defecating everywhere.

AA: But you didn't go to any public events?

SFH: No … I don't remember – Occasionally I went to the *tashbih*, on the last day.

AA: But you didn't act in it?

SFH: No, no. I just looked from a distance, and the lion cubs... also I remember one year, the fellow who acted Shimmar[14]; he nearly was killed by the crowd.

AA: He must have been a good actor.

SFH: No, but – I mean they caught him – also, I remember every year in the `Azza of Twairij[15] as it is called, thousands of people would be running down – quite a few people would be trampled on.

AA: Did it leave any profound effect on you? Did it engrave itself on you?

SFH: Other than an event, not really. I knew people needed to commemorate something. I knew people loved this anniversary repetition. Later on I came to understand that this is how we touched to that of continuity, of ongoing-ness.

AA: You were not touched emotionally by the story of Imam Hussain?

SFH: No, but I do remember, until now, whenever I am in a bit of inner resonance with Imam Hussain, I weep. But not the `Azza of Twairij, none of these things.

AA: So why do you say '*Ya Hussain!*' when you drink water? I have noticed that..... It must have had a powerful impact; but it wasn't something around which you built your inner life.

[14] The killer of Imam Hussein.
[15] The lamentation of Twairij – part of the Ashura ritual in Iraq.

SFH: No. As I grew up, specially the last twenty 30 years, I started to feel the presence of these beings.

AA: But it's unrelated, you think, to your youth.

SFH: I can't say unrelated. Everything is related. *Wa anna ila rabbika almuntaha*[16].... I can't say unrelated, no way.

AA: But when somebody comes and says, 'We're commemorating some saint in, say, Florence,' you would not feel that attachment.

SFH: Nor if they tell me they're commemorating Imam Hussain – I say 'Good luck to you!' I feel I'm not separate from his presence. As I have just told you, in Karbala, they called me to participate ... they said, 'Why aren't you here? You are a son of Karbala', I said, 'You know, the *nur* of Karbala is in my heart. You need the stones of Karbala. You need that, I need the *nur* of Karbala; Allah gives us all according to our wishes. *Bismillah!*'

AA: But Shaykhna, you relate to the symbol of Karbala. You don't say the same thing about, say, St. Francis of Assisi.

SFH: No, I don't.

AA: Because you are not a Christian.

SFH: I have to accept my physical, biological, cultural lineage. I don't deny that. That's why Chinmaya returned me to my religious origins. He said, 'You don't need Sanskrit, you don't need your habit. Now that you have touched the truth, you go back and find that all of it is the same. Go!'

AA: The filter is your youth, your childhood and adolescence.

SFH: I think it is more of a diet, more of a familiarity rather than a filter.

AA: Equivalent to eating certain dishes?

[16] "that the final goal is your Lord." (Qur'an 53:42)

Allah's Nur and Culture

SFH: Sure. With a diet, you get used to it, you want familiarity, the same thing that you know. Because ultimately what you know is your own soul. You know Allah, you know Allah's *nur*. So everything else you want starts from the gross, the outer, until you find that what you are looking for is looking for you – it is your own *ruh*, which gives you life.

AA: But the tools, as it were, are to some extent, cultural.

SFH: Sure.

AA: And culture is to some extent connected to your earliest exposure.

SFH: Sure, but once you have the house and are living in the house, you don't commemorate the tools. Finished. It doesn't matter. All the way your path, path, path. Once you're in the city, it doesn't matter. I once asked one of the great ones, 'Why don't I hear a lot about *Tariqah*, *Tariqah*, *Tariqah*?' He said, 'You are in the city, don't ask about the road.' So I accept the tools, I accept the need of it. I also accept that you have to give up that – like Ibn `Arabi's nearly 300 pages of the virtues of *zuhd*, and the virtue of leaving *zuhd*.

AA: But he still wrote in Arabic, which imposes on him certain limitations.

SFH: Fine. You have to get out of that imposition, get back to the root of it. Water has to come out from somewhere, but once it comes out, you say, it's a well, in so and so location …

AA: No, I'm not trying to say, Shaykna, that one is a prisoner of these things, that you're predisposed in this direction because you're bound to act in a certain way because you're exposed to these sights and sounds – there are still significant.

SFH: I don't deny that.

AA: But they also give it a certain twist, familiarity.

SFH: I don't deny where I was born, the culture, the *deen*, the mother, and the environment – but more than that I acknowledge the Light that transcends it all. And the more I acknowledge that Light, the less important will be all of the tools, background and biographies. The biggest need we have is a biography, but more than that need is to get rid of the identity.

AA: But it's facilitated, if you agree with me, by your own experiences, as your experience is being detached and distanced from an early age, you're no longer culturally specific… it helps.

SFH: Absolutely. It helped then to be attached to it and it helps even more when, without knowing what detachment is, to go past it. It becomes yet another obstacle – 'I have to be detached' – what do you mean, detached? Detached from what? There's nothing detached – there's only one. No … 'you suffer from attachment, you suffer' – what attachment? There's only One. It's the illusion of my own mind.

AA: No, it's not attachment as much as a frame with which you pose these questions. They can be posed differently. As you know in science, the way that you frame an experiment, to some extent it generates the desired or the un-desired result, as it were.

SFH: True. And that's why science is so limited.

AA: What about language?

SFH: The language is a bridge, but it can also be a great canyon that divides, like everything else. Every goodness can also be the worse of worst.

The Absolute

AA: We'll talk about that later. The issue of culture and language at an early age I think is extremely significant in the way that you comprehend the world.

SFH: Probably.

AA: You don't agree with that?

SFH: Yes I think so. But as I said earlier, once you touch something that is Absolute, all of these relative issues become so insignificant.

AA: But the path to it must come through these frames.

SFH: Sure.

AA: You don't enter the route to Absolute without these terrestrial weapons in your armory.

SFH: On average yes, but not always.

AA: If somebody tells me, for example, that the best way is to know Serbo-Croat, I'll find it next to impossible. The multiplicity in which this is manifested demands that you work to this principle.

SFH: This is absolutely correct when the intellect is aroused, reasoning, *`aql* and all of that. But I have also known people who didn't need any of that – they just in their simple simplistic way found the Absolute – as Ibn `Arabi says, 'The *Jannah* is full of simpletons'. But those simpletons cannot help or teach others, cannot help to show the path or the way. A person like you needs both – significant attention to the path, and to all of its idiosyncrasies, and a better understanding of the ultimate destinations, but it's not a necessary condition.

People with Clear Minds and Pure Hearts

AA: When you talk about simpletons – simpleton or simple as in non-compound – it's different. If you are simple it sounds as if you are reduced to a singularity. It's different from being a simpleton, which can mean idiotic.

SFH: No, I don't mean idiotic, I mean somebody whose heart is clear, whose mind is not yet fully challenged or developed. So they are almost mindless. No, they are pure. They have clarity in their minds and purity in their hearts. I have known people who have not had the sophistication of education and all that. In my own language also, education is to

do with bringing out what is in – the Latin origin of educate – *educare* (brought-up; trained) –

AA: But a simpleton cannot be a Shaykh**.**

SFH: True. They will not be able to teach, but their presence is *baraka*. It's why they've killed it.

AA: It's like an AC-DC current – it's just one type of current – it's not both. So they are of little use to people who are seeking.

SFH: No, I can't say little use in an obvious sense. It doesn't mean their presence is not good. In Karbala it was wonderful in our own household, all of the five, six, sometimes fifteen, people – women and men sitting there doing their chores quietly – sifting through the rice – it was goodness. We have reduced everything – unless you can do this or do that, you are incompetent. I think this is denuding humanity of its divinity, which in some cases is coming out of people whom we disregard as being simple, uneducated – I think this is a big, big loss to humanity.

AA: Did you have mendicants or *qalandars*?

SFH: Often – in our house as well as Karbala. I remember one man coming during Muharram ....

AA: Local?

SFH: No, they were foreigners. You could see from the robes, the cap – they were often people with *kashkol*, sometimes without. This one man would stand in front of Bab al-Qibla supposedly, he only ate one almond a day – he would be standing on one leg reciting, and halfway through reciting, he would change to the other leg. I think I must have seen him a few times but I didn't check whether it was 24 hours. There were a number of cases.

AA: What did you think of him? Were you intrigued by it? Or was it just part of the landscape?

SFH: I considered him to be just part of the landscape. I thought of him as just another being, another tuning. I was neither curious nor uncurious, I just accepted it as it was.

AA: You're describing, Shaykhna, a medieval city.

SFH: It is true.

AA: Which had its lepers, beggars, its merchants, …

SFH: It's true. Three mad people in the city. One of them was a lady – Layla Diwina was her name '*diwina*' means 'mad' – Layla was her name.

AA: And then all of this was then shattered by...

SFH: I left …

AA: ...by the opening of the officers' club?

SFH: (laughs) I don't know – yes. You know by the time I left for the UK.

Accepting Change/Inner Reliance

AA: When did it begin to lose its medieval-ness?

SFH: I would say I began to notice its loss of medieval-ness when I was about, may be 10, 11, 12, and my father stopped going to his *burani*.

AA: Do you think it was a good thing in those days or a bad thing?

SFH: I knew it was an end of an era. I never judged it as good or bad.

AA: Really? Just something that happened.

SFH: Something that happened. Because, again, my talking to Imam Hussain – 'shall I stay, shall I go [to England]? I don't want any movement, I didn't want any change.' He said, 'No! You have to go! There's nothing else for you.' So I went.

AA: And you were not like, you were, enthralled with change. You loved it – new cars – TV.

SFH: Yes and no – not really.

AA: Did you like TV?

SFH: TV came in England when I went – 1955.

AA: It came to Iraq in 1956.

SFH: You see I wasn't enthralled.

AA: Like air coolers. Did you have air coolers in Iraq?

SFH: They had some, yes, desert coolers. No, I wasn't enthralled. I just took it as – 'fine, it helps and gives ease and comfort.' I took things in my stride. I was never over-enthusiastic about anything. I was always mild, but pleasantly attached…

AA: Attached?

SFH: Not really. I didn't know attachment or detachment**.**

AA: I'm applying the term retroactively.

SFH: I can't say I was detached or attached. But it never really shocked me to a thrill or excitement.

AA: You're describing supreme comfort, a form of serenity.

SFH: Inner serenity. Even the bicycle, which was a big event – I was excited the moment it was given to me, but that was it. A few minutes later on, that was it. There was nothing more.

AA: Do you remember an episode that jarred you? Did you do an injustice without thinking, and then deeply regret it?

SFH: I think there were a few occasions in our playgroups with my relatives, wanting to have one of their toys or something – it just passed, it was childish.

AA: You were not an acquisitive person?

SFH: No – I remember I hid a few times nuts and things, which were eaten by rats, and I felt at the same time, I would say to them, 'You deserve it!' I remember once there was a wonderful packet of special Persian nuts that I hid in one of the rooms in the *burani* – there were several rooms empty – there was a little cupboard so I put it in there, and after two or three weeks when I went there it was mostly chewed away, so I felt, 'you see, that's what happens.'

AA: I think it seems that it was inevitable that you would become a Shaykh....(laughing)..... unless you reverse that which is difficult....I think you were earmarked like these people seeking the new Dalai Lama. No inequality...No sibling rivalry, no jealousies, none of these vices that condemn individuals…

SFH: If I have to say one thing again, I repeat, I had immense inner, if you like, trust, or reliance or confidence, without it being too vain or arrogant – I had that.

AA: You were at a middle point.

SFH: Yes, self-contained. I would be very happy being left in the house for long hours – I would find something to do – I would find a book to read, something to do, or a bit of gardening – you know I would occupy myself.

AA: But it's extraordinary, Shaykhna that you were not swept up by the political currents of the time: this was a time of great change in Iraq.

SFH: I had a lot of, again, insight. For example in the oil company, where my friends were the top Ba'athists, what was the first Ba'ath thing that came? Ali Saleh Al-Sa`di, well, you know his wife was a very close friend of mine – one of the closest. Because the wife's brother was part of one of our groups, like (Shaykh) Hosam, his name was Tariq al-Umari. Tariq was one of the closest in our inner circle – we were four or five of us, and his sister, Hana, was very close to me and some of our friends.

AA: Also a big Ba'athist?

SFH: Top Ba'athist – chief of the radio.

AA: Yes, I know her – sister of Tariq al-Umari…

SFH: So when that regime came she came to my house and hid with us for a month – she came to the house and hid – nobody knew where she was. But I felt all of this would pass. And they asked me to do this and that, and be head of this and I said, 'this is all rubbish.'

AA: But Shaykhna, this is later...

SFH: This was later, yes. But this was when I was tested...

AA: I mean the crisis that emerged in Iraq in the 1950s didn't really reach you.

SFH: No – as I say, even the World War I didn't notice.

AA: If you don't notice the world war, what are you going to notice?! May be an earthquake! Even that you probably wouldn't notice. Were there any sectarian feelings in your household?

No Sectarian Feelings

SFH: No. I knew there was one major Sunni family who had a Sunni mosque in Karbala.

AA: But you knew you were Shi`a?

SFH: Of course – and I knew they were Sunnis and they were nice people – his name was Khatib, and his son was with me at school: we played sport. That's about it. I really had no negative feelings towards the Sunnis whatsoever, nor against Christianity. As I said eariler, quite a number of Christians would visit our house. I knew they were different, but I didn't feel any discrimination towards them.

AA: But it was an overwhelmingly Shi`a environment. You didn't conflate being a Muslim with being a Shi`a?

SFH: No – I think from an early stage I knew that there would be distractions and there would be different streams and different levels of light or knowledge and I knew that where I'd come from had been very privileged in that, and I accepted that – I acknowledged that I was in gratitude.

AA: But that's different. A decade later things changed.

SFH: No doubt about it.

AA: It became more intense.

SFH: I was spared all of that, and that's why wherever I went after that, I tried to create a similar ambience, as though it's nothing to do with this world, like here in South Africa – what can you do? And I'd been privileged in the way that wherever I'd gone I managed to have a bit of an ambience like this – I could have been anywhere, and still feel and experience that.

Simple Life in Karbala

AA: Did you own a radio?

SFH: No – my sister wanted a radio – she was older than I – and she had a tiny little radio, a beautiful little Pye – her name was Fadhila – and she would hide it in her room – my father was quite – you know – not happy with it – so she would be very quiet listening to some music and so on. Later on he would ask her to bring it to him for the news. So I think he became well-disposed to it.

AA: What did he listen to – Saut al-Arab?[17]

SFH: I don't know – things like this … I never…

AA: Were there cinemas in Karbala…?

SFH: No –

[17] Voice of the Arabs – A radio station.

AA: That came very late**.**

SFH: It came much later**.**

AA: About *Chai Khanas* and so on?

SFH: Full of them.

AA: But you were not allowed to go there?

SFH: I was never deprived – I never took to it...I much preferred at home.

AA: I was just thinking – did you go to the souk?

SFH: Often.

AA: And did you talk to *Bazaaris* and stallholders.

SFH: Often with Baba Mahmoud or with somebody else.

AA: Part of the life of the town, that fellow sells carpets, that fellow sells this or that.

SFH: I had no needs...I had everything in the house. People would gift us. I often had enough clothes. I was also never desirous of acquiring so many things, like clothes or shoes. I often had people gifting me – from Iran, from Baghdad – shoes, clothes, shirts, etc.

AA: Clothes were just provided for you?

SFH: Provided – often my mother would sew – she would alter some of these things for me, I remember a couple of occasions, things that were altered for my brother – I liked the stuff, but I wasn't very happy about my having altered stuff.

AA: Hand-me-downs –

SFH: Hand-me-downs. They were good and she did a super job. Until now, most of my nightshirts were sewn by my mother. Until now.

AA: You were wearing western clothes?

SFH: In Karbala, yes.

AA: You didn't wear traditional clothes?

SFH: No, I wore western clothes.

AA: Did they shave your head?

SFH: No.

AA: Did you go to Friday *ghusl* and so on?

SFH: No.

AA: So you didn't have special rituals?

SFH: By that time my father had stopped everything. There were no more rituals; he was no longer involved in public life.

AA: But the daily articles of use – did you use Laural soap or Pears soap?

SFH: Both – most .....I preferred Laural soap – I continue with them up till now.

AA: And toothpaste, or a *miswaak*.

SFH: I think so – I never had a *miswaak*.

AA: I mean the common articles of the modern world began to seep in.

SFH: That's right –

AA: From clothes to toothpaste –

SFH: Yes... bicycles, blocks of ice and iceboxes.

AA: Air coolers.

SFH: Air coolers – we didn't need it because we had *sirdabs*.

AA: Fans...

SFH: No, we didn't do so much, but I knew it was done nearby... we had *sirdabs* and we had fans.

AA: The only article of modern consumption you didn't have was a car.

SFH: That's right – there was no need for it. You could walk. And whenever it was for trips, people would send their cars, or a few cars were available.

Visiting Baghdad

AA: When was the first time you went to Baghdad, Shaykhna?

SFH: I think maybe with my uncle.

AA: What did you think of it? Did you want to get back?

SFH: It really didn't matter. I tell you what I liked in Baghdad; it was *simsimiyya* that was a big association with Baghdad – nice bars of *simsim* and sugar, or honey. I am still fond of it. Actually, I did like Baghdad, I didn't mind it, but I was never overly fascinated by it.

AA: Was it a day trip, you came back to Karbala the same day?

SFH: No, no, a few days, two or three days – it was a long trip.

AA: You stayed with family?

SFH: Stayed with uncles, families and Jamil Sami, and with others, the Mazandarani families; they were three of them and many elsewhere.

Interactions with Adults

AA: Shaykhna, we come to – you said that your heroes were your teachers.

SFH: In school, yes definitely.

AA: Did you have any other heroes?

SFH: Yes, I had a few visitors to my father. There was one Iranian prince, who would come every year, either the head of the Iranian Hajj delegation, a very princely being.

AA: Qajari prince?

SFH: Qajari prince. There was another one resident in Karbala called Shahzadeh – I also loved him. He would always give me sweets; he lived in a most beautiful house – with a huge garden, a little pavilion. He was a wonderful man. There was another man, who was a Sayyed close to my father, from Peshawar, a Peshawari, also a wonderful man. He would always be there, every day with my father in their *burani*.

AA: You just liked them as individual beings…

SFH: I looked up to them. I found these beings were of substance…

AA: People worthy of being admired.

SFH: I loved them and they never condescended to me, they treated me as one of them.

AA: It's very traditional – a habit that seems to have died out now, to treat children as if they were part of the adults.

SFH: I was treated as one of them.

AA: They wouldn't say, 'go away!' if you were there with them?

SFH: No, never, never.

AA: Did you ever talk to them?

SFH: Often –

AA: In a conversation?

SFH: I often talked to them. Again in a real way – I would ask them, 'What is this?' 'What is that?' 'Why do you do this?' and they would answer me. I would have them really as older friends. I never felt in any way being condescended to or had to put up with anything of that sort.

AA: I remember you related once a story where a person was involved in interest-taking...

SFH: Yes, yes, in the *burani* there were often 3 or 4 of these low level mullahs, and they would do their deals. In this particular case somebody wanted to borrow money and they wanted interest and the mullahs found this solution. They said, 'look, buy from him this cigarette for £10 and you'll get your way.' So I told them that on the day of reckoning God would put him in a barrel and set the barrel on fire and say, 'I didn't throw you, I threw the barrel.' They looked at me quite unhappy. On occasions I would say things like this to others as well as relatives. So that's it.

AA: So how did your father react?

SFH: He didn't know. It didn't reach him. It was not that important.

AA: It was quite a daring thing to do.

SFH: As I said, I was allowed to, without it being funny, without it being clever – it was natural for me. And I was allowed self-expression. Later on, when I saw what goes on in the inner self, that it reflects the *al-Mutakallim*, I really felt that I had been so fortunate, that the Expresser in me had been allowed to express its voice from early on, at that young age.

AA: What did you think of the notion of the deity at that age?

SFH: Didn't really think much. I knew deep down that all of what we were doing was a human attempt and I had to be in it. I felt deeply that I had no option other than accepting whatever came, including the skills I developed, including the work I had to learn for business or engineering or whatever. I took it that this was part of a cycle, and I accepted it in a way, occasionally with a bit of grumbling, occasionally with a bit of reluctance. So

deity and the higher I somehow, maybe subconsciously, knew it without questioning it, without knowing it.

AA: Did you relate it to *khawf* – fear?

SFH: Not that much. I visualized paradise, I visualized Hell, but I somehow did not fall into that excessive, if you like, synthesis or analysis. I somehow trusted that all was well.

AA: You were too young, I suppose, but usually, at that age, ten or twelve, you have a sense of the deity, driven either by fear or, I won't say, hope, but some kind of reward at the end.

SFH: I never had that. You know, later on when I discovered the meaning of *khawf* and *raja'*, I really found that perhaps I'd been very fortunate in being between the two.

AA: And you were not told, 'If you don't do this...'

SFH: No.

AA: '…you'll be in the fire.'

SFH: No. Never, never. Nor did I look for more *thawab*. I really, as you said earlier, I was much more in the middle somehow. It was one of those muddling through by *rahma*.

Pre-University/England Scholarship

AA: We come now to the last phases of your pre-university – secondary school. You also went to *thanawiyya* in Karbala?

SFH: Of course.

AA: Which one was it?

SFH: *Thanawiyya Karbala* – it was good, I enjoyed it and –

AA: All your friends moved with you?

SFH: Yes. I did very well. I excelled. Strangely enough in my most favorite topics, which was Mathematics, and science, either I would do 100% or fail. It happened twice.

AA: Why was that?

SFH: I don't know. Either I get it all, or somehow just below par. It happened to me at the *mutawasia* – the third … and then in the *thanawiyya* a month or so before the exams, I began to wake up – I wanted to do well. And of course came first in Karbala, second in Iraq, and strangely enough, I was top in Mathematics. Arabic was 100% – can you imagine somebody getting Arabic 100%?

AA: No, it's impossible!

SFH: Impossible. That's why.

AA: *Baccalaureate* is not an easy exam –

SFH: In the interviews of scholarship they asked me, for example, 'What is this?' So, there were some of these odd things.

AA: I think you were first in Karbala, second in Iraq, all the options were open to you – where to go to university. Did your father expect you to go to England?

SFH: Not at all. He never, ever interfered, never said anything or suggested anything. Whatsoever.

AA: If you had wanted to become a blacksmith, say?

SFH: I don't think he would have objected. But somehow, his presence was for me a good reference, and somehow, automatically, I wanted to do medicine. He wasn't very happy with that because of the strenuous life it would bring upon me. He mentioned to me, for example that one of my elder brothers decided against medicine, because he said, 'My life would be completely taken by being in the service of others.' And then when my name was announced on the radio that I was second and was selected for scholarship, that notion began to tick within me. And then I knew – Sahib Mohsin was already in England,

because he was two years ahead of me – so one thing led to another, so I said, 'All right, never mind'. I actually thought I'd apply and then I would refuse it. Pachachi was the examiner –

AA: Nadim?

SFH: Nadim. And he asked me, 'why do you want to do biology?'

AA: He interviewed you?

SFH: He interviewed me and two others for the scholarship; so I applied for organic something.

AA: Who provided the scholarship? The government or the IPC[18]?

SFH: The government.

AA: It wasn't the IPC?

SFH: No, it was the government – I think so. I'm not sure. Nadim was the head of the examining committee. The other one was that fellow who became minister of oil, also went to the Gulf, nice man, from the north.

AA: Abdullah Ismail?

SFH: Abdullah Ismail. He was the secretary, he was sitting there with others; they were all there. They remembered me later on. So he asked me, 'Why do you want to do this?'

AA: So there was no sectarianism?

SFH: Not at all. I never felt sectarianism. He said, 'You have done so well.' Without being arrogant, I said, 'Yes, if you don't accept me, don't. It doesn't matter.' He said, 'No, we want you.' So I went. And it was shock upon shock. Cultural shock was the greatest. You asked me what were the shocks. It was this. The cultural shock. It was a killer.

[18] Iraq Petroleum Company.

AA: Did you know the language?

SFH: Some English, because the last two years at the secondary school we were taught English.

AA: Could you converse in English at that time?

SFH: Very poorly.

AA: But you could read a bit.

SFH: I could converse, read a bit, like now!

AA: No, not like now!

SFH: Slightly less**.**

AA: You are not cluttered by what you have learnt since! It was elemental...

AA: Did you know what you were going to study in England?

SFH: Initially I was interested in organic chemistry – that was the subject.

AA: What did you know about it?

SFH: I liked Chemistry. I had always liked Mathematics and Physics. I wanted Chemistry because it was far more basic, fundamental at the molecular atomic level – I liked that sort of thing. Investigative. I wanted to know what was inside the molecule, inside the cells, inside the organic life. It's part of my – if you like – curiosity about the origin of life. So I thought organic would be better – I didn't know what it was – really had no idea as to what subjects there were. And that is why the Examiners for my scholarship objected. He said, 'Why are you doing this? You are so good at this and that...' So when I got to the GCE first, two years, I applied for London.

Travelling to London

AA: How did you get to London? How did you take leave of your family? Did you leave in a rush?

SFH: No, not in a rush – there was quite a bit of resistance. For example, I was about to leave for the airport – my own nanny just wept; she said, 'I will die'. I said, 'Die', I said, 'You're born to die.' So the poor woman, she quietly left the house and took a taxi to go to the airport to Baghdad, not knowing what time I was leaving – and the taxi took her somewhere else, dropped her somewhere else. The poor woman was two days in the sun, she got sunstroke. She died a week later, literally. I didn't know. She had eczema. We used to send her stuff we found in England, they said it's good for eczema. So after about a year my brother or someone wrote to me, and said, 'please don't send her any more things. She doesn't need it.' I suspected she must have died. So Baba Mahmood would not call for a taxi to take me to Baghdad. He said, 'I can't do that. I don't want you to leave. How can I go and help you leaving.' So it was a bit of a drama over my leaving for England.

AA: It must have been rather traumatic for you to leave.

SFH: A bit traumatic – and in the airport I found two or three other people on the same scholarship.

AA: How did you find out about your scholarship? You were accepted by the committee – they wrote you a letter?

SFH: They wrote me a letter. They said, 'This is your flight. You're booked on KLM. You stay one night in Beirut…'

AA: 1955?

SFH: 1955. 'One night in Beirut, and you'll be on your way to England and there you'll have somebody in the airport, from the embassy to greet you.'

AA: What about financial arrangements?

SFH: I really can't remember whether they gave me some money or not. Can't remember. But they were quite organized. There was a Mr. Pearce from the embassy who was in charge of the scholarship students.

AA: You had to get a passport.

SFH: Yes... Iraqi passport – the usual stuff, not that difficult, took 2/3 weeks. In Karbala it was easy, my brother and others helped me.

AA: There were no visas then.

SFH: No, I don't remember. But anyway, I didn't have any hassles; there were no restrictions. But on the plane to Beirut I was quite surprised to see waitresses – that was the first cultural shock for me.

AA: Stewardesses…

SFH: Stewardesses, sorry, I was surprised. "Isn't this shameful," I thought, "Women watching!" So in Beirut we stayed in a hotel, in downtown on the sea front – Normandie – there were 3 or 4 and a certain Alwan and 3 other students, and the next day we took the flight to London.

Life in England

SFH: There [in London], there was somebody from the embassy. I can't remember where they had booked us – some bed and breakfast place – and then a week or so later, they assigned each one of us to a college to do the GCE. I was assigned to Brookland College in Weybridge, Surrey.

AA: It was quite a pleasant summer.

First Impressions

SFH: Very pleasant. And there I stayed with a family. There were three of us Iraqis in the same house, with a landlady and the smell of bacon and so on was overwhelming. And the next morning we came down in our pajamas, and she said, 'No, No, No, no such thing. This guesthouse cannot allow this. Go back and dress up. Come back properly dressed.'

AA: You were used to walking in pajamas in the street!

SFH: So I learned that. And then what was very embarrassing for me a week or two later, I had a little brass jug for the toilet, which I had hidden behind the door in my bedroom. I suddenly found that on the mantelpiece – as though it was an ornament. It was a brass thing. So I was so embarrassed. They didn't know what it was for. And then, about 2/3 weeks later, I bought a radio to listen to the news to improve my English.

AA: What was your first impression of London. Did you like it? It was summer time.

SFH: It was summertime – it was all right. I was surprised at the gender mix – that really shocked me more than anything else.

AA: But *hijab* was not really that common in Iraq.

SFH: Karbala was full of *hijab* and *abaya – pushiye*, some of them.

AA: Did you go out in the streets bareheaded?

SFH: No-one, except some of the Europeans who came to visit us.

AA: So you were surprised to see mixed couples.

SFH: I was surprised also at the interaction – a woman sitting with a man, talking with a man – it was a very big shock to me.

AA: So what was the outer aspect?

SFH: I think I had seen enough pictures in those tourist travel books that I was given by what looked liked ... type of ladies – Freya Stark – I wasn't that surprised, I wasn't that shocked. Then Sahib Muhsin and a few others were there, and they warned us, they said, 'Look, you know there will be a lot of girls smiling at you and laughing with you – it doesn't mean anything, so be careful, don't be too concerned about it – this is normal here.' So we were soon educated that women were not loose or whatever and don't get any ideas. I found the biggest difficulty was that I was expected to be self-reliant in studies, in the lectures. I couldn't quite catch up.

AA: But I'm sure the college is designed to teach foreigners English.

SFH: No, Brookland College was preparatory but for everyone, it was not for foreigners, not specialized in anything.

AA: Like a sixth form college…

SFH: Something like that, absolutely. It was not specialized. We were in a minority in the class. We had to do exactly as everybody else and they were far ahead. It was very depressing. The first three months, most of us were very depressed.

AA: I had the same experience in my time. I was much younger.

SFH: No, it was very depressing – several of us suffered from that. I remember one of our friends who later went to the ministry of foreign affairs, nice man, Ferhan something; after two or three months he was weeping day and night. We asked him why, he said he had not heard from his family. He said, 'Every day I'm sending them a letter.' In

Weybridge it was very nicely organized – all the street corners had 'litter' boxes, he was throwing his letters into the litter box! Day after day – no answer. So there were a number of tragedies like this, which were comic tragedies. So somebody told him, "This is 'litter' box, not letter box." And there were a lot of tragedies; somebody ate bacon, they told him it was 'ham', he thought it was 'hen'. It was ham. So he cried. There were quite a number of incidents. We were not sufficiently guided. We didn't have anybody to tell us much or show us or give us a little book to introduce us to the British culture. There wasn't any of that.

AA: Dropped in the deep end.

SFH: Dropped in the deep end. I too found it quite difficult and depressing but I had a lot of good support from a few friends and also, as it happened in Weybridge, there was somebody I knew very well from Karbala, who was in university at that time. His name was Khalil Iraqi, nice man, close to us, knew my family. He would be visiting me, so I had quite a bit of support. And my brother – one of my brothers from my father's first wife, he was a businessman, quite well off, export-import to the Middle East, nice man, wonderful man. So I would almost end up every weekend, if not every other weekend, in his house, in Wembley. He'd take care of me – food, parcels. So I was quite supported, but I still felt lonely, depressed. I remember a very brief letter – my father used to write to me – it wasn't that long, but I kept it. I got one letter from him five six months after I arrived in London. He said, 'Had I known it would be so hard on you, I would not have allowed you to go but I thought based on what is coming you might as well be exposed to the rest of the world. But I know it's been very hard on you, and on your mother, although she doesn't show it. She never showed it in her letters.'

AA: Later on when you reflected on this time, was there any benefit of being thrown in the deep end?

SFH: No doubt there were, but at the time I would have told you, 'Please take me out of the deep end.' So of course there is always with hindsight –

AA: If someone had offered you a return ticket, would you have taken it?

SFH: I think so, I think so. Although once I had it in my pocket, I would have wondered what I was going to do with it in Iraq. ... whether I would have returned, I am not sure. I wasn't really happy, I wasn't well. Then one of my friends…

AA: What was the food like?

SFH: Terrible, Terrible.

AA: English stodge?

SFH: English stodge; also don't forget, they were still on ration. Everything, including eggs, were rationed. I was used to produce from our farm, so I would go to the grocery shop and you could only buy a quarter of a cucumber. For one shilling or something. Half an onion – that sort of thing. It was horrible. I would have from our farm tons of beautiful oranges and there you had to buy half a one or one.

AA: Did you sort of reflect on how this was a mighty power and it had such a miserable narrow life?

SFH: No I didn't-

AA: I mean this half an onion – things you never saw in Iraq – to see them in what was supposed to be a great power. Did that not make you think?

SFH: No. As you said, I wasn't at all looking at the power maps of the world. I just thought they were technically, materially very advanced, but they were a different people and I didn't think I would belong to them or like to. So I really took it from day one, 'I am here on a trip to gain some skills, some training, a degree, and that's it.' I never thought I would have a great deal of connection, long-term association with it. Nor did I know how temporary it would be or how long. I just accepted this period as being very different, and I had to put up with it and that's it. There was no alternative. What else could I do? So the first year was harsh on me.

AA: Was it a two-year program?

Return to Iraq for a Holiday

SFH: Two years. I returned to Iraq the next year for a holiday. I bought a scooter, so I drove all the way to the tip of Italy – Brindisi – to Venice and from there I took a boat. On my own steam.... and then – I might have had some help from my family.

AA: Did they expect you to return?

SFH: No, no.

AA: So you went across Europe on a scooter, by yourself?

SFH: By myself, staying in youth hostels along the way.

AA: An adventure!

SFH: Yes, I joined the Youth Hostel Association and it took me 8-9 days from London to Venice; from there I took a boat.

AA: You had to take a visa from Italy and a transit visa.

SFH: Yes – all the time.

AA: It was quite easy in those days.

SFH: Yes easy, from there I took a boat, it was one of the famous old ship.

AA: There was the Achilles, the Agamemnon, the Esperia.

SFH: The Esperia, I was on; then from there to Beirut. From there I took the Nairn[19] to Baghdad.

AA: It must have taken you weeks…

SFH: I was in Iraq for a month.

[19] The Nairn Transport Company was a pioneering motor transport company that operated a trans-desert route from Beirut, Haifa and Damascus to Baghdad, and back again, from 1923. Their route became known as "The Nairn Way". The firm continued, in various guises, until 1959.

AA: Were they all happy?

Final Meeting with Father

SFH: Very happy. I was also very happy and that time I knew I wouldn't see my father any more, because I said goodbye to him. He looked well. I said, '*Inshah Allah*, I'll see you again when I come back maybe in a year or two.'

AA: He was in his seventies?

SFH: No, in his eighties.

AA: But he wasn't ill then?

SFH: Not at all. In his early mid-eighties. So, as I was leaving his courtyard – this was another house that he had – a little courtyard with orange trees and all of that and his own library and bedroom – beautiful setup – and the lab was, as I said, behind – you could get into it from the roof. So I turned around again just to look at him; he deliberately, I think, tried not to have eye-to-eye contact. So I knew that's it, I won't see him.

AA: A premonition.

SFH: Absolutely. And the rest of the time, especially with his batman, he said he knew exactly which day he'd die when he was leaving, and how he prepared for it.

Back to England

AA: What happened to your scooter? You left it in Venice?

SFH: I went back – I had left it in Venice. Went back to Venice, took the scooter and drove back to England. It stayed with me for a year or so. I had one or two little accidents, turning around a bit too fast on a gravel road, you know they are a bit skiddy – and I enjoyed it very much. Then I sold it later on. Occasionally I gave lifts to one or two people –

AA: The summer of 1956? Before the Suez crisis?

SFH: Correct. So basically I returned, then I applied to different universities – I wanted some place that was a bit less hectic.

AA: Did they indicate where you should go or was it your decision?

SFH: No, they helped me to apply to one or two universities. I thought of St. Andrews but I learned it was much colder and I wanted some place where it was a bit more homely – I was homesick. I was really homesick. And I was fortunate that I had a wonder British old lady as my landlady for a long period of time – her name was Mrs. Cubicle. She was married to a Frenchman, a very fine and interesting Frenchman. She always plied me with fruits and stuff.

AA: In Weybridge?

SFH: In Weybridge. So then I had three or four possibilities. I didn't do very well in my A levels – middle grades.

AA: C-D –

SFH: Something like that – so I knew I won't get-

AA: What subjects?

SFH: Eventually I decided there and then that I would choose basic science: Physics, Mathematics and Chemistry.

AA: For your A levels?

University Life

SFH: A levels. So I got accepted to the University of Wales. North Wales – I preferred that, I felt it was more homely, small university, and not too stressful, not too demanding.

AA: It was a University College then?

SFH: It was University College of North Wales.

AA: Aberystwyth?

SFH: No, Aberystwyth is south. This is Bangor – North Wales. Next to a beautiful island. Anglesey. I lived in Anglesey.

AA: Is it connected to the mainland?

SFH: Yes, yes. There is a bridge – beautiful. There are a couple of islands.

AA: Did you visit the college or prior?

SFH: People told me there were Iraqis there – I heard from the grapevine there were 4 or 5 Iraqis; one of them was doing a PhD, the others were undergraduates.

AA: And were you limited by your grades?

SFH: I was limited to two or three universities; I preferred not to go up north, so it was limited.

AA: Were you offered St Andrews University College and others?

SFH: It was possible – St. Andrews – maybe another one.

AA: They gave you an indication?

SFH: Yes – and being a foreigner we were given a certain amount of leeway – they made allowance for our low grades –

AA: Do you think you had low grades because of lack of familiarity with the system?

SFH: No doubt – I began to catch up towards the end. It wasn't very easy, but I wasn't too unhappy about it either.

AA: You weren't aiming for Cambridge or Imperial College?

SFH: No, I think from early on I excluded the top five or six English Universities, definitely also Oxford. Cambridge was out of my reach.

AA: Did the embassy direct you or did you decide on your own?

SFH: No, they gave us again a short list of what was appropriate and I think most of us Iraqis in that batch received second year scholarship in a big way. Fadhil Khan was just one year ahead of me.

AA: The scholarship started in the 1920s but not in a big way.

SFH: No, not that number – we were 50 that year. There were also from the Development Ministry and a few other places. I think in total there may have been 70, 80, 90 people.

AA: Was Islam al-Khalisi, my cousin, one of them?

SFH: Yes, a year ahead of me – I knew him from Iraq, Karbala. His father, I knew him very well from Karbala. We were close friends. His father was very close to my father. Almost every day he was with my father. Abdul Rasul Al-Khalisi almost every day.

AA: In many ways stubbly upright person.

SFH: They were very close together – I'll never forget them. He would travel with my father in their car going to orchards; they had a lot of photographs together.

AA: You knew Isam from Karbala?

SFH: I knew Isam very well from Karbala. I was very fond of him. Exceptionally good at school – bright – he was a year ahead of me.

AA: So he didn't suggest you go to Sheffield. I thought you were going to go to Sheffield. You were then accepted at Bangor.

SFH: I was accepted at Bangor and I went.

University Life

AA: You didn't go home for the summer holidays?

SFH: No.

AA: So what did you do in the holidays, did you work?

SFH: That year I worked in Sweden. I applied to the university of Uppsala to work as a research assistant in a farm. They were gaging why this immune hybridized clover was not getting fertilized by the bees. So I was given this task for two months, with a girl who was the granddaughter of Tolstoy, to measure how long the bees stayed on the flower, and we found that quite clearly –

AA: Did you do it by photography?

SFH: No, timing – it doesn't stay long because it cannot get the pollen. So the stem was longer than the bee can pollinate. So the professor congratulated us because of that – they gave us a bonus.

AA: How did you find the job – in the newspaper or –?

SFH: No, in the university board – I applied; so that was my first year.

AA: It was between your A levels and the first year, or the first year?

SFH: No, after the first year.

AA: So it was it was a job that was put on the university bulletin board.

SFH: Exactly, after the first year at university I went to Sweden.

AA: So how was your first year in college?

SFH: All right, jogging along, not too happy.

AA: No Iraqis there?

SFH: There were, maybe 7, 8.

AA: Shaykh Hosam?

SFH: Shaykh Hosam was ahead of me one or two years, I think 2. So Hosam was very close in terms of age, and a few others. They were my friends.

AA: Did they see you as junior?

SFH: No, they were my close friends. Tariq was my year – Tariq al-Umari – there were a total of 6/7 Iraqis.

AA: Your friends were all Iraqis?

SFH: No, they were not all Iraqis. There were non-Iraqis as well. For example, there was one nice Englishman and a lovely lady, who was actually his girlfriend.

AA: Did you keep up with them later on?

SFH: Not so much – only three years after I had graduated, and that was it. There was one Iraqi, brilliant, a bookworm, very religious, doing his PhD. There was a Syrian who was doing a PhD. There were a total of maybe 10, 12, middle Easterners, Arabs; an Iranian, very nice boy – he was my friend. Very close friend.

AA: Did Iranians and Iraqis exile, or abroad, became quite friendly?

SFH: Yes, three or four Iranians, I wasn't really very happy. I had no real intimacy, no connection with the culture. And the weather depressed me a lot. I didn't know that I was subject to Seasonal adjustment – SAD[20] – I really didn't know that. I discovered it much later.

AA: That was the cause for depression?

SFH: Also the lack of sun – sea air, and all of that. And I met a few very fine people outside the college. I didn't stay in the hostel. Some did.

AA: Dorms or...?

[20] Seasonal Affective Disorder.

SFH: I didn't stay in the dorms. It was a very old, beautiful, small boutique university, with may be 2000 students; brilliant residents and a wonderful lecture hall; though a bit stiff and pretentious.

AA: You wore ties?

SFH: Yes, you had to wear a gown, always.

AA: And instruction was good?

SFH: It was excellent. They had high quality professors.

AA: 50s and 60s were the peak.

SFH: Our Professor of Physics was an FRS.[21] The Professor of Chemistry was an FRS. Top people.

AA: Do you remember anybody in particular?

SFH: Yes, I remember the Professor of Physics, Professor Andrew; the Professor of Chemistry was Professor Agnes – Angus.

AA: And you stuck to basic science?

SFH: I stuck to basic science, pure science, and pure Mathematics.

AA: I thought your degree was in Chemical Engineering?

SFH: No. Chemistry, Physics and Mathematics; I did courses in Chemical Engineering in the oil industry. They sent me to America for a while to Esso that time as it was in Houston, Texas; again it was very depressing and lonely.

AA: Much more depressing than in England!

SFH: Very depressing. And I, from nowhere, was there for six months. I was at the IPC for 8 years; more than half of it I was abroad.

[21] Fellowship of the Royal Society.

AA: So when you were in Bangor, did you feel the need to go to a big city, like Manchester?

SFH: We did occasionally.

AA: By coach or bus?

Planning to Return to Iraq

SFH: Coach, bus – with the Iraqis, sometimes with cars, one or two of them had cars. We had an enjoyable group. One of us, Ghazi Kufaishy, became a very prominent Ba'athi member; Ghazi Ayoub too became a very prominent Ba'athi member. Saddam killed him because he told Saddam, 'Now that you are so unpopular, step down for a while and then you come back.' The next day he was killed. There were a lot of things like that. But we had a nice group.

AA: But it overlapped with the revolution in Iraq (1958). Did that affect you in any way?

SFH: No, it didn't affect me.

AA: Were there any pro- or anti-revolution people?

SFH: I don't think it affected our group in Bangor so much. Hosam may know more. I wasn't affected, I didn't feel it. There were several of these people already becoming Ba'athists, and there were two or three of them a bit more religious.

AA: Where would you classify yourself?

SFH: Myself – really indifferent. I wasn't in any camp.

AA: Did you stick to religious practices?

SFH: No – by the second year at university I couldn't keep up my *salaat* – I began to drift. The last year, I remember myself beginning to smoke, especially with the studies and things, and by the end of it, I was beginning to feel the lack of the need, a vacancy in my life. It was there, the last year, that I met Zainab, Inge. She was there for a scholarship

and we used to meet in the cafe, talk and so on. I was about to return to Iraq and I felt very lonely, so I told her, if I went back, and got a job, would you come, and so on? It was already clear that I'd marry her.

AA: You were young –

SFH: I was very young – 23.

AA: What about Karbala?

SFH: My father had died – I knew everything was over… I was going back to Kirkuk to the oil company.

AA: You already had a job lined up?

SFH: The scholarship must have been the IPC, now that you ask…

AA: Nadim Pachachi (The Examiner) was Minister of Oil.

SFH: He was a Director; he wasn't yet the minister. They were both in the directorate. No, it was an IPC scholarship.

AA: Nadim Pachachi was a Minister with my late father with him in 1956...

SFH: It was IPC and I knew I'd have a job straightaway there. When I returned, there was the question of National Service or the Army. But they found I had flat feet, which is not true actually. That was discovered also, later. The doctor there said I had flat feet, so I was exempt. So I went straight to the oil company. Whilst I was with the oil company, people like Hosam, Sahib were still doing the military service. So we all started together.

eBooks By Zahra Publications

General eBooks on Islam

Living Islam – East and West

Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri

Ageless and universal wisdom set against the backdrop of a changing world: application of this knowledge to one's own life is most appropriate.

The Elements of Islam

Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri

An introduction to Islam through an overview of the universality and light of the prophetic message.

The Qur'an & Its Teachings

Journey of the Universe as Expounded in the Qur'an

Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri

The Qur'an traces the journey of all creation, seeing the physical, biological and geological voyage of life as paralleled by the inner spiritual evolution of woman/man.

Keys to the Qur'an: Volume 1: Commentary on Surah Al-Fatiha and Surah Al-Baqarah

Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri

The first two chapters of the Qur'an give guidance regarding inner and outer struggle. Emphasis is on understanding key Qur'anic terms.

Keys to the Qur'an: Volume 2: Commentary on Surah Ale-`Imran

Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri

A commentary on the third chapter of the Qur'an, the family of `Imran which includes the story of Mary, mother of `Isa (Jesus).

Keys to the Qur'an: Volume 3: Commentary on Surah Yasin

Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri

Commentary on chapter *Yasin*. This is traditionally read over the dead person: if we want to know the meaning of life, we have to learn about death.

Keys to the Qur'an: Volume 4: Commentary on Surahs Al-`Ankabut, Al-Rahman, Al-Waqi`ah and Al-Mulk

Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri

The Shaykh uncovers inner meanings, roots and subtleties of the Qur'anic Arabic terminology in these four selected Surahs.

Keys to the Qur'an: Volume 5: Commentary on Juz' `Amma

Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri

Insight into the last *Juz'* of Qur'an, with the objective of exploring the deeper meanings of Qur'anic Revelations.

The Essential Message of the Qur'an

Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri

Teachings from the Qur'an such as purpose of creation, Attributes of the Creator, nature of human beings, decrees governing the laws of the universe, life and death.

The Qur'an in Islam: Its Impact & Influence on the Life of Muslims

`Allamah Sayyid M. H. Tabataba`i

`Allamah Sayyid M. H. Tabataba`i shows in this gem how the Qur'an contains the fundamental roots of Islam and the proof of prophethood as the Word of God.

The Qur'anic Prescription for Life

Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri

Understanding the Qur'an is made accessible with easy reference to key issues concerning life and the path of Islam.

The Story of Creation in the Qur'an

Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri

An exposition of the Qur'anic verses relating to the nature of physical phenomena, including the origins of the universe, the nature of light, matter, space and time, and the evolution of biological and sentient beings.

Sufism & Islamic Psychology and Philosophy

Beginning's End

Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri

This is a contemporary outlook on Sufi sciences of self knowledge, exposing the challenge of our modern lifestyle that is out of balance.

Cosmology of the Self

Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri

Islamic teachings of *Tawhīd* (Unity) with insights into the human self: understanding the inner landscape is essential foundation for progress on the path of knowledge.

Decree and Destiny (Original and a Revised Version)

Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri

A lucid exposition of the extensive body of Islamic thought on the issue of free will and determinism.

Happiness in Life and After Death – An Islamic Sufi View

Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri

This book offers revelations and spiritual teachings that map a basic path towards wholesome living without forgetting death: cultivating a constant awareness of one's dual nature.

Leaves from a Sufi Journal

Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri

A unique collection of articles presenting an outstanding introduction to the areas of Sufism and original Islamic teachings.

The Elements of Sufism

Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri

Sufism is the heart of Islam. This introduction describes its origins, practices, historical background and its spread throughout the world.

The Garden of Meaning

Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri

This book is about two gardens, one visible and fragrant, the other less visible but eternal. The beauty and harmony of both gardens are exposited in this magisterial volume, linking outer to inner, physics to metaphysics, self to cosmos.

The Journey of the Self

Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri

After introducing the basic model of the self, there follows a simple yet complete outline of the self's emergence, development, sustenance, and growth toward its highest potential.

The Sufi Way to Self-Unfoldment

Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri

Unfolding inner meanings of the Islamic ritual practices towards the intended ultimate purpose to live a life honorable and fearless, with no darkness, ignorance or abuse.

Witnessing Perfection

Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri

Delves into the universal question of Deity and the purpose of life. Durable contentment is a result of 'perfected vision'.

Practices & Teachings of Islam

Calling Allah by His Most Beautiful Names

Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri

Attributes or Qualities resonate from their Majestic and Beautiful Higher Realm into the heart of the active seeker, and through it back into the world.

Fasting in Islam

Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri

This is a comprehensive guide to fasting in all its aspects, with a description of fasting in different faith traditions, its spiritual benefits, rules and regulations.

Prophetic Traditions in Islam: On the Authority of the Family of the Prophet

Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri

Offers a comprehensive selection of Islamic teachings arranged according to topics dealing with belief and worship, moral, social and spiritual values.

The Wisdom (Hikam) of Ibn `Ata'allah: Translation and Commentary

Translation & Commentary by Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri

These aphorisms of Ibn `Ata'Allah, a Shadili Shaykh, reveal the breadth and depth of an enlightened being who reflects divine unity and inner transformation through worship.

The Inner Meanings of Worship in Islam: A Personal Selection of Guidance for the Wayfarer

Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri

Guidance for those who journey along this path, from the Qur'an, the Prophet's traditions, narrations from the *Ahl al-Bayt*, and seminal works from among the *Ahl al-Tasawwuf* of all schools of thought.

The Lantern of The Path

Imam Ja`far Al-Sadiq (Translated By Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri)

Each one of the ninety-nine chapter of this book is a threshold to the next, guiding the reader through the broad spectrum of ageless wisdom, like a lantern along the path of reality.

The Pilgrimage of Islam

Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri

This is a specialized book on spiritual journeying, offering the sincere seeker keys to inner transformation.

The Sayings & Wisdom of Imam `Ali

Compiled By: Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri

Translated By: Asadullah ad-Dhaakir Yate

Carefully translated into modern English, a selection of this great man's sayings gathered together from authentic and reliable sources.

Transformative Worship in Islam: Experiencing Perfection

Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri with Muna H. Bilgrami

This book uniquely bridges the traditional practices and beliefs, culture and language of Islam with the transformative spiritual states described by the Sufis and Gnostics.

Talks, Interviews & Courses

Ask Course ONE: The Sufi Map of the Self

Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri

This workbook explores the entire cosmology of the self through time, and maps the evolution of the self from before birth through life, death and beyond.

Ask Course TWO: The Prophetic Way of Life

Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri

This workbook explores how the code of ethics that govern religious practice and the Prophetic ways are in fact transformational tools to enlightened awakening.

Friday Discourses: Volume 1

Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri

The Shaykh addresses many topics that influence Muslims at the core of what it means to be a Muslim in today's global village.

Songs of Iman on the Roads of Pakistan

Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri

A series of talks given on the divergence between 'faith' and 'unbelief ' during a tour of the country in 1982 which becomes a reflection of the condition occurring in the rest of the world today.

The Connection Between the Absolute and the Relative

Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri

This is a 1990 conversation with Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri, in which he talks about wide-ranging topics on Islam and presents it as the archetypal, universal, Adamic path that began when humanity rose in consciousness to recognize duality and began its journey from the relative back to Absolute Unity.

The Spiritual Path: A Conversation with Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri On His Life, Thought and Work

Professor Ali A. Allawi

In this wide-ranging conversation with Professor Ali Allawi, Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri talks about his life story and the spiritual journey that he embarked on and the path he has been on ever since.

Poetry, Aphorisms & Inspirational

101 Helpful Illusions

Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri

Everything in creation has a purpose relevant to ultimate spiritual Truth. This book highlights natural veils to be transcended by disciplined courage, wisdom and insight.

Beyond Windows

Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri

Offering moving and profound insights of compassion and spirituality through these anthologies of connections between slave self and Eternal Lord.

Bursts of Silence

Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri

Inspired aphorisms provide keys to doors of inner knowledge, as well as antidotes to distraction and confusion.

Pointers to Presence

Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri

A collection of aphorisms providing insights into consciousness and are pointers to spiritual awakening.

Ripples of Light

Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri

Inspired aphorisms which become remedies for hearts that seek the truth.

Sound Waves

Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri

A collection of aphorisms that help us reflect and discover the intricate connection between self and soul.

Sublime Gems: Selected Teachings of Shaykh Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani

Shaykh Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani

Spiritual nourishment from Shaykh Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani's existing works.

Autobiography

Son of Karbala

Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri

The atmosphere of an Iraq in transition is brought to life and used as a backdrop for the Shaykh's own personal quest for self-discovery and spiritual truth.

Health Sciences and Islamic History

Health Sciences in Early Islam – Volumes 1 & 2

Collected Papers By: Sami K. Hamarneh

Edited By: Munawar A. Anees

Foreword By: Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri

Health Sciences in Early Islam is a pioneering study of Islamic medicine that opens up new chapters of knowledge in the history of the healing sciences. This two volume work covers the development of Islamic medicine between the 6th and 12th centuries A.D.