

Inside Pathan Country: A Brief Encounter with a Traditional World

by John Ahmed Herliby

Forward

Amid the strong feelings and surprising events of this Pathan diary, there is perhaps some room for a brief forward. The episodes in the following account might have been the random notes of a stranger in a strange land; instead, they have become the genuine impressions of a rare and unique experience. I had been warned about venturing into the northern frontier regions of Pakistan. The harbingers of doom had shouted dire warnings in the civilized world I inhabit. My family was worried, my friends either skeptical or alarmed. The threat of terrorism and the spirit of anxiety that accompanied the approach of the new millennium seemed to focus in particular on the Muslim world. Stark images and sinister innuendo, I thought unconcerned, are like the bullets of a gun: they can be invasive, determining, and even fatal to the integrity of one's deep-rooted beliefs unless one was vigilant.

Muslim terrorists, Islamic militants, the Kyber Pass, the intransigent Taliban, mysterious Pashtu tribesman—all well publicized elements of an allegedly grand scheme of terror and intrigue that had become a primary focal point of the international media, highlighting the part of the world I was intending to visit as a lawless frontier and focusing on a form of militancy among remote and little known tribal peoples that is portrayed in the media as rigid and unforgiving. Americans were being warned to keep a low profile and avoid large crowds. In particular, people intending to travel abroad during the holiday season were advised to avoid potential hotspots such as Pakistan. Nevertheless, I brushed aside these warnings and resolved to fulfill a promise I had made to my

Pathan friend, Farman Allah, to visit him in his village in the NorthWest Frontier Province of Pakistan.

I have journeyed to many foreign places, but on this trip, a strange thing happened that the diary itself will have to reveal. When you travel to a remote and distant land, you fully expect to enter an unfamiliar and intriguing world of people, places and events that may interest, entertain and challenge you. In retrospect, I now realize that I didn't enter Pathan Country; on the contrary the spirit of the Pathan had entered me. The truth is, one takes away from such a rare encounter more than a memory that can be expressed in words and phrases. One comes away feeling changed somehow and different, as if the experience had become a rite of passage into another, a more traditional world, whose ambiance and spirit still remain in my soul in noble contrast and as an anachronism of time to the cultivated fields of Western civilization and the prevailing spirit of the modern world.

Behind the fragile façade of a country in transition and behind the noble face of a people in search of a place in the modern world lies the ancient and enduring spirit of a traditional, Islamic way of life. If what we suffer in today's world is a kind of invasion of the modern 'spirit' into the very heart and soul of the individual, then I can similarly affirm that this unexpected journey has resulted in the incursion of another kind into my heart, of a phantom spirit from a distant past, permitting this rare passageway into a frontierland from another era, into a world of people and events in which the vicissitudes of the modern world could be momentarily forgotten and left behind. For a few brief days, I was privileged to enter a world that remembers and emulates the spirit of the traditional world—where one's word was one's bond, where a promise was still sacred, where the world itself was transparent; where generosity was the norm. By entering that world, I discovered, it enters you.

This diary is a journey into a forgotten realm where a common humanity is inscribed in its inhabitants' way of life and a mutual respect is reasserted before the terrible darkness of spirit that exists within the modern world. In return, this brief encounter with the traditional world of the Pathan may serve as a vehicle of understanding among men in whom the spirit of the modern world actually reflects something of the traditional world of the spirit.

Notes from the Pathan Diary

*For Pakistan, you is foreign guest;
but for me and all the uncles and cousins in my village,
Yahya, you is friend and brother. Welcome!
(Farman Allab, Pathan Tribesman)*

Nothing could have adequately prepared me on all the levels of body, mind, and heart for my encounter with the great Pathan tribe and the profoundly moving experience I recently had in the North-West Frontier (NWFP) of Pakistan. A brief hint and perhaps a premonition of what was to come began to take root after my initial introduction to a Pathan named Farman ibn (*son of*) Saleh Mohamed while working at a university in the Emirates. Fascinated by the sight of a Western Muslim such as myself praying at a local mosque, Farman introduced himself and initiated a friendship that soon grew and deepened. The incredible solidarity and camaraderie of the Pathan people began to unfold as I was slowly taken into the inner sanctum of their unique brotherhood whose integrity they have religiously preserved even amid the hardships and severe working conditions in the Gulf countries. The gathering story culminated in an invitation to visit Farman and his extended family of mother, brothers, sisters, in-laws, uncles, aunts, cousins and other close childhood friends in a small village outside of Peshawar.

*You come, Yahya. The people in village is waiting for you.
If you not come, whole village is very sad and I will kill you.*

I thought for a minute, then looked at my Pathan friend and beyond to the inner being of the man. At a glance, he could have passed as a tender giant of childhood fairy tales. His frame was larger than life, well-proportioned, solid and suggesting a feeling of strength and nobility that went beyond the normal course of a man. There was a bigness in him that transcended his body. Dark-skinned and toughened by hours of hard work out in the grueling elements of the Emiratee desert where he worked as a foreman for an irrigation company, he wore his thick dark hair closely cropped and had a well-trimmed jet-black beard covering his face, offsetting the brightness of his eyes and the light of his facial expression. I knew he was kidding, not because of the broad smile and the gleaming row of white teeth, but rather because within that incredible body was a simple, innocent, uncorrupted, noble soul incapable of committing any true outrage. Indeed, he was a formidable being

by any account and a rare and unique friend that I truly valued and trusted, even with my life. When he invited me to visit his village, I accepted, knowing full well the import and implications of such a rare invitation. He was drawing a line in the sand by inviting me to cross over into a very private and conservative world that few have ever seen, much less experienced.

I arose at 4:00 a.m. on the day of departure, to have the pre-dawn breakfast (*subur*) and say the prayer. The Muslims were now in the final days of Ramadhan when my trip would coincide with the Eid Festival after the holy month. I was scheduled to fly out of Muscat, in the Sultanate of Oman where I live and work, at 8:00 in the morning for the two and a half hour flight. When I got to the airport, however, I was informed that the flight was unexpectedly delayed. The plane eventually left at 1:00 in the afternoon, jammed packed with Pathan tribesman and the incredible amounts of luggage, blankets, cartons, and oversized bags, some of which had to be left behind. I thought with relief of my friend waiting to receive me with his friends at the still unknown and mysterious destination of Peshawar in the North-West Frontier Province.

As we approached Peshewar, I could see the dramatic range of the Safed Koh mountains that runs along the border with Afghanistan and through which the famous Kyber Pass winds. The range of cliffs was shrouded in mist. The pilot attempted a landing, but apparently thought twice about it since the fog at the airport was so dense. He then turned the plane around and we soon landed at Islamabad, the capital of Pakistan and the seat of the government. Needless to say, this was a little alarming. I was supposed to be met upon my arrival and there was the question of "security".

My friend Farman was taking the security issue very seriously, since that part of Pakistan was traditionally considered to be a wild and un-governable area. Americans had been warned during the millennium festivities about travel, particularly to Pakistan, and there had been bombing incidents against American interests in Pakistan recently. There were the heightened security concerns surrounding the whole Osama bin Ladin affair since he had issued a call to kill Americans world-wide, and the year-end hijacking of the Indian airliner to Afghanistan had recently heightened tensions in the area. The still unidentified hostage-takers had allegedly passed anonymously across the border in the area where I

was headed.

Against all expectation, there I was in, being bundled into a small transit area of the aging, single-runway airport at Islamabad. We passed through immigration and I was shoved unceremoniously over with the other tribal horde, all bedecked in turbans and shawls and talking agitatedly in a foreign tongue to await further instructions! Oman Air didn't have any representative there as understandably they don't fly into Islamabad. I soon gleaned that the luggage was being offloaded, indicating we were here to stay.

Dark thoughts began to emerge. I managed to approach the sole person who seemed to have any wits about him and spoke some English. When I suggested that I take a taxi to Peshewar, he quickly advised me not to. "It's very dangerous," he whispered, then added ominously as an afterthought, "you'll never make it to your destination!" Word soon arrived that buses would be provided to take all 200 of us including the mountains of luggage to Peshawar. Before I could ponder the possibilities of an endless night of hassles, and thinking of my friend who has been waiting to meet me since 11:30 that morning, before I could think a further disturbing thought, I was confronted with a well-dressed and charming employee of Shaheen Airlines who informed me that my friend Farman had managed to call and wanted the message passed on to me that he would come down to Islamabad himself to pick me up, a 175 kilometer trip that with the terrible road conditions could take up to three hours!

Now the real Pathan experience began to unfold in its truest dimension. I was escorted through the airport to the restaurant and offered a delicious complementary dinner of rice and kebab (I had been fasting through all of this!), and thereafter invited down to the airline office to await the coming of my friend. About 9:00 that night, I finally met Farman and his two other "bodyguards", all three of whom arrived armed rifles and guns. Indeed, they were taking my security seriously. Farman had a revolver tucked discreetly into his "cloth", Farouk and Babu both had kaleshnikov rifles hanging discreetly along the folds of their woolen shawls.

Indeed the winter weather was freezing beyond belief. Cold, damp, record-setting temperatures had been recorded that winter in the region. I was delighted to see my friend, guns and all, indeed never was

the sight of a friendly face so endearing. They all embraced me in great bear hugs, wrapped me into a spare 10-foot woolen shawl and escorted me out into the raw elements of the night only to be confronted with a commotion of people, cars, taxis, rickshaws, horses, donkeys, bicycles whose cacophonous sounds were all draped in a shroud of near total darkness. We hadn't walked five steps when it became clear that the car, which they had quickly left by the curbside to fetch me from inside, was being taken away. It had been raised up on a forklift that looked like it was attempting to lodge it on top of a tree. This inspired much argument, protestations that I was a foreign guest and much more, then with a wink and a nod (and a few hundred rupees), the car was dumped back down onto the road, whence I was tucked into the back seat for the return trip to Peshawar.

*People here drive as they like. There is no law on the road.
And everyone is government of one.*

Only God could have prepared me-or saved me-from the wild ride back to Peshawar along a road that was poorly lit, two way, accommodating a multitude of cars all attempting to pass each other at incredible speeds while avoiding the carts, animals, bicycles, and potholes that littered the road. I sat mesmerized by the sight of the on-coming headlights heading straight for us, only to be brought out my trance by near-death experiences in which we passed in and out of the on-coming lane at the last minute. It seems to be a question of pride to take chances and show no fear, but as we careened down the road into the dark night of the North-West Frontier Province toward the city of Peshawar, I was petrified. I had finally arrived inside Pathan country.

By the time we arrived at my friend's tiny village about 30 kilometers outside of Peshawar, it was nearly midnight and I was exhausted, but the end of the day was not yet in sight. A great crowd of people, men I should say, awaited my arrival and were there to greet me with a garland of wild flowers that they placed with a great show of spirit around my neck. Everyone was beaming with happiness as we crowded into the "guest room" the family had prepared for me to use while I was visiting.

I was ashamed to learn later that these "poor" village people had actually built and refurbished this spacious room at the entrance to their

living compound, complete with separate private bathroom, running hot water and shower, all American amenities they had never had in the house. I was ensconced in front of the little electric heater, thoroughly wrapped up in the woolen shawl, and so were the others sitting in random semi-circles around me, including Farman's brother with whom I could communicate in Arabic, his father in law who was an educator and spoke fairly good English, his uncle, his cousins, his nephews, his childhood friends and other close members of his village. As I began to drift off into the total exhaustion of sleep, I noted the clear, strong sound of their native tongue, Pashtu, which belongs to the Iranian linguistic group. It later became clear to me that these tribesman are great storytellers and the story of my arrival was even then being spread far and wide from the crowded room on that dark, sober night.

*All food is original and fresh from farm.
We visit tomorrow the land around village and you see for yourself.*

As a city boy from the suburbs of Boston, Mass., I had never drunk milk from a cow much less from a goat or water buffalo; I had never eaten fresh yogurt or unprocessed cheese; I had never tasted a farm fresh chicken or a freshly laid egg; nor had I ever eaten meat stewed in buffalo oil! Where had I been all my life to have missed out on this exotic, 'original' fare? Indeed, I had never eaten the amounts of food I was called upon to eat in the name of hospitality, for the Pathan people pride themselves on a hospitality without bounds and its success is measured in the amount of food the guest can eat. Gratefully, the first four days of my stay were the last days of the fast of Ramadan, so I had a brief respite before the really serious eating began.

We awoke early to have a hearty breakfast, although understandably the word for this meal in both Arabic and Pashtu means anything but "breakfast". Rather, it is the meal that commences the fast and seals its sacred intention. After eating not only the fresh eggs, yogurt and honey but also the steaming rice, lentils and meat that were to preserve us during the rigors of the fast, we made our ablutions and found our way to the mosque for the early morning, pre-dawn prayer, making our way through the dark, eerie village. The narrow little streets were shrouded in a thick layer of mist and fog which passed like spectral ghosts through the tall, thin poplar trees that lined the near-by fields with their sentinel presence.

We went on a tour of the environs surrounding my Pathan friend's

village that morning. The countryside itself was lush, well-tended and green with ripening vegetation in spite of the winter season; but I was even more impressed with the number and variety of trees that highlighted the bucolic setting, particularly the wide variety of fruit trees that crowded around the more stately poplars, cedars, and oaks. Springtime I was told brought a blaze of flowers, so I would have to return then. On one side of the narrow path, a field dense with the tough-looking leaves of the cauliflower, on the other side, purple-skinned potatoes, what we used to call in my Irish-American family “new” potatoes, lay steaming in the newly-overtaken soil. In the distance the courtly stalks of the sugar cane were blowing lazily in the light wind.

The farmers all waved and then went about their business, cutting, pruning, digging the rich earth and tending the animals who wandered about in this natural setting as though from some primordial past. Great water buffalo stood under well-thatched, open-sided sheds exuding an air of detachment and contentedness, an archetypal example if there ever was one in nature of an animal teaching man the meaning of both contentment and calm. Little lambs frolicked in the grass while one proud villager introduced me to his pet sheep, a magnificent looking animal who sported a well groomed, chocolate colored coat with a lush verge of sheep-down that hung along the back of its legs and sashayed as it moved like the bustle of a woman’s skirt. It nudged its head affectionately against my leg in response to my greetings and looked up at me with clear, intelligent eyes as if it wanted to make friends.

*This is all natural and original setting, Yahya.
Now I take you to see sugar cane factory where they make sugar.*

Factory, I thought puzzled, entrenched as I was within a fixed mindset that thought only in modern city-scape terms. What I was about to see was a “factory” in the same sense that we say that the discovery of certain tools in pre-historic times was an advance in “technology”. I nearly slipped on a patch of buffalo manure and skipped over a gurgling stream before we came upon the “factory” just over that slight incline covered in sugar cane stalks. A more natural setting could not be imagined and a far cry from the bleak and dismal factories of the Western world.

A primitive apparatus set up in the fields squeezed the juices of the sugar cane in a large tub. This raw nectar was then transferred to large copper vats that were heated to boiling point underground in a series of



tunnels fueled by the crushed residue of the cane. Two old Pakistanis sporting their traditional beards knelt beside one great vat and stirred the golden creamy broth with flat ladles in what must have been back-breaking work, but their smiles belied their effort and the light on their faces was matched by the rays of the sun that stole through the cracks of the thatched roof to settle and glow on this frothy sweet nectar. On the other side of the enclosure, I saw a similar vat that contained the end result: small, rounded brown sugar balls that I couldn't taste at that moment as we were all still fasting, but every house sweetened their tea with this natural, home-made sugar. Out back, we saw where the fire was stoked, where the fresh ripe stalks were gathered and where the used cane was prepared for re-cycling, but all was a mere afterthought after the sight of those two old men smiling in the fullness of their years. Factory, indeed!

*I have new cloth for Pakistani suit and we buy you waistcoat and shoes and sandals
All must be new for Eid festival.*

The next day, we were scheduled to visit the city of Peshawar, including the famous Mughal fort built by King Akbar in the 16th century and of course the grand bazaar. The fort we saw from the distance, a sprawling, magnificently constructed structure in the style of the period that

could not be visited in its interior because it is still being used as a military encampment and headquarters. The bazaar we saw by plunging headlong into the labyrinthine puzzle of side-streets and by-ways all jam-packed with every manner of buggy and vehicle from horse, donkey, and bullock-drawn carts to vesper-driven rickshaws that attempted to weave their irritating way through every available space. The amount of pollution thrown off by these vehicles created a thick pea-soup smog that clogged the nostrils and seriously affected my breathing.

The Eid was several days away and the city was in the final throes of shopping in preparation for the end of Ramadan celebration, known as *Eid al-Fitr*. I was very concerned during this shopping spree about the money situation. I had first consulted with Farman at the airport about changing money, but he refused to dignify the discussion with words. I asked him again early that morning, hoping for the opportunity of trying out my famous bargaining skills in the money markets of the Peshawar bazaar, but not wishing to insult him somehow by breaking the protocol of the “guest”, I soon fell silent. I was to have no such experience with the money-changers. In fact, I never touched Pakistani money and never laid eyes on it while I was in Pakistan. It was this Pathan villager Farman who saw to my every need and was ready to buy anything that concerned my well-being or desire. That needless to say included outfitting me for the Eid with new “cloth”, shoes, and a Pashtu vest and hat. A further word on the question of money could not be broached without causing serious insult.

We spent considerable time roaming like locals through the maze of streets and stalls, with every kind of clothing and cloth hanging down from overhead awnings, much of the work was tailor-made by people sitting right there in the narrow alleys of the bazaar. I was in the market for a smart Pakistani waistcoat that has since become world famous, in the style of what we often saw Nawaz Shareef wearing before his downfall and incarceration. It is a sleeveless coat that comes in different materials and colors, but we were looking for a heavy one made of wool with a matching Pashtu cap. I was already wearing a Pakistani suit of my own and soon enough, thanks to the bargaining skills of my friend, was sporting the woolen waistcoat and cap.

I was fully expecting to stand out in the bazaar “like a sore thumb” as I looked about me in the crowded confusion of the bazaar, especially in

light of the hysterical warnings on CNN over the holidays to avoid crowded places and keep a low profile against the event of terrorism. Here I was in the midst of what some people consider to be terror-terror land, plunging into the frantic pre-Eid crowds with aplomb. However the truth was, I realized a little sadly: no one took any notice of me. I was as invisible and anonymous as the next bearded and turbaned person. I mentioned this to Farman as we pushed out way through the bazaar. He smiled happily and beamed a bright light. *You look like people who come from secret valley in North Pakistan, near Hunza, descendants of Alexander the Great. They have same colors like you. White color for the beard to make you old; red color for the skin to make you healthy; sky color for the eyes to make you happy*, he said. In the life of simple truths that he lived, he considered me to be one of their own people, for I was a Muslim, a brother and a friend.

In the evenings of the final days of Ramadan, we always returned to the guestroom where I was staying, to break the fast and sit with Farman's relatives and village friends. The guestroom itself reveals an inner dimension of the family's invitation. I had asked Farman where I would stay when I was there and what sort of arrangements could be made that would not intrude on the integrity of the household. I was concerned because I knew with what strictness the Pathan tribesmen preserve their "traditions", particularly when it comes to home life and the sanctity of the family, what the Arabs call the *bareem*, (literally: that which is holy) or inner sanctum of the household where the women and children live and that constitutes the hearth (and heart) of the home.

Only after my arrival was I to discover the reality of the situation. Farman and his brother had built up a storage area of the household into a fully furnished living quarter complete with an attached bathroom that included a shower with hot water, clearly an incredible concession to my particular western needs since the rest of the house had no running water. The freshly-laid plaster on the walls was still damp. Farman and his brother apologized profusely for the fact that the walls were not yet painted. The room was amply furnished with two beds, a carpet that covered the entire floor, a divan, and a number of Arab style pillows and cushions to service the people, most of whom sat on the floor. I never slept alone—either Farman or his brother slept in the other bed with the kaleshnikov for protection against any unexpected intruders.

I was profoundly shocked to learn that for a one-week visit this poor family had gone to this kind of expense and clearly in my naiveté I didn't realize that these people didn't have "guest" rooms. The houses in the village were made of red brick, resembling solid, rectangular mini-fortresses. Rooms fanned out around an inner courtyard reflecting a tempo of additions as the need arose for more space: one room for the mother where the grandchildren often gathered, another for the oldest brother, wife and family, another for his other brother Mohammed who lived in the Emirates, housing his wife and four children. Farman and his wife occupied another room with their two young children, the oldest sibling, a sister who had never married and had taken care of her younger siblings when their father died, also had her own room. Finally, there was a communal kitchen used by all the wives and his mother and a latrine used by all. The guestroom was well separated from this hub of activity, being on the other side of the courtyard and adjacent to a small garage that led onto the street.

*Tomorrow we go into the mountains of the famous Swat area.
We visit my friend Akbar and his family in mountains outside Swat.
You know Akbar from Emirates.*

There was a rhythm to this journey and an ambiance of well being and meaning that comes from a number of factors including intelligent planning and purposeful design. To Farman, we were not visiting the area as tourists marvelling at the sights; we were visiting friends who happened to live in a region of the country whose natural beauty could be enjoyed as a byproduct of the journey; but what really mattered was the visit with friends. It was the first day of the Eid, a day for visiting loved ones and friends above all. We said the early morning prayer in the mosque. I was embraced by just about everyone in the mosque, the elders and the youth alike, great bear hugs punctuated with heart-felt greetings and *salaams*. The way they shook and embraced me attested to the sheer delight it was for them to encounter an American Muslim under these circumstances in their tiny mosque on this special day of rejoicing, celebrating the end of a month-long fast. The elders had given me a place of honor in the front row behind the prayer-leader (*imam*). In every instance, great care was taken to preserve the "protocol" of the moment.

Farman and I, his brother-in-law Babu, Farouk, a close friend who did all the driving in the "borrowed" car-in fact my three bodyguards were

still armed to the teeth with revolvers and rifles-set off around mid-morning for the foothills of the Himalayas beyond the northern side of Peshawar, whose soot and suffocating smog I was glad to leave behind. We stopped for lunch and sat outside on wooden benches wrapped in our woolen shawls against the bitter cold to sample the local *kebab* that we scooped up with fresh and piping-hot Pakistani bread. Farman had bought some tomatoes from the vegetable stall and hand washed them himself, knowing of my passion for tomato salad. Nothing was overlooked and everything was remembered. The *kebab* actually looked like an oversized burger, but didn't taste like one, being seasoned in the local style with onions, tomatoes, peppers, herbs and spices, putting to shame the stale, overcooked burgers served in fast food places in the US. We washed this down with thick black tea before bundling ourselves back into the small car for the next leg of the journey feeling fully satisfied and well fortified against the winter chill.

I had the overwhelming sense of "living" rather than "touring", of being a part of something real rather than acting out a role as tourist and witness. As I sat in the back seat and looked out over the increasingly more beautiful countryside, I listened to the conversational banter of Farman and his two friends. One thing worth noting is that these people are great conversationalists as well as great linguists and I was able to witness this in person as we drove deeper into the mountains of the northern frontier. Farman himself speaks five or six languages, but he never made much of this ability, as if it were second nature to everyone. I know for a fact that he spoke his own native Pashtu, in addition to Urdu which is the national language of Pakistan officially spoken by everyone in the country but actually used by only one-tenth of the population on a regular basis, Hindi which is similar to Urdu but written with a different script, Farsi which is the Iranian language in which his own language of Pashtu shares an ancient legacy, fluent Arabic and increasingly proficient English, not to mention several other dialects and languages of other tribes of the area that he was familiar with.

However, it was in the style of their conversation that their true characters were revealed, for these people love to converse with each other more than anything. They sit together; they talk together; and they are silent together in a manner that doesn't exist in the Western world. Above all, in spite of the language barriers between myself and the others, a

sense of balance was preserved. Farman concerned himself with his friends but somehow never forgot me and made every attempt to include me in their banter. I couldn't understand their conversation as such, but what with my own linguistic ability, my background in Arabic (for Pashtu has Arabic influences) and from a context that was often briefly outlined by Farman, I was often able to glean much of what was being said, at least in its general meaning and import. The truth is, the details didn't matter to me that much. It was enough to witness the incredible camaraderie, friendship and mirth that flowed from one to the other. It was obvious that much of what they were saying consisted of stories and tales of earlier times and places, humoresque and/or serious events that had happened to them that required dialogue, drama, emotion and talent to recreate as a living memory. But I was never left out. Farman would ask after my well-being, translate particularly interesting points, and comment on the countryside. Babu made courageous attempts to refresh his English in his unselfconscious and bold style. Farouk showed himself to be the imp that he was through a cascade of words and intonations that I couldn't understand but that somehow had the power to mesmerize me with their intonation and charm. When he laughed, everyone laughed, for his smile was too infectious for words. Whenever I repeated a few phrases of their beloved Pashtu, they made much of it and were as overjoyed as children.

It was growing dark and I was getting concerned. After all, someone had to worry as my companions were so carefree and trusting to fate that nothing seemed to bother them and certainly not the approaching night. The mountains were getting more rugged and the landscape more primitive looking. The road narrowed and the cliffs drew down steeper into the valleys. The sparkling waters of the Indus River wound their way down through the hills and cliffs with a clarity and vitality that suggested some kind of living presence and we could hear the roar of the swift-moving current. Soon enough, dusk turned to darkness and in the pitch-black night of the sky, the big dipper rose once again to reaffirm a reality that is greater than our own through the presence of the stars.

The final few miles turned into a search for the small village in the mountainous Swat area where Farman's friend Akbar lived with his large family. Have you been here before, I asked Farman. *Yes*, he said firmly as he peered out the clouded window, *once, about fifteen years ago*,

when I was sixteen. But these people have good memories attested to by the multiple languages they remember. We were soon making our way in total darkness through the street of a tiny village built along the contour of the mountain. Densely packed houses crowded along the side of the village street that was very narrow with very little room for a modern vehicle such as we had. Our expert driver Farouk negotiated the cramped passageway with precision, careful not to let the car slip into the drains separating the street from the houses.

We were soon well ensconced in a typical Islamic-style sitting room, what the Arabs call a *majlis* that is always the first and outermost room of the house, invitingly furnished with carpets and cushions. It was bitter cold, but this was offset by the incredible warmth of feeling and hospitality afforded by the host, Akbar who I knew from the Emirates, together with his father and brothers and a number of other men from the village who had come to welcome us. We sat around on the floor of course, a habit that I have grown accustomed to over the years, and within the hour, the floor was spread with a cloth and Akbar's brothers brought in a piping hot array of foods, a specially flavored rice famous in that area, meat and vegetable dishes, and the much favored *raita*, a yogurt dish flavored with chips of cucumber, onion and green pepper, all washed down with the strong black tea that they seemed to favor there. I noted that the bread, as in all Pakistani homes, was lovingly wrapped in a cloth bundle and set in a basket, to keep it warm.

When it was time to retire for the night, the four of us were led back out into the elements further up the hill and deeper into the village where we passed through a gate into an inner garden with various rooms for sleeping. When I entered the room, I saw five beds lining the walls. All the beds were hand-made from rope woven across a wooden frame, and each came well equipped with a simple cotton mat covered with hand-embroidered sheets and hand made quilts that were very heavy. Under that mountain of hand-packed cotton, no one was cold. The host slept with us in the room as a courtesy to the guests.

During the night, I had to go 'to the bathroom', so I got up quietly, not wanting to disturb the others, and especially not my three commandos who like babies slept the sleep of the innocent. Once I had left the safe haven of the blanket, it was bitter cold outside, but I had no choice and donning my sandals at the door, I made my way across to the little out-

house that stood at the other end of the garden within the walled enclosure. Simple bodily functions were never so difficult, but finally relief was at hand and I stepped back out into the cold dark night of the garden to find my friend Farman standing guard several feet away with the kaleshnikov sitting on his hip and a sleepy grin on his face.

In the morning, we made our ablutions and said the early morning dawn prayer, which is recited at the first light of day well before the actual dawn. Hot water was prepared and the host actually pour the water himself over my hands and feet to facilitate the ritual since running water from a tap was not available. Thereafter, and ready as we all were for more food, we sat down to a sumptuous breakfast of fruit, yogurt, a flaking and nourishing oil-based bread well known in the sub-continent as *parattha*, which we used to scoop up the thick, fresh cream and the raw, unprocessed and pure honey.

I asked my host about the honey because not only was the taste exquisite and as my friend Farman liked to say “original”, but it also seemed to have bits and pieces of the hive itself mixed in with the gooey sweet mass. Akbar told me the honey came from within their very house. It seems his eighty year old grandmother can communicate somehow with the bees and had been able to coax them into the house to set up their hive. The bees come and go as they please given the nature of their “duties”, I was told, and no one seems to notice, least of all the bees themselves. You can even play with the bees and they don’t bother you, Akbar told me wide-eyed. Now that’s original honey, I thought.

When I stepped through the door of the garden upon our departure, the land spread away in front of me into the distance to form a magnificent panorama of mountains and clouds. As the pale disk of the winter sun rose in the distance, I saw our next destination, the rugged, white mountain peaks of the Karakoram, the land of the snow cloud and the traditional, northern spice-route to China. We said our good-byes and prepared to take our leave. There had been a light rain during the night, the first in many months and the village street had turned into a sea of mud that we had to trek through in order to reach the car. The old man, Akbar’s father, gave me a warm embrace and was the last to pass his hand through the car window to offer me one final hand-shake. Through hand gestures, he gave me the traditional signs to indicate that he wanted me to pray for him. I quickly nodded the customary sentiments, but felt

humbled by his request. He was the model of benevolence, the host in the tradition of the Prophet and the generous one reflective of one of the names of God in Islam (*al-Kareem*). His prayers I thought would fall more readily at the foot of the throne of God than mine, but the Muslims have a favorite saying: *Allah knows best*.

In some strange and unexpected way, the highlight of the journey and its true *raison d'être* were the people we encountered along the way, while the magnificent setting we passed through only served as an afterthought. Akbar packed his tremendous hulk into the back seat with Farman and myself to accompany us during our tour of the area and a good thing too since we kept each other warm in the bitter cold. As we made our way up the valley deeper into the mountains, the weather became colder than before and eventually we passed the snow and tree line and found ourselves deep into the snow clad territory of the Karakoram. We were now journeying through a wild, mountainous country setting. The snow was coming down hard and as we advanced, it was getting much deeper and the road more treacherous. Yet, in spite of the remoteness of the area, I realized that our whereabouts were being constantly monitored. At one point, we stopped at a kind of check point, and my bodyguards jumped out and consulted with the local authorities as if they were expecting us. When I questioned Farman about it, he just said that my security was “under control”. But I was amazed, to say the least, at the thoroughness and seriousness that my safety was being taken. All throughout the course of my stay in Pakistan, our whereabouts had been monitored by the special security forces of the government in cooperation with my Pathan companions.

We finally reached the end of the road at a town called Kalam, a scenic mountain village with a mountain river rushing headlong through it as it made its way down the mountainside. In the summer, I was told, this place was packed with tourists and holiday-makers. Today, the town was nearly empty and fairly desolate; it was snowing hard and threatening to seal us in with an impassible road. When in doubt about a course of action, food was always suggested, so my friends set about finding the best place to eat by fanning out in different directions to make inquiries, each of them comically wrapped up in their woolen shawls, but not before packing snow down each other's backs.

Soon enough, I was being led into what appeared at first sight to be a

dingy little place, but unexpectedly it opened out in the back to become a spacious dining room that seemed to be hanging on the edge of a precipice on one side of the town. A fine array of windows provided ample views of the houses of the town that were nestled within the contours of those craggy mountains. Great chutes of water made their way down the side of the mountain near the windows of the restaurant and created a tremendous roar within. After marveling at the unbelievable views, we were served up some fresh trout that had been grilled barbecue-style over hot coals out in the snowy street in front of the restaurant. This was served together with a curried chicken cooked in a wok and the inevitable freshly-made and piping hot Pakistani bread served as a satisfying lunch before making our way out of the town and out of the mountains altogether, to escape being sealed indefinitely within the winter landscape. We eventually left Akbar in a town near his village from which he intended to make his way back on his own so as not to delay our return journey. After leaving him by the side of the road, we began the long trek back to Peshawar in the late afternoon. True to the Islamic tradition, the needs and comfort of the traveler are sacrosanct and Akbar had fulfilled his duties well.

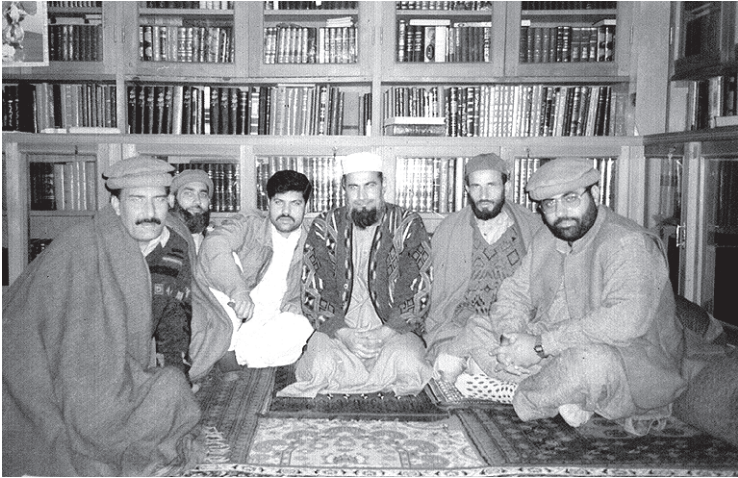
The next day was to be my last complete day in the North-West Province, in what had become for me the beloved Pathan country. These tribal people are fully conscious of the demands of intimate relationships and respond with deep feeling to the subtleties of the moment. After a full week of what amounted to well orchestrated touring and visiting, we would spend a quiet final day in and around Farman's village. The following morning, I was scheduled to fly back to Muscat.

The day began as always with a tremendous breakfast of fresh, original farm foods including bread, cream, *laban*, cheese, fruit, farm-fresh eggs, and tea. Thus fortified, we piled into the car and began to tour the countryside for one last nostalgic glance at how people live within this remote, country setting. The memorable images still pass through my mind's eye. The horse-drawn carriages jingled with bells as they carried their passengers to local destinations along that dusty road, the trotting horse in silhouette against the rising sun like an ancient pictogram. The great cumbrous water buffaloes pulled their heavy loads without any sound of complaint. We passed through a village even smaller than Farman's where the houses were all made of clay and straw and whose

inner enclosures traditionally housed the farm animals. Along the outer walls of the houses in this and other villages, I saw sizable mud patties flattened like burgers on the side of the wall to dry in the sun. And what were they, I wondered aloud? None other than the “spoils” of the water buffalo, I was told, carefully preserved and left to dry, to be used later as fuel for cooking and hot water. *Nothing is wasted in village life*, Farman told me solemnly and I believe him. A hard-working donkey pulling a heavily-loaded cart passes by looking young and boyish and enduring. I think I have learned something about virtue from the sight of this animal. In the village itself, we squeeze the car through the narrow streets. A little dead-end child with a dirty face walks past the car window with a chicken squished in her arms. Their two pinched little faces look up at me. We stop and wait for a cart to pass, packed with sugar cane stalks drawn by a great water buffalo. The little boy on the back of the great beast grins at me and waves hello, or is it good-bye. I do not know. These are the pictures that were not taken by my camera, the pictures not of my imagination but of my discerning mind, pictures I could not have created on my own.

Even on this my last day, there was no such thing as idle touring. We were on our way to a destination, another visit, another friend, another group of people who wanted to see the “foreign guest” and talk with the “American Muslim”. On my own in this little village, the clay walls of the houses looking old and run down, I would have been as out of place as an alien being on an outer planet. Under the protection of a local Pathan family and as their honored guest, I was everything that mattered to the village.

We descended from the car and tip-toed through the mud of the street to enter the grounds of the house beyond the wall. I was advised to be careful to avoid a great smudge of buffalo waste that was still steaming near the gate of the house. Beyond the grim reality of the outside setting lay all the charm of a truly bucolic existence. An inner courtyard revealed a variety of farm animals. Two elegant, gray colored cranes posed for my stunned vision and fanned their wings in protest at the interruption. A number of chickens provided a frantic counterpart to the detached serenity of the cranes as they scurried about the courtyard in their perennial search for food. Yet nothing could compare to the noble-looking black water buffalo that peacefully munched its hay on the other



side of the courtyard as it gazed into the distance beyond the limited horizon of its mind. This was a picture I simply had to have, and the host obliged by stepping into this rustic farm setting to lend the image of his own self-possessed nobility and calm appearance to this charming scene.

He then gracefully ushered me and my friends into the interior beyond an open door. I was amazed to find myself in a small rectangular room that was fully lined on every wall with glass-enclosed wooden bookcases that housed a complete collection of hard-backed, leather-bound books whose titles and authors were enscripted with the exotic gold lettering of Arabic and Pashtu and Farsi. Perhaps it was the unexpected quality of the experience that left me bereft of words. The man's son spoke good Arabic, so after we had sat ourselves down on the plush, hand-woven tribal carpets and cushions that were strewn randomly around the room, he busied himself with me, displaying with loving care a number of books in Arabic including a few hand-written and embellished Qur'ans. Of course, every visit must include a meal, so we ate our second breakfast at 11:00 in the morning, a feast that included steaming rice and chicken roasted and stewed in buffalo oil. After a brief prayer of thanks initiated by the host that this happy encounter had been made possible, we took our leave. The remembrance of God is never far away from the rituals of their daily life.

By the time we left the village, the sun had passed the meridian, we had said the noon prayer, and the day was beginning to die. There was a feeling in the air of closure and departure. No one wanted the moment to pass—not of course the individual moment, but the totality of the moment that summarized our experience as a moment of encounter and exchange. For me as a Westerner and American, it had been a kind of surreal dream of a vanished time and a passageway emerging out of the remote past. For my Pathan friends, the monotony of their lives had been interrupted with this unique encounter, and they had been able to express and show the best of themselves. No one wants such moments to pass, but pass they must, at least in their linear and literal reality, if not in their enduring remembrance.

It was past two o'clock and we were going to buy some fish and have lunch at Farouk's house. Not another meal, I thought. Give me the true satisfaction of hunger any day, I prayed, rather than the false satisfaction of being sated and full. However, this was my last day and Farouk and his family considered themselves honored by my presence. We sat outside on cushions and a carpet in the courtyard of his house. Farman showed me the water pump in the corner and filled a pitcher with water. *Every house has a well*, he told me. So this is the source of the water supply, I thought, remembering the armies of tourists I had seen in my travels carrying their own water bottles.

Farouk's father came to join us together with his little daughter. Farouk brought in the food, including the steaming fish just cooked by his wife. I tried to make a brave show of interest in eating, but my heart was in it and I couldn't face another meal. In fact, my friend Farman made matters worse by piling more food on my plate and encouraging me to eat more. In true Pathan style, Farouk also offered me the choicest morsels of fish and encouraged me to eat more. Perhaps I was distracted by all this attention, but suddenly and unaccountably, I swallowed a sizable fish bone. I felt it scratch the back of my throat, and immediately tried to spit it out, but it was too late, and I realized that it was lodged precariously beyond the back ledge of my tongue. I was beginning to choke.

My friend Farman, Babu, Farouk, his father, the child, all were struck dumb and jumped up from the table. To their collective horror, the guest was in distress; this was their responsibility. I excused myself and went to the latrine on the other side of the courtyard to see what I could do

and try to pull myself together. But there was nothing to be done. I couldn't swallow and I couldn't expel the thing. I stepped grimly back out into the courtyard and they immediately took in the reality of the situation. They resolved to take me at once to the local doctor. We left the meal spread out uneaten on the carpet. As we left the inner courtyard, I noticed the worried face of Farouk's father as he held the little girl in his arms and the kaleshnikovs left abandoned in a corner of the inner courtyard. They were no defense against this.

A doctor at a small dispensary in a nearby town shook his head. He couldn't handle it and we would have to go to the hospital in Peshawar. I groaned audibly. The thought of going all the way to Peshawar, at least 45 minutes away, through that nightmare of pollution, traffic and congestion, was enough to make me sicker than I was. It was as if a curtain had been drawn and a new act was now unfolding, an unexpected denouement to an otherwise perfect play. But Farouk was up to the demands of the moment. He stepped on the gas and leaned on the horn as he made his way at breakneck speed along the road to Peshawar, defying every possible danger and every unexpected circumstance. The world seemed to fall away from our path as our car advanced with the horn blasting a perpetual warning for the cars, carriages, carts and countless pedestrians to get out of the way as we made our way through the smog into the congested city.

My three caretakers rush me through the crowds and the injured milling about an emergency room that seemed dark, run-down and uninviting. An x-ray was quickly taken. It was determined that a bone was caught in my throat and we were sent upstairs to the eye, ear and throat department. Throughout the course of this unwanted adventure, my friends were silent and clearly worried, like children struck mute in a situation they couldn't fully comprehend and over which they had no control. Gone was the happy banter of the previous days and a grim forbearance seemed to settle over them until we got through this harrowing experience. I marveled at the ability of my friends to respond to the needs of the moment. These were no country bumpkins, but people with sharp instincts and sound intuitive reactions ready to respond to any contingency.

The calm atmosphere of the eye, ear and throat department upstairs was in sharp contrast to the frantic air of chaos that had prevailed in the emergency room. Farman quickly assessed the doctor of the situation,

then took my hand and sat down next to me. The doctor briefed me about the probabilities of resolving such an encounter and with a true feeling for the psychology of the moment, tried to calm me down before proceeding to attempt the extraction of this discomforting fishbone. There is nothing to worry about, he assured me with professional calm. These things happen and we should have it out in no time. Even if we can't manage to extract it, the bone could stay there for several weeks without doing much harm before eventually slipping down into the stomach. So don't worry, he assured me in good English.

He heated a dentist-style mirror and positioned it at the back of my throat. You will have to help me, he said, because I only have two hands, one for the mirror and the other for the tweezers. Secure your tongue and hold it out as far as you can. I did as I was told, breathing deeply to calm myself. "I see it," he exclaimed as if he had discovered a gold nugget. Several attempts to seize the bone brought me up gagging, and we were all beginning to wonder whether this was going to result in the happy ending we all prayed for. On the fourth attempt, however, with a deft maneuver, he slowly withdrew the offending bone. "Here it is, you can save it if you want." It didn't look like much, sharp and oval, like a pared fingernail, but inside my throat, it had felt like an old shoe. I breathed a sigh of relief and uttered the traditional Islamic epithet, in chorus coincidentally, with the others, *al-bamdu-lil-Llah* (all praise to Allah), and never was a phrase uttered with more heartfelt sentiment and collective relief. We thanked the doctor and praised him for his skill, he embraced me warmly, and we took our leave from the grim environs.

The ride back was a leisurely affair, with much relieved laughter and banter. They kept asking me if I felt better, as if they couldn't believe that the ordeal was finally over, that I was whole again and myself as before. I never knew what it cost, if it cost anything at all. I never saw any of my three companions pay anyone any money and no one was forced to fill out any paperwork or show any documents. In the end, there are some advantages to a system in chaos. Just before entering the house upon our return, Farman told me not to say anything about the incident to any of the guests at home because everyone would be very upset. We soon discovered that everyone, not only in the house but in the entire village, knew the story of my ordeal which in true village fashion had spread like a brush fire.

It is a humbling experience to be fully accepted and taken into the inner circle of a family and the warm embrace of village life, indeed into an ancient and traditional tribe who practice very conservative customs and follow strong religious beliefs. The Pathan people seemed to me larger than life, physically, mentally, and spiritually. Physically, the appearance of many of them was that of the lovable giants of legends and folk tales. You come to know them, however, through their actions and not their words, for the extent of their generosity knows no bounds and the needs and comfort of the guest takes precedence in all matters. The face you see is their true face. The words you hear are their true words. If they take you in, you are one with them. They showed an attitude toward me that made it clear they considered me their brother and friend. It was unexpressed in words, but spontaneous and freely offered through their actions and behavior. No matter who I was or where I had come from, to them I was Pathan and one with them. This was no journey of a stranger in a strange land. On the contrary, this was a journey in which my soul felt at home. If I were asked where I was and how I got there and why, I could have given a clear answer because I had found one in the encounter with these simple tribesmen.

On a number of occasions, I was asked, perhaps a little self-consciously, what I thought of the Pathan people. It was a question I was instinctively reluctant to answer, partly because I felt that no simple answer existed or came to mind that could do justice to the experience I was having, and partly because it would take serious consideration and the right words to portray the greatness and nobility of these people in their true light and could not be summarized in a few superficial words. In writing this tribute, I have finally answered this question as I promised I would, a promise that needed to be kept in view of the profound outpouring of sentiment this great tribe had extended toward me.

The next day, I said my good-byes to all the friends and relatives and villagers who had troubled themselves over me during my brief stay with them. Feelings were muted and subdued and there was a genuine sense of melancholy in the air. They put a brave face on what was a sad parting. As I approached the car that was to take me to the airport, I passed through a line of Pathans who each in his turn embraced me, shook my hand and bid me the traditional Islamic *ma salaam* or “go in peace”. With a final smile and wave, I was gone.

At the airport, Farman and his friends carried my luggage up to the check-in counter. I had been loaded down with gifts, but the grandest was the hand-made blanket Farman's mother had made for me, a dark and rich maroon-colored quilt that seemed to weigh a ton, heavy enough to service those bitter Peshawar winters. In addition to this, Farman had procured for me 10 kilos of the fresh mountain honey that is favored in the area. When I protested the inordinate amount, he grinned broadly. *This is Pathan style.*

I managed to get through all the formalities, the baggage checks, the embarkation forms, the x-ray machines, and finally the immigration line. It was time to say good-bye. *Thank you so much, Farman. It has truly been an experience of a lifetime. You have been too kind.* But Farman has no use for these awkward English pleasantries and finds refuge in one final act of generosity. *I leave when plane leave, Yahya, and not before.*

At parting, words finally fail. What remains is an embrace that wouldn't let go, a final raising of the hands, and then the traditional gesture of leave-taking, namely the right hand over the heart. This final symbolic gesture must now seal the narrative closed, just as it allowed us to leave behind with each other the best of ourselves, without the need for another word.