

TRUEING

Many people who have a conversion experience do not see it as leaving anything, rather as a trueing, an integration of inner experience, outer practice and system of belief. Many Muslim converts talk about the relief they felt when they could drop the concept of the Trinity, since that wasn't true to their felt experience of God, nor could they reconcile it with their understanding of monotheism. Others loved not having to make a distinction between belief and practice; practice was now belief. To be a Muslim was to regularly perform certain practices.

One question I asked Sister Mary Salaam—whose journey has included practice as a devout Methodist, a Pentecostal, and then a Muslim—whether God had changed for her, she said, "Of course not. Our conversation has been constant." Ken Muschewicz, who converted from Catholicism to Islam, said, "Wonderful question. Not at all." And a Zen abbess in Asheville, said, "Oh, I consider myself a Catholic and a Buddhist." This comment was echoed by Peggy Rowe, a follower of the Buddhist priest Thich Nat Hanh, who encourages people to understand themselves continuously inside the frame of their original religious training. I heard this as well in Therese Stogner, who as a young nun woke up one morning hearing a voice that said it was now time to leave the convent but not her faith.

To hold conversion stories in imagination, it is important to get a feel for what is being tried and *how* it is being tried. Sometimes there are needs—for compassion, or intellectual coherence, or symbolic fluency, or coherence of language and practice, that are not being fed. Sometimes it is a need for community. I think here of how powerful the experience of reading signs that included quotes from Confucius and Thomas Jefferson was for Fred Tregaskis—the experience of finding a community where his heart-rich need to doubt could be embraced.

To have a feel for the trueing involved in people's choices of how to *express* their religious experience requires that we separate the experience itself from the explanatory system and also stand in awe of that part of each of us

that knows wholeness for us, how important and ruthless and exact it is. How it can say, suddenly, "I don't want those words in me." Or can recognize that the rhythms of Islamic body prayer create a conversation with God and with others that we can't experience in any other way, even if God has not changed for us at all.

MARY SALAAM

A young man in a grocery store stopped and watched Mary Salaam and then asked, "M'am, are you saved? Because I see a halo over your head."

It isn't the only time she has had someone say something similar. Another man said to her, "I don't mean to be fresh, but you just light up."

Sister Mary is seventy-one. She still works as a charge nurse at a nursing home. She teaches Arabic at the Atlanta Masjid and regularly attends meetings of interfaith groups in Atlanta, such as the Children of Abraham and the Interfaith Sisters. She is small, elegant, and wears a wonderful collection of hats and head scarves, which she wraps tightly around her head, their ends tied into a rose above her ear, so it looks like she is wearing an elegant cloche from the Roaring Twenties. She is very down to earth, as careful with her speech as she is with her dress.

There is, as these strangers observed, something about her that lights up a room. I found her spiritual journey one of the most interesting of all that I heard during this project. What struck me was its continuity, although in her life Sister Mary has moved from being a non-professed Baptist, to Methodist, to Pentecostal evangelist, to Muslim.

In a follow-up interview, I asked, "Mary, when you changed religions, did God change for you?" Not at all, she told me. Her personal relationship with God remained unchanged—intimate, all-absorbing.

Having your own personal relationship with God is like being Muslim now. I'm very conscious of how I do my prayer—because I'm conscious of how I want to be with God. That is what I want to do. This doesn't make me more Muslim. There are things I want to do because they are pleasing with me and pleasing with God. I know God does not need me, but I need Him. It's for me that I'm doing it. If I miss any prayer, it bothers me. If I oversleep, I still do it because I need it.

From the very beginning, Mary has had a strong, guiding need for

congruence between her inner experience of faith and the outer expression of it. As a child in rural south Georgia, she went to a Baptist church with her mother.

They would have you sit in the front row—called it a mourning bench. But I never had a desire to sit up there. They'd always take communion—but they would pass me by because I was a child. When I learned what it was about, I realized I was more observant than they were. After church, people would do other things outside of church that didn't go with what was being said in the church. It didn't coincide. I didn't understand it. They did something different on the outside. So I didn't join.

This keen observation of the congruence, or incongruence, of speech and action—and clarity of response to that incongruity—can be heard throughout Mary's life. It didn't make her give up on religion; it made her keep questioning and seeking.

As a child, when they had revivals and said, "All Christians raise your hands," Mary never would. "I didn't understand. But I always said, I was going to be able to raise my hand one day." But she would be sure she understood exactly what she was doing first.

Mary's need for congruence between intention and action, inner understanding and public faith, has always been intriguingly balanced by an even stronger intuitive and visionary capacity. The dance between these two capacities has determined her spiritual path, giving her the abilities to immerse herself deeply and also to separate out and find more congruent faith forms when needed.

When she moved to Atlanta at nine or ten, she started attending a Methodist church with a neighbor. She went to tea on Sunday evening and Sunday school in the mornings. But she didn't join. One Sunday, she was singing *This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine*, and found herself standing silent before the preacher.

"What are you going to do? Join the church?" he asked.

"I guess so," she said.

"Now, I understand it was the Spirit of God moved me. I didn't. None of my family is Methodist."

But Mary became an ardent Methodist. She sang in the choir, taught Sunday school. "I would do everything they had," she said with a smile.

Mary married just before she turned fifteen. "I had gotten pregnant. I lived up the street from a minister. His wife was my teacher. He said it was the

best thing I could do," she explained. She continued to be heavily involved in the church, over the years taking her six children, five girls and a boy, there with her all the time.

Then tragedy struck. In her account of this time, we hear several themes that run through Mary's life. The role of visions. Her stoicism and generosity of spirit, even in times of heartache. How her faith provided her with a touchstone, a compass, giving her the strength to question religious authority when it was used punitively.

What took me out of the church—one of my girls got killed. Five years old. Hit by a car. In the eulogy, the minister, he made the comment, "If her mother had been there, this might not have happened."

This man doesn't even know the whole story. Before my daughter was hit and was killed, she had gotten hit before. We were coming home from church and crossing the street and she pulled away from me and got her shoulder hurt.

Charlene—we called her Bit—she was an angel. Everyone loved her. She went clean all the time. If she got dirt on her dress, she'd take it off. Never went barefeet. She wanted to do grown-up things. She would tell me what she was never going to do. Go to school.

She would iron and wash. I heard her one morning out on the porch screaming. "Mama! Mama! That woman was coming out for me. Tell me who was that lady? All white. Hat. Shoes."

"Where did she go?" I asked and she pointed at the cemetery.

I was separated from my husband at the time. Two older girls would spend time with their grandmother. Bit didn't usually go. But this time she wanted to go. So I called her sisters back and they got her. On a Friday.

Later I fixed something to eat. We had no phone there—I used the telephone of my neighbor. So when I heard my neighbor call me by my full name, I knew something had happened.

I had a dream after she had her screaming. I dreamed my sister was moving, her silverware was falling out and I picked it up and there was always more that was falling. I found a grave with a silver axe—and I started throwing silverware at it.

At the time, the hospital was in walking distance. So I started walking. But they had moved the hospital. A man stopped and reminded me of the change and took me to the new hospital, up on a hill, like my