



A BELIEF IN UNITY: THE LIFE OF ABDUS SALAM

by Tasneem Zehra Husain

The name lay, waiting, until he was born and all his life, Abdus Salam wore it as a mantle. Almost nine decades ago, Mohammad Hussain, a school teacher in Jhang, had a dream that his unborn son would go on to do great things and serve God. In gratitude, he decided to name this child Abdus Salam - the servant of peace.

The choice was inspired, for Abdus Salam was truly a messenger of peace and unity where ever he went. He was able to see the deep, underlying similarity between apparently disparate forces of nature, just as clearly as he could see through the layers of political and religious dogma, to the common bonds of humanity that unite us all. In his 70 years on this planet, Salam worked tirelessly to reveal beautiful hidden structures - both mathematical and social - and bring together theories and people who were needlessly reft apart. He credited this attitude to his faith. "I think the emphasis on symmetry is something which I have inherited from the culture of Islam. The belief in unity, in there being one simple cause for [all] that we see, has a basis in my spiritual background" he said.

Abdus Salam was born, on 29 January 1926, into a family of modest financial means, where education was valued highly. His parents encouraged, and delighted in, the young boy's curiosity, and in that sparse but supportive atmosphere, Salam began to blossom. In his later years, he used to tell a story about when he was about five and so engrossed in reading a book that he did not notice the cat running away with his dinner. That intense focus stayed with him throughout his life, as did his lively curiosity. Salam had an active, wondering mind, always brimming over with ideas. He kept track of these through notes scribbled on whatever he could find - from envelopes to scraps of paper, to the backs of posters. No 'writable' surface was safe. His son tells an amusing story about the time Abdus Salam had lunch at Buckingham Palace with the Queen and Prince Philip. After all the guests had left the table, Salam went back and asked if he could take his napkin - he had written some notes on it.

Abdus Salam was a truly cultured man, and extremely well spoken. He read widely - spanning the spectrum from Islamic history to P.G.Wodehouse. Salam was a man of many interests. He was able to enjoy the beauty of

Punjabi poetry as well as the comic antics of the Marx brothers. Although he lived away from Pakistan for well over half his life, no one could mistake Abdus Salam's roots. Tied up forever in our memories of him is the indelible image of a turbaned man in an achkan and curling khussas, receiving the Nobel prize. When he spoke about his award winning work, of which he was rightly very proud, Salam's words were characteristically modest and quite in keeping with eastern tradition. "It's a good piece of work", he said. "Allah was very gracious in letting me get involved with something which, inshaAllah, will live."

A citizen of the world, at ease with people of all cultures and persuasions, he remained proudly Pakistani to the end of his days, and was - despite governmental attempts at disowning him - perhaps the best ambassador the country has ever had. A journalist once asked Salam how he felt about the fact that his extraordinary accomplishments had now branded Jhang as the birthplace of one of the greatest scientific minds of the century, whereas previously the only claim to fame this small village had, was due to the folktale of Heer Ranjha. With wit and humility, Salam answered "There are over 325 Nobel laureates in the world, but only one Heer."

Salam was firmly committed to the cause of science in Pakistan, and he worked tirelessly to increase the exposure of, and create a better intellectual environment for, Pakistani scientists. He played a critical role in establishing Pakistan's Atomic Energy and Space Research agencies PAEC and SUPARCO, and even initiated an annual physics conference in the hills of Nathia Gali, to which he attracted many international luminaries. Salam was the beloved mentor for an entire generation of Pakistani students, some of whom (most notably the twin brothers Riazuddin and Fayyazuddin) become physicists of international repute in their own rights.

But while Salam's nationalistic zeal brought out his generosity and spirit of service, it did not limit his outlook. One of his most famous students was the Israeli physicist Yuval Ne'eman, who pursued a PhD under Salam's supervision while serving as Israel's Defense Attache in the U.K. Where others might have seen this as a source of conflict, given the prevailing tensions between Israel and Pakistan, Salam viewed neither political nor religious differences as boundaries. A devout Believer himself, he did not feel the need to either apologize for his faith, or to proselytize - a quality that is becoming increasingly rare in Pakistan! Salam's motivations for working on the electroweak theory might have had their origins in faith, but his collaborator on this work - Steven Weinberg - is an avowed atheist. The two not only worked together to produce a Nobel prize winning theory, they also maintained a lifelong respect and affection for each other.

There is no doubt in my mind that Abdus Salam would not have realized even a fraction of his potential, had he been unable to see across apparent - but artificial - boundaries. Today, in a Pakistan that is increasingly divided, along religious, ethnic and political lines, I think we would do well to look on Salam's life as a lesson: our hearts and minds shrink or expand to fill the spaces that are available to them; the more fences we erect, the narrower the lives we confine ourselves to; should we elect to break down walls instead, a vast, exciting world of possibility lies open, with room for each of us to live up to our potential.