

## A Tribute to Imam Sohaib Sultan: A Life of Grace, Joy, and Service

Omer Bajwa\*

Imam Sohaib Sultan was a man whose life exemplified the Prophetic virtues of humility, joy, and service to others. Born into a family deeply committed to community building, Sohaib grew up surrounded by the ethos of service and devotion. His father, Dr. Talat Sultan, was an early leader and founder of several key Muslim organizations in North America, including MSA, ISNA, and ICNA. From an early age, Sohaib understood the critical role of local and national Muslim organizations in fostering community cohesion and spiritual growth.

Sohaib's childhood was marked by frequent moves due to his father's educational and professional commitments, providing him with a rich tapestry of experiences that shaped his understanding of people and places. He pursued undergraduate studies in journalism and political science at Indiana University Bloomington, a foundation that sharpened his intellect and deepened his curiosity about the world. He went on to earn a graduate certificate in Islamic chaplaincy from Hartford Seminary, where he also studied Islamic studies and Muslim-Christian relations.

### A Pioneer in Islamic Chaplaincy

Imam Sohaib Sultan was among the pioneers of Islamic chaplaincy in higher education in the United States. He became one of the first full-time Muslim chaplains at a college or university, serving at Princeton University for 13 years. During his tenure, he and his beloved wife Arshe Ahmed established a vibrant and inclusive Muslim Life Program at Princeton, transforming it into a model of what a "community of joy" could look like. This concept of a joyful, engaged, and inclusive community became one of their enduring legacies.

In addition to his chaplaincy work, Sohaib was well known as the author of *The Koran For Dummies* (For Dummies, 2004) and *The Qur'an and Sayings of Prophet Muhammad: Selections Annotated & Explained* (SkyLight Paths, 2007). He also published a collection of essays entitled "Searching for Wisdom: Ruminations on Islam Today," and wrote a series of [Ramadan reflections](#) for Time.com. His MA thesis was published posthumously by Dr. Martin Nguyen as *An American Muslim Guide to the Art and Life of Preaching* (Fortress Press, 2023).

### Reflections on His Writing

Sohaib's writings were a testament to his ability to bridge the intellectual and the spiritual. He had a rare gift for conveying complex Islamic concepts in a way that was both accessible

---

\* Chaplain Omer Bajwa is the Director of Muslim Life in the Chaplain's Office at Yale University.

and profound, making his works a source of guidance for readers from diverse backgrounds. His books and essays not only educated but also inspired, often encouraging self-reflection and a deeper connection with one's faith. Through his "30 Days of Ramadan" series, he brought a sense of spiritual intimacy to a global audience, showing how the sacred rhythms of the holy month could transform daily life. His writing continues to resonate as a lasting part of his legacy, offering wisdom and insight for generations to come.

### ***The Art of Living and Dying with Grace***

In April 2020, Imam Sohaib Sultan was diagnosed with stage-four cholangiocarcinoma (bile duct cancer). This profound challenge became a platform for him to teach one of the most enduring lessons of his life: how to live—and die—with grace. His reflections during this time revealed his unwavering faith and deep sense of gratitude.

In [his own words](#), he viewed his illness not as a battle, but as a struggle with and acceptance of a divine decree: "Cancer too is a creation of God's and He has so wisely decreed to place it in my body. I am not battling cancer. I am struggling with cancer and accepting that it has much to teach me in life's journey... Cancer has cured me of certain outer ethical and inner spiritual ailments that I've carried with me for too long." He drew strength and solace from the Qur'ān, often reciting verses that resonated with his journey. Among his favorites were:

*"My Lord, make my entrance a truthful one and my exit a truthful one, and grant me supporting authority from Yourself." (17:80)*

and

*[Allah will say to the righteous] "O tranquil soul! Return to your Lord, well pleased [with Him] and well pleasing [to Him]. So join My [righteous] servants, and enter My Paradise." (89:27–30)*

These verses encapsulated his approach to life and death, reflecting his aspiration to live with honor, faith, and a sense of divine purpose.

### ***A Legacy of Reflection and Introspection***

One of the central themes of Imam Sohaib's teachings was *muḥāsaba*—self-reckoning and introspection. He encouraged everyone to take a deep and honest look at their spiritual and ethical lives, asking, "What blemishes are there, and how can I remove them?" At the same time, he encouraged everyone to celebrate their blessings, their positive attributes, and to be grateful to Allah. These practices, he taught, were essential for personal growth and for drawing closer to the Creator.

He once reflected: "Take a look in the spiritual mirror and ask yourself: what can I improve upon? How can I become more loving in the eyes of God?" These lessons became even more poignant as he confronted his own mortality, showing how *muḥāsaba* could lead to profound transformation.

### ***The Final Sermon***

Imam Sohaib Sultan's final public sermon, delivered [online](#) on January 15, 2021, was later published as a chapter, titled "What I Learn from the Prophet ﷺ About Death and Dying" in the book *Mantle of Mercy: Islamic Chaplaincy in North America* (Templeton Press, 2022). In it, he poignantly reflected on the meaning of life and death, reminding us that it is the inevitability of death that gives life its urgency and meaning.

He taught that life's challenges, including terminal illness, are opportunities to cultivate patience, gratitude, and reliance on Allah. His example continues to inspire those grappling with their own trials, reminding us of the beauty that can emerge from struggle.

### ***A Community of Joy and Love***

Imam Sohaib Sultan was not only a scholar and a leader but also a source of immense joy for those who knew him. He laughed and loved with unbridled enthusiasm, drawing others into his orbit of warmth and light. He had an extraordinary gift for turning pain into beauty, anger into understanding, and sadness into purpose.

As we remember Imam Sohaib Sultan, we honor a man who lived and died with unparalleled grace. His legacy will continue to guide and inspire us to build communities of joy, to practice *muḥāsaba*, and to approach life's challenges with faith and patience. May Allah grant him an honorable entrance into Paradise, as he so often prayed, and may we strive to embody the lessons he so lovingly taught.

*Innā lillāh wa innā ilayhi rāji'ūn.*