

## To See or Not to See?

by Lesley Dawson

My name is Mohammed and my family is from Hebron in the south of the West Bank. I have just returned home from a very peculiar experience at Bethlehem University. It was something I had never experienced before. Apparently, part of it was called an interview, the other part was something called an aptitude test. I can translate the word interview into Arabic, but I have no words to explain aptitude test or even begin to understand what the word means.

I am getting ahead of myself and without what went before you will not understand the story. I am a devout Muslim man and do all the things asked of me by my religion and our village sheik. In fact, he told me I was his best student at the madrassa.

So, what makes me different? I seem to have been chosen by the Merciful and Compassionate One to live without sight. I have been blind since an illness in childhood. That makes me flawed as a Muslim man. It means that I am being tested to live my life without seeing my intended wife, my children and the beautiful place in which I live.

When growing up in Hebron I was unable to play football with my classmates and I always wanted to play for Leeds United. Not being able to achieve my goal in life, I became very angry with Al Khaaliq, my Creator. Why did He make me like this? I vowed to get even with Him. I would show him what I could do. I would be better than all my sighted contemporaries.

With this aspiration, I set out to learn Braille with vengeance. Fortunately, I went to a School for the Blind that allowed me to sit my Tawjihi exam and gained me entrance to university. I was ready to show what I could do but then all the universities closed by military order of the Israelis. All that studying went for nothing.

Today, however, things might have changed. My brother brings home the local newspaper and reads out to me an advert from Bethlehem University. Despite the closures, a new programme was starting at Notre Dame Teaching Centre in Jerusalem. They were looking for applicants for a profession called physiotherapy.

“I guess you don’t know what that is, but you should apply for a place anyway. Anything must be better than sitting at home waiting for something to happen.”

As it happened, I did know what physiotherapy was, at least I had read about it in the literature, sent to me by The Royal National Institute for the Blind in London. It was a job a blind man could do. In fact, I had read that the best masseurs in the West were blind.

I began to get excited. Here was my chance to get even with all those boys who had laughed at my inability to catch a ball, who were now sitting at home because their training courses had stopped.

I persuaded my brother to phone the university and book a place. The conversation seemed to be much longer than I expected. Perhaps they were not happy with an application from someone who couldn't see. Eventually he put down the phone and turned to me with a worried look on his face.

"Well, have I got a place?"

"It is not as simple as that. You must attend for an interview in English and then demonstrate some of the skills you will need."

By this time, I was learning to save myself useless emotion, so I swallowed my pride and indignation and prepared to travel to Bethlehem.

Never had I been asked what I thought were the best and worst aspects of my character. Who I am is usually determined by what family I belong to and what the senior members of that family say about me.

I was complemented on my English language skills and obviously managed to bluff my way through the interview and the aptitude test and was offered a place on the study programme. Even better, some charity in the UK was prepared to pay my university fees. Now I would be able to show them all what I could do.

When classes began, I realized that we would have to read from set books in English. How was I going to overcome this problem? None of my family read well enough in English to do this job. Not to worry, I was told. They would arrange for English speaking volunteers working locally to read the set texts onto cassettes, provided by the famous RNIB. I was in heaven.

The only problem was learning to cope with the different accents of those who spoke onto my cassettes. I knew there was a difference between English English and American English but did not realise that there were so many versions of English English.

Now I was on my way. I would have my revenge. I would have a well-paid job on graduation, and they would all be unemployed. The only fly in the ointment were these odd sensations in my chest that sometimes worried me.