

Today's Martyrs – Julie Aftab

Before 17 year old Julie Aftab left Pakistan for medical treatment in the United States, her nondenominational bishop said to her "If you forgive them your wound will heal without any medication. You can heal from the inside out".

More than a year earlier, Julie had taken a new job as a telephone operator in a call center in Faisalabad. As the eldest of seven children she had been working since age 13, when her father, a bus driver, had broken his back. Two weeks into her new job, on June 15, 2002, a customer started an ugly confrontation after he saw the silver cross hanging from her neck. The cross was a gift from her grandfather.



Photo by Melissa Philip – Houston Chronicle

“Are you a Christian?” “Yes I am,” Julie replied, only to be asked twice more.

“You are living in the gutter. You are going to hell. You are living in darkness”.

“I am living in the light” Julie replied.

“So, you think Islam is in darkness?” he almost shouted.

“No, you said that, not me”. This was a frightening turn. Julie’s defense of her faith had been twisted against her. The customer was setting her up for blasphemy charges, which carried the death penalty.

The man left. Within forty minutes he returned. He carried a turquoise bottle. She tried to block the thrown acid with her arms but the stream caught her in the face. Screaming, she ran from the office. At the door a second man grabbed her by the hair and pulled her head back. Together they poured the acid down her throat.

Julie ran into the street. Teeth fell from her mouth onto the ground. A woman removed her hijab and used it to grab Julie; she pulled her to her nearby home where she rinsed the acid away with water. Others detained the two attackers until police arrived. What followed could be seen as an indictment of an entire culture.

The police demanded to know from the attackers why they had done such an evil thing. They replied that Julie had insulted Islam and had said that Muslims were living in darkness and would go to hell. The police immediately released the perpetrators. The neighbors who had helped her now turned against her. When she was taken to the hospital they all followed her, told the hospital staff about her ‘crime’, and threatened to burn down the hospital if they treated her. The hospital staff refused treatment. Her parents arrived. Their pleas for treatment were spurned. They took her to another hospital. The attackers followed them and repeated their allegations and threats. The second hospital refused to treat her. Her parents finally found a hospital that agreed to treat her, but they were told that Julie would most likely die.

Two-thirds of Julie's esophagus was burned. She had lost her right ear and eye, and her left eye was blind and lidless. Her right cheek was gone, her facial bones and remaining teeth were exposed. Both arms were damaged and immobile. And of course the spiritual crisis inevitably happened: "God, why did you do this to me? Why did you put me through this?" But with care she slowly began to recover. By early October she had regained her voice and the sight in her left eye. However, the persecution continued. Before she was released from the hospital (after almost a year), photos of her disfigured face were distributed as an incitement, she was threatened with a lynching, and her family's home was destroyed by arson. After her release she was shot at on two occasions, with a bullet once passing through her hair.

Julie's bishop was able to arrange for her to travel to Houston, Texas for reconstructive surgery; it was at this time that he pleaded with her to forgive. A retired Christian couple, Lee and Gloria Ervin, took Julie into their home, taught her English and to read and write, and sat with her when she woke screaming from her nightmares. Local churches of all denominations worked to further her education and to secure her legal asylum in the United States. By 2012 she had endured 31 surgeries - all performed gratis by her doctors, had begun study for an accounting degree at a local college on a full scholarship, and had become a naturalized U.S. citizen. By 2014 she had married a childhood friend, but life has still been difficult: reportedly she has survived two automobile wrecks and a bout with cancer.



Fox 26 News

Despite everything, Julie's gratitude and faith have become unbounded. She said "Maybe those doctors don't know what they did. Maybe they think they just did their jobs. But for me, they gave me a life". She has said that she would like to become a pastor and help persecuted girls in Pakistan, adding "Those people, they think they did a bad thing to me, but they brought me closer to God" and called her scars "my jewel, my gift from God".

Crucifixion can come in many forms, not only with wood and nails. We know, however, that it is followed by resurrection, and the words "I am living in the light" are made true once again, in this world - God willing - and in the next.

Today's Martyrs
2490 Black Rock Turnpike #455
Fairfield CT 06825-2400

<http://todaysmartyrs.org/index.php/people/>

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