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A Tribute to Justice Antonin Scalia

February 19, 2016

Today we start saying our last goodbyes to Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia. He left us so suddenly when his turn came. In some ways, this was a fitting departure. He was a strong, resolute, and no nonsense person. He also believed that beyond this life there was a better place, for he was a man of deep faith.

I first met Justice Scalia in 1996 at a dinner given by the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. I was seated next to him. During our conversation, I asked Justice Scalia why he had not spoken to a Muslim group yet. His quick and unhesitating answer was: "Invite me."

I did, and KARAMAH spent several days trying to figure out where to hold the event. At that time, we had no offices, nor did other Muslim organizations (there were very few then) own suitable spaces in DC. I finally called Justice Scalia and suggested that we hold the event at a university. Again, without hesitation, he suggested that the event be held at the Supreme Court. And so it was, and KARAMAH held the very first event for Muslims in the Supreme Court. Our fifty guests included community leaders, business people, law students, and women activists.

Justice Scalia gave remarks about the U.S. Constitution and Religious Freedom. There were other speeches and then a reception. Our Muslim guests gathered around Justice Scalia like he was a rock star. They were having for the first time a close encounter with the Supreme Court and this great American figure. Law students wanted to discuss his opinions. Others wanted to comment on existing law. Yet others just wanted to be near him. He made himself generously available. And that is how Muslims in America first entered, as a community, the Supreme Court, and how I came to know Justice Scalia.

But there is a small yet untold part of this story that I like best. During the preparations for the event, we held a meeting to discuss the arrangements. Justice Scalia suggested that we do it over lunch at a nearby Italian restaurant. Everybody there of course knew him and what his preferences were. I sat there solemnly discussing some details, but then Justice Scalia asked me about my work and I mentioned my research in Islamic jurisprudence. The discussion soon shifted from the mundane to the sublime. I quickly saw in front of me a man of deep faith and compassion, whose love of God, family, and humanity was palpable and all embracing. Suddenly we were no longer a justice and a law professor organizing an event. Rather, we became two people of faith, embracing our common humanity.

I do not remember anything else about that lunch, except that since that day I held a special spot in my heart for Justice Scalia, the human being and the man of faith. A discussion of his legal legacy and service to our country should be left for another day. This is hardly the time to engage in it. I just thought that it is important to remember him today as a multidimensional man

with a big heart and mind, and a very deep faith. We at KARAMAH pray that Justice Scalia rests in peace and that his family finds solace in his full and rich life.

Dr. Azizah al-Hibri, KARAMAH Founder



In the photo, Dr. Azizah al-Hibri, Dr. Asifa Quraishi, and Judge Rosemarie Annuziata standing alongside Justice Antonin Scalia at “the very first event for Muslims in the Supreme Court.”