

A Day's Visit to the Mazor

Excerpted, by permission, from *Sixteen Seasons: Stories from a Missionary Family in Tajikistan*, by David James (William Carey Library, 2011)

We wound our way towards the famous Muslim saint's *mazor*, his resting place. The landscaping was superb as the caretakers had harnessed the delta of diverging natural springs among the ancient trees and channeled them to water new rows of sapling pines planted neatly between the paths and streams. But I had to wonder if the young trees would get enough sunlight beneath these giants.

Climbing some broad brick steps, we stood together staring at Mazori Sulton Uvais. The great Uvais' bones were housed in this quaint brick building. I immediately began admiring the mazor's beautiful hand-carved wooden windows.

A golden, crescent-mooned dome rested above the entrance. A young mullah, dressed traditionally with a *toki* skull cap and long *joma* coat, sat on a bench, hands outstretched, palms heavenward waiting to receive Allah's blessing as he led a group of pilgrims in prayer. We stopped our chattering and listened to the Arabic mantra. I knew none of our party understood. We stared up at the sycamore trees towering above the dome as we listened to the water rhythms gurgling from the spring. In the low place beside the mazor, pilgrims were gathered along the spring's banks engaged in the rites surrounding the holy water.

In the absence of a golden scoop with a diamond-studded handle, the pilgrims passed along a sun-faded pinkish plastic ladle, sipping the clear water as they prayed along the bank.

Women drank down in the stream beside the men. This would be the closest they would come to the holy bones. Many filled RC Cola bottles with holy water in order to bring home to neighbors or drink themselves later on. Perhaps they hoped the water would battle against a lingering illness.

Though I didn't understand much of what I was seeing, it was clear to me that deep desires were visibly, often with manifest desperation, bubbling up all along the bank. ...

I looked down at Alisher as he knelt beside the spring drinking from the scoop. I noticed no evidence of internal spiritual tension in his expression. Did he not understand

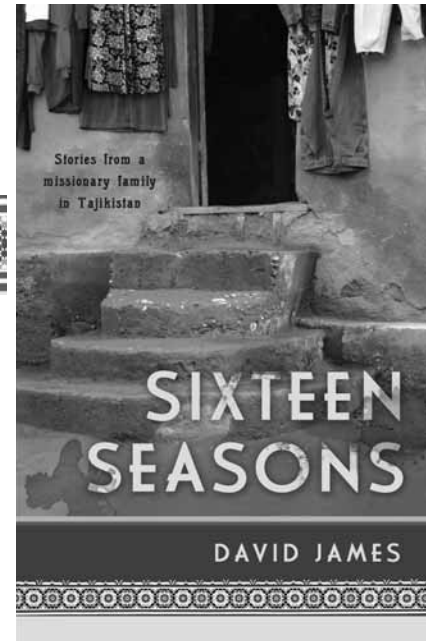
the implications? Was he an exceptionally adept syncretist? Perhaps he was not as serious about the gospel as he had let on. He had never said he believed in Christ but he had been so interested that sometimes I wondered if he was a secret believer. Was he drinking defensively, functionally, or ritualistically? ...

I purchased a copy of the mazor's little white booklet containing the legends about Sulton Uvais. I would spend the next couple weeks of my language lessons pouring over the legends. With the guidance of my perpetually even-keeled language coach, Safar, helping me wade through the literary Tajik and frequent jaunts into mysterious Arabic, I would try to piece together the stories surrounding this place.

I found nothing about Uvais being a sultan. It must be more of an honorary title since he was such a devoted Muslim hermit. It is said that because the Prophet Mohammed lost all his teeth in wars, that Uvais reverently broke out all of his own teeth. Another time, he went and drew water for his blind mother, only to find her asleep when he returned, so he stood next to her holding the water all through the watches of the night until his hands froze to the pitcher. He was ready with the ice water when his mother woke up. I think that story is supposed to be inspiring or convicting or something, but I'm not sure. ...

The other legends in the booklet speak a great deal about fear, slavery to Allah, intense awareness of impending death as close as the beating veins in one's own neck, and the great merit found in living the strict eremitic life. There is precious little of love and relationship and nothing of founded, unbounded grace....

Trying their best to renegotiate their fate, a few pilgrims near the spring were down to their elbows in water attempting to gather holy pebbles. Perhaps they were



hoping to overcome infertility or disease. Perhaps the gathering of real pebbles could somehow bring hope as a physical embodiment of their good works. The eternal scale of judgment is such a powerful metaphor in the Tajik mind. Tajiks believe your life can be represented by that scale. Your good works, like these pebbles, are placed on one side, your evil works on the other. You wait until the end to see which way your life scale will tip, determining your eternal destiny or severity of purgatory.

Soon everyone in our group was finished and we decided it was time for lunch. ...

Our taxi driver found a deep pool in the spring channel running beside our cot. He placed our watermelon there in the cool water. It bobbed beside two other nice melons belonging to fellow pilgrims. I envied the melons and their swim as they bumped and rolled in the pool, their mottled rinds of such healthy green hues, joyfully floating on the clear waters in the dappled shade. It amazes me how a few melons, sunlight, shade, and a spring-fed pool can put the world's best art to shame....

Tajikistan's simplicity has been a balm to my old and infirm fascination. It has revived my ability to wonder, which has been an incredible gift because I feel that this lack of attention, reflection, and therefore wonder is also a struggle in my spiritual walk with God. I find myself drawn repeatedly to Ephesians 3:18-19 with a hunger to awaken to the true dimensions of Christ's love. How wide, how deep! I'm reminded of Jesus' injunction to become like children. Surely our appreciation and capacity for wonder, a wonder we so often abundantly see in children, is something that God desires to revive and sanctify in us since we are created to worship Him. Not simply to believe, but to delight. It is quite difficult for worship to happen with a dead or distracted sense of wonder. I am so thankful for Tajikistan and how it has revived in me the ability to take joy in watermelons. I have been reminded that they are miraculous. I think a long time ago I used to know that....

As we waited for the tea leaves to settle, a shriveled old man hobbled up. Instantly our taxi driver jumped up and helped the man shake his way to a comfortable position up onto the edge of our cot. He looked too weak to try to scoot to a place of honor along the backside, so no one suggested it. Tajikistan is not about activity. There are no to-do lists, but there are plenty of relationships. And the old stranger, welcomed instantly among us as we chatted, was indeed a beautiful thing.

He never spoke and he nodded off at least once, but he seemed happy and proud when I snapped his picture. It would not be ridiculous to think that perhaps this might be one of maybe just a couple of times in his life that he

had his picture taken. He looked like the stereotypical Tajik elder; a round *toki* skull cap sitting atop his ancient shriveled face and a long grey beard hanging down onto his flowing, red-striped *joma* coat. The old man loved our watermelon, which, fortunately for him, was soft enough to eat without the help of many teeth. As we sipped our tea together, I looked at him and wondered if he was alone in the world, sort of wandering around the mazor grounds, eating from the pilgrims' bounty....

Soon the tabak was empty and the strips of roast eaten. The old man led us in enjoying more slices of our spring-cooled watermelon. I was hoping this Tajik elder would be a fount of poetry and traditional stories. Often his generation is the last great source of oral tradition, the remnant displaying the incredible powers of human memorization. The Soviet Union ushered in new times, and it is increasingly difficult to find men of the old ways.

Tajikistan still displays the evidence of an oral culture. They still have the traditional contests in poetry memorization. I heard an example of this in the famous story of how a poor village boy with a great mind is challenged to one such contest by a boy from the great schools in the city. The rules are simple. Whatever letter the last line of the quoted poem ends with, the other person must search his memory to find a poem that begins with that letter. The contest goes on and on until one of the duelers cannot think of a poem beginning with that letter, or a new one of that letter if the letter has been previously used. In the story, of course, the village boy shockingly wins.

To see the way the present generation of Tajiks' eyes sparkle when they tell such stories of dueling poets reveals deep veneration. As long as there is such esteem, the past is not totally gone, but it is an appreciation largely void of imitation. Young Tajiks marvel at the storehouse of their grandfather's knowledge, but they wonder more intensely at television, music, and to a lesser extent books.

It has been interesting to see the last stand of an oral culture. Sometimes as illiteracy rates, especially in the villages, increase, or when I on occasion meet a Soviet-educated father who can read sitting beside his children who cannot, I wonder if perhaps pockets of oral culture will remain.

But as electricity lines reach ever further out into the countryside, I think even if illiteracy rates rise, traditional Tajik oral culture is gone. Not that I even remotely think that literacy is a bad thing. Absolutely not! It is an incredible gift. But while holding a deep, unshakeable appreciation for literacy, I believe it is still possible to appreciate the aspects of beauty in an oral culture. It is a culture steadily drifting away before us like the dozing old man beside me, the visible manifestation of his dying kind.^f