When I was first asked to talk about my spiritual growth at Macalester, I thought “Sure, why not? How hard could that be?” Of course, the voice in my head did a complete one-eighty when I actually sat down to write what I was going to say, until I sat down and reflected upon everything I have experienced so far during my four and a half semesters here at Macalester and had to decide which of them had led to my spiritual growth. To be able to come with an answer to that, I would have to be able to tell you where my spirituality ended and where the rest of me began.

Is that even possible?

The short, simple answer to that, I think, is no. Religion is more than a set of beliefs and traditions, it is also a set of instructions regarding living our everyday lives. So, with religion so intricately intertwined with our entire lives, I believe that anything that helps us become better people in general is something that helps us grow spiritually.

I think my spiritual growth began the moment I boarded a plane and left my giant, sprawling seaside city of Karachi behind. Islam places an enormous amount of importance on gaining knowledge. It beseeches Muslims to go to the very corners of the world in search of it. And so, as my city fell behind, lost beneath the clouds, I had made my first step. This was my jihad, my struggle, my fight against the darkness of ignorance. And I continue to fight, to struggle, every day that I am at Macalester, pushed to my limits by my professors and my peers, I fight every day that I put on my lab coat and do research with my professor and every time I read something or see something or hear something that lights another bulb at the back of my head. Is this not spiritual growth?

Of course, academia is only one aspect of knowledge. I think I have learnt more about the world by having conversations with my friends and acquaintances, often at times when I should actually be working on a paper or something. The Quran says: “O mankind! We have created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another.” This is one of my favourite verses and I think Macalester’s mission embodies it well. There are few places where I could eat breakfast with someone from China, grab lunch with someone from Germany and have dinner with someone from Palestine. Before Macalester, I had never actually had a face-to-face conversation with an Indian before, and although I had not really been brought up to share the feeling on animosity towards Indians that many fellow Pakistanis harbour, and although I was well-informed enough to know how similar Indians and Pakistanis are, to actually experience that similarity was still something of a shock. Now, more than ever before, I am more likely to speak out against ignorant comments that might be made against Indians back at home. Is this not spiritual growth?

Before Macalester, I had never seen a Jewish person before either, and not really talked to a Christian before about Christianity. I remember this one time, back during my first semester here, it was late at night and, as always, I had a huge assignment I should have been working on. Instead, I was sitting on the floor of the Turck 4 lounge, with a friend who was Christian and a friend who was Jewish. We sat in a triangle, with each of its sides representing one of
the Abrahamic faiths, swapping stories from our scriptures. Even though I had read about this before, to hear that Da’ud was David and Musa was Moses and Isa was Jesus and that all our scriptures had very similar stories for them was still a bit of a revelation for me. The idea that God and Adonai and Allah are all the same, is very powerful idea. One less person mulling over petty difference is one more person batting for peace. Is that not spiritual growth?

That is not to say that I haven’t grown spiritually in a more literal sense. Being raised in a Muslim country meant that I was surrounded by the call to prayer five times a day, that I had parents who would nag me until I finally went and prayed, and that there were people around me with Allah in their hearts and on their lips as they went about their everyday lives. Adjusting to Macalester was, therefore, a challenge. But, as Islam puts it, challenges are only character-building trials to be overcome. There have been days when, without the call to prayer or parents who nag, I have gone to bed miserable because of all the prayers that slipped my mind. There will probably be more days like that. There are days when I feel completely severed spiritually. But then, there are days when I don’t miss a single prayer, or when I fast just because I want to, or when the first thing that floods me when I wake up in the morning is gratitude for everything I have been given and I know that I am rising to the challenge and that Macalester is a means of helping me to get to a higher level of spirituality.