# What is ulfa (familiarity)? And what are its negative effects?

The word ulfa means familiar intercourse, familiarity, friendship. But what is meant in the question has a far broader and more comprehensive meaning than the bare translation of the word conveys.

Humanity's relationship to things and events, the meanings and conclusions drawn by them from such relationship, the actions and reactions that are aroused by these conclusions within their conscience, and the changes in their actions and attitudes as a result of all these, are a chain of matters that keep their souls alert, active, sensitive and vigorous.

The admiration humanity feel for the splendor and attraction of the creation, the curiosity and wonder they feel about the precise operation and order of the universe, the gains they make from the things they discover, the urge to acquire more and more, and the intellectual capacity and the organized way of their thinking, lead them to be mentally and spiritually sensitive, alert, active for and preoccupied with all events.

By contrast, if they do not perceive the exciting beauties and varieties of things and events around them, but go on living unaware of the harmonious combinations working in the universe, inattentive and indifferent to everything around them; if they do not seek for the cause and effect and wisdom behind all things and events; and also, if they do not discover their inner world and soul—this shows insensitivity, negligence and ignorance, and spiritual enervation. Neither the mysterious book of the universe nor the opening out before their gaze of its signs, leaf by leaf, teaches him anything. And how many signs in the heavens and the earth do they pass by? Yet they turn (their faces) away from them! (Yusuf 12:105). In spite of exposure to falls and rises, to such convincing illustrations in nature and history, how few people really benefit from them!

For those who are aware of what is going on around them, their curiosity and wonder at the creation are like setting forth on an endless sea, in each stage of which they acquire the golden keys to the mysterious palaces of the universe. As they advance with pure heart, elevated feelings, composed mind and soul ready to receive inspirations, and as they feed their soul with what they gather from the whole creation, their intellectual world turns to a garden of Paradise and yields its fruits.

Those who do not acquire such an understanding cannot take themselves out of the circle of familiarity and keep complaining about the monotony of things and events. According to such people, everything is chaos, dark and meaningless. . . . Even if they see all the signs, they will not believe in them. . . (A'raf 7:146). Their minds are chained, their souls yoked, and their hearts are sealed, so they understand not (there are many verses in the Qur'an ending this way). Such people cannot be expected to do any good or produce anything useful. It is impossible to hope for something from them in this mood.

There is another sort of familiarity which happens after one has fully known and realized something or supposed that one has, though, in reality, one has not. This is what the question was getting at. After having known, believed, acquired or experienced a little, the changing conditions and the renewed beauties should result in new dimensions and greater profundity. To lose one's interest, alertness and sensitivity and to no longer draw lessons or conclusions, is a kind of fall or deviation, of decay and death, in one's feelings.

If those who have fallen into such a situation do not waken immediately and run (or are not led to run) to appreciate again the delicacy, subtlety of thought and wisdom in things; if they do not open their ears, listen to, and understand, the Divine Messages, they are destined to become barren and perish. Therefore, the Creator of the universe has sent many and various people and given lessons and warnings by them. By these sincere, reliable, eloquent, and infallible guides, the Almighty reiterates His Eternal Messages and thus brings clarity to the minds, strength to the hearts, and peace to the souls. Moreover, He always awakens consciences against that to which they may get habituated, and urges people to review all the tableaux He presents to their understanding.

God reiterates many times the creation of humanity, the dispersal of humankind over the farthest corners of the world, their union and happiness with their mates, the grandeur and magnificence in the creation of the world and heavens, the variations in languages and colors, the alternations of day and night, and the blessings, fertility and prosperity that come with climatic activities such as thunderstorms, lightning and rain, in most powerful and varied words. God never leaves any room for "becoming habituated" for over familiarity—at least, not for those of His servants who know, reflect, reason, and understand.

Among His signs is this, that He created you from dust and then— Behold, you are men scattered (far and wide)! And among His signs is this that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that you may dwell in tranquility with them, and He has placed love and mercy between your (hearts): In that are signs for those who reflect. And among his signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the variations in your languages and your colors. In that are signs for those who know. And among His signs is the sleep that you take by night and by day, and the quest that you (make for livelihood) out of His bounty. In that are signs for those who hearken. And among His signs, He shows you the lightning, by way both of fear and of hope, and He sends down rain from the sky and with it gives life to the earth after it is dead. In that are signs for those who are wise. (Rum 30:20 4)

Like the above, many Qur'anic verses draw our attention to the extraordinary wonders and miracles that a great number of human beings pass by each day without taking lessons from them. Our situation may be likened to that of a fish that lives in the water but does not know what water is nor how valuable it is for itself.

Another form of ulfa, over familiarity is that staleness in one's thinking and mentality that affects one's actions and worship. This is the death of one's love ('ishq), ecstasy (wajd), and enthusiasm. One who falls into such a state loses the love and excitement for worship, the sense of responsibility, the aversion to sins, and the liking for repentance and lamenting sins. From then on, it is almost impossible to turn that person into his former good state. It requires very pure and sincere persons to remind and help that person to look to himself, so that he can evaluate his situation and heed the warnings and the people who give those warnings.

Each and every voice and breath that comes to humankind to establish a new spirit has always conveyed the same message: To become habituated, dull, stale, to grow old and become corpse like is inevitable for some people at some time, but it is never impossible to reform, as long as they are respectful to those who must use a sharp instrument to cure their sickness:

Has not the time arrived for the believers that their hearts in all humility should engage in the remembrance of God and of the Truth which has been revealed, and that they should not become like those to whom was given the Book aforetime, but long ages passed over them and their hearts grew hard? For many among them are rebellious and transgressors. (Hadid 57:16)

In sum, ulfa, staleness and over familiarity, is a great disaster which afflicts human beings, and has in fact afflicted many. The afflicted person is unaware of the happenings around him, blind to the beauties in the great book of the universe, and deaf to the tongues which speak of the truth. That is why he is shallow and inadequate in his faith, without any love and ecstasy in his worship, and unbalanced, unjust and erring in his social relations. His rescue from such a situation depends on a powerful hand stretched out to help him and make him see and hear again. For this reason, such a person should be made to reflect and meditate on death and the Hereafter, to visit many charity and service institutions, to take part in some social and religious service, to study and review the glorious pages of the history of Islam and thus look up to the heroes of Islam, to meet with sincere, well versed, people full of Islamic love, ecstasy, and zeal. In this way, the opportunities and conditions should be prepared to reform and renew that person. There are many more points to make on this subject, but we have had time only to review some of them in the hope, and with the prayer, that God, the All Mighty, in Whose hands are the keys to all hearts, may remove ulfa from ours.