

# HUFFPOST RELIGION

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## **On Greatness and the Greatest**

*By Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf*

Greatness is the theme of the hour.

We in America were great, are great, or will be great again—so we are assured during this political season. How fitting it is, then, for us to memorialize at this time one whose claim to be the greatest so many honor, and now most especially at his passing: Muhammad Ali. Ali reviews the case for his greatness in several moving Youtube videos recently uploaded for all of us to watch. These are recordings of speeches he gave from younger days. Here is a sampling of reflections he gave in response to a question put him on how good he was: “I can’t say how good I am and no true Muslim will brag or even take a chance on saying he’s good.... It’s up to Allah, God, to be the judge.” Perhaps the same is true of greatness, in Ali’s mature judgment.

But we who remember Ali may well reach for words like good and great to describe him. No one who listens to Ali speak from his faith can fail to be moved by him. He is charming, witty, extremely intelligent, and disarmingly sincere almost in the way of a child. How many of us know that in later years he coauthored with his daughter, Hana Yasmeeen Ali, a whimsical autobiography entitled *The Soul of a Butterfly*? It’s very believable when Hana suggests in an online interview with *Belief.net* that she gets her “poet’s soul” from her dad.

Ali was a poet. That’s how to hear the seeming braggadocio over his boxing triumphs. But if so many of us remember him so appreciatively now, it is because he was so much more. He was a symbol of America at its best. He was the soul of America in struggle with itself—over civil rights, over the Vietnam War. He waged the battle for the dignity of black America and for the integrity of any young American back in the 1960s who repudiated that war on conscientious grounds. Many a baby-boomer remembers those ringing words he spoke about the Vietnamese people, that backhandedly implicated the true enemy right here at home: “Shoot them for what? They never called me nigger, they never lynched me, they didn’t put no dogs on me....Shoot them for what? How can I shoot them poor people. Just take me to jail.” The words are prophetic. In time we stopped the shooting in Vietnam, and outlawed racism at home. As a wry adage attributed to Winston Churchill has it, Americans will always do the right thing after they’ve tried everything else.

In his stand for civil rights and against the Vietnam War, Ali was very close to Martin Luther King, Jr. Like King, he was on what history judges the winning side, or let us say, the side of

greatness. Ali was willing to lose his boxing titles over his stance against the Vietnam War. There's an integrity we might all try to emulate. America became greater when it understood the mistake it made in Vietnam and undertook to correct it—to the point that today Vietnam is one of our major allies and a major fan of all things American. America became greater when, thanks to the likes of Ali and King, LBJ pushed to enact legislation for civil rights. So there is Ali's greatness in the greatness he helped our country achieve.

For one whose work was so wed to the body, he was surprisingly detached from it. Like Pope John Paul II, who also suffered from Parkinson's disease, he did not hide the frailty that fell to him in older age. In that way he became a role model for disabled folk as much as for aspiring athletes. Like the faithful of many religions—all of which he endorsed—he took the body as a passing casement for the soul. “We're just trustees,” he muses in one of the speeches Youtube preserves for us, “we don't own anything,” not even our bodies.

Our finest tribute to the memory of Muhammad Ali is for us to continue to make America great in the way that he did—by being true to what is right, by speaking truth to power, by being the best of who we are. America's greatness lies in its ability to appeal to our deepest sense of righteousness and justice and fair play.

Muhammad Ali died on the cusp of Ramadan. He died in sight of the holiest time of the Muslim year. That surely bodes well for him. He worried in that same speech over the next life. “The most important thing about life is what's going to happen to you when you die,” he reflected. “When I die, if there's a heaven, I want to see it.” We think he needn't have worried. He confessed to an audience of admirers that his retirement was for one thing chiefly—to get ready to meet God. And so he has done. Let us gather our thoughts together on behalf of Muhammad Ali:

We now present you to God, we usher you, we send you onto God with our love and our prayers and our intercession for God to hear our prayers and yours—and to reward you with his pleasure and his paradise. Let it be so.