

I am an American Muslim Woman
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By
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I am an American Muslim Woman. These words are very powerful for me. Words I would never have said out loud-yet unquestionably that is who I am. Why would this be so difficult you ask? Would you have difficulty saying that you were an American Christian or Jewish Woman? Probably not, yet my identification as a first generation American Muslim Woman has been a struggle. The events of September 11th have caused more concern--but the need to share and disperse misunderstandings is greater.

I didn't realize I was different from other four-year-olds growing up in New Jersey until the kids in my nursery school teased me with whooping noises (similar to the 1960's television version of American Indians). All of a sudden, I realized I was not like the other children.

Later, in sixth grade, an event occurred that altered how I thought of myself. It was 1971. My cousins had just immigrated from India. Before that, I was the only non-white, non-black, non-Christian, non-Jewish student in school. One of my cousins was in the same grade. Finally, someone like me.

It was the month of Ramadan. My cousin's teacher wanted to know why he wasn't eating. He tried to explain the Islamic fasting month to his teacher. However, his teacher was unsatisfied and came to my classroom. He bent over me and demanded to know, "Why isn't your cousin eating?" I tried to explain Ramadan as best as a 12-year-old could at the same time wishing my cousin didn't go to my school and hoping I would disappear. It was at that moment that a sentence was handed down to me. A sentence I would carry for many years. A sentence that said, *I Am Different.*

I told my parents what had happened, and my dad met with the principal and the teachers. Logically, I said, “My dad took care of them!” However, 24 years later, I realized what my sentence cost me. It cost me my silence and my identity.

From then on, I did whatever I could to blend in. However, my name and my skin color would always give me away. I would try to be the best student, the one the teachers would like. I was a friend to all, trying to please everyone. I remember someone telling me they didn’t see me as being different. I felt I had succeeded.

I would open myself to people only when I could trust them- only when I felt it was safe to disclose that I was a Muslim, and my faith was different from theirs. I didn’t realize that this barrier kept people at a distance from me until a trusting colleague told me she was *surprised* that I was a lot of fun to be with. I thought about her statement. Why was she surprised? Of course, it’s fun to be around me. Why hadn’t she seen it before now? I then saw the cost of my silent barrier. The cost of hiding that I’m different. The cost of withholding my self-expression.

That awareness happened six years ago. Since then, I have led interfaith prayer services and given talks to schools, churches, and hospitals. I have been the emcee for the annual Ramadan Eid dinners where Muslims and non-Muslims celebrate the ending of the Muslim holy days. The chaplains at Saint Joseph Health Center have called on me to help them in their ministry as Muslim women were dying in the Emergency Room. Muslim women I never knew when they were conscious, but spiritually supporting them, their families, and the hospital staff during the last minutes of their lives. All of these incidents would never have occurred if I had not seen the cost of my sentence. My sentence that I was *gloriously* different. So now another life altering moment-September 11, 2001. Oh, how I prayed, like many American Muslims, do not let these people be Muslims. Nevertheless, they called themselves Muslims. I was out of town on a business trip. My fear was for my children. Will people treat them with malice? Painfully, I found out that both my older boys had experienced negative comments. Can you imagine a 14 -year-old telling another 14-year-old he was responsible for the terrorists’ attacks? I initially became that sixth grader-- 30 years ago. I was afraid and wanted to hide. However, there has been so much negative information about Muslims and Islam, I knew I

couldn't be silent. I had to speak out and let others know the truth. Thank God, for people who want to know the truth.

Recently, I've been giving presentations on, *The Truth about Islam-Dispelling the Myths*. I've also been on a radio talk show, local television news, and continue to speak to various groups about my faith. The silent moderate Muslim community can no longer be silent. We have to share ourselves with others, so our children won't face discrimination and racism. I cannot say I have lost my inhibitions, and fears. They are all there, but what is stronger is my identity of who I am and what I can contribute as someone who is different. Someone who is an ***American Muslim Woman***.

“I am interested in creating an environment where people can learn from each other in a way that doesn't make one person right and the other wrong. My hope is that we can create a place where fear and hatred will be replaced by friendship and peace.” *Mahnaz Shabbir*