Growing up Muslim in America

MY LIFE AFTER 9/11

TINY beads ran down my face and formed a pool of sweat on my chin. I was soaked; my shirt clung to me. This was, I reasoned, a negligible price to pay for my triumph against the opposing kickball team. As the bell rang I, along with the other fourth-graders, filed back into class, but the elation we felt from the playground victory was soon to be shattered. Well, for my classmates, anyway.

As we walked in, our teacher, Mr Stansu, asked if we knew anything about the World Trade Centre in New York. In a roomful of nine-year-old Canadians, the aggregate of our understanding of an iconic American structure would barely form a couple of sentences, but when Mr Stansu told us that hijacked airplanes had crashed into the towers, our naïveté ended.

To be honest, a lot of what I heard that morning didn't quite register. I had emigrated from Saudi Arabia just two years before, and I was still struggling with English. Even though I had attended English as a Second Language classes for a couple years, everything from English letters to the direction in which you read a text was distinct from the Urdu and Arabic languages I spoke.

Two weeks after 9/11, my dad got a new job and our family moved to a small suburb in Upstate New York where the terror attacks had a profound impact on the students in my tiny elementary school. Unlike me, they knew what the World Trade Centre was and understood the enormity of the devastation. Muslim radicals had instigated the attacks.

Most of the kids in my class associated Islam with evil. They didn't know any better; most of what they were being fed by their friends and family polarised them, and so it was natural tc share those feelings.

In Toronto, my little section of town was littered with Jamaicans, Indians, Croatians, Nigerians and others. The diversity made it easy to mesh in because everyone was struggling and everyone was equally an outsider. Plus, there was a large Desi population (people from South Asian countries such as India, Pakistan and Bangladesh). No one I

ever interacted with gave me the impression that they had aligned Islam with malice.

My new town was the polar opposite. Nine out of every 10 people were white. During my first few months living there, I felt an anti-Islam sentiment, but I didn't initially recognise it. For instance, the kids in class ostracised a Muslim classmate, but I attributed their rejection of him to his reclusive nature. Even I avoided him at times.

When people inquired about my faith, I'd tell them that I had never been in a church, only a mosque. The average nine-year-old responded with absurd facial expressions and discomfort, but I didn't recognise it as anti-Islam, either.

Other classmates sometimes mocked Islam, but I believed their motives weren't entirely malicious; these were the same kids who rattled off names like "fatty" or "loser," and so I figured it was typical kid behaviour.

To avoid their animosity, I'd tell them I was Christian, not Muslim, but I couldn't hide the truth for long; my mom is Muslim and is rarely seen in public without a hijab on. My classmates made the connection and the mockery resumed.

By the middle of fourth grade, I pieced together the tragedy, my peers' reactions to my faith, and understood why those around me criticised Islam.

More than four years later, the razzing continued. Before my high school freshman year, football double sessions started in mid-August, as did Ramadan, the Islamic month of fasting during daylight hours. Because I couldn't eat or drink when the sun was up, I'd be lacking that "edge," that hunger to crush the other player.

After one bad play, my coach pulled me aside and barked at me: "I need you to get angry; if you want to start, you need to be angry."

I couldn't be angry; I had to maintain my cool; Ramadan is a month of modesty and self-control, I explained.

"I don't care — you know what the problem with you is? You're just happy, like every other immigrant. You blew stuff up and now you're sitting in this country all content because you ruined it for the rest of us. Do that to the other team. That's what I need you to do."

That sent me into uncontrollable laughter. Other players started laughing too, and this only amplified my frenzy like a feedback loop gone terribly wrong. Death and destruction covered the coach's face, and he soon had me running laps as punishment.

While I was running, I realised how absurd his mini pump-up speech was. He literally thought that Muslims, as a holistic group of people, condoned the terrorist attacks of 9/11. It didn't anger me that he felt that way because I realised a lot of his misconceptions were due to ignorance as opposed to flat-out disdain. Even my close friends subconsciously associated Islam with terrorism when in fact Islam condemns violence.

People always talk about change and making progress, but no one ever steps up to the plate. Everyone wants to fix human relations, but no one truly wants to do anything about it. You'd have to go out of your way and comfort zone, two things people aren't willing to do, to accomplish anything. Just like a New Year's resolution, you might adhere to a new mindset for a couple of days before you relapse into your old habits and preconceived notions. It's just too much of a chore, which is why I'm so skeptical of all those interracial or interfaith dialogues. They seem so phony, and it's too much effort to participate.

It's been a decade since 9/11. I don't hear the mimicries or the yells. No one is telling me to blow up anyone else anymore, and I haven't felt excluded. But this isn't all about my experience; plenty of other Muslims still face issues. Whether it's always "qualifying" for random security checks at airports or just plain-old hateful speech, it's still there.

And no amount of humour can mask that.

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