



Two windows; photo, Cetta Kenney

Voices of Youth

To Share Our Faith

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It was the first morning of Eid when I received a phone call from my uncle. My Palestinian neighbor Nariman had just cooked up some blueberry banana pancakes and I was about to dig in when the phone rang. Expecting a jovial Eid Mubarak, followed by the requisite come visit us in Minneapolis, I answered the call in high spirits. About 45 minutes later, as Nariman and the rest of the breakfasters started clearing the table, I continued to sit with my fork poised over the pancakes, which by now had absorbed the last sweat of maple syrup. Aside from holiday niceties, my uncle had called to inform me that my twenty-three year old cousin, Sadaf, had made an announcement to the family: she had been saved. She had converted to Christianity.

My reaction to this news was not what my uncle had expected. Clearly distraught, angry and hurt, he could not understand why I would

reply with, "I hope her decision helps her get closer to God and find peace." Little did I know, my words were a slap in the face for a man who had left his home thirty years ago to make a good life in the United States, a place where he would eventually learn to truly be a man, a husband, a father, and a Muslim. As a Chicago native, born and raised, I could only see a glimmer of what that journey must have meant for him,

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and as a Muslim, I could not understand why my words shocked him.

Sadaf, orphaned at the age of eight, was raised by my uncle as a daughter in the suburbs of Minneapolis along with four of her siblings. My family is originally from Pakistan, and our childhood resonates with a series of mantras our uncle tried to instill in us; home videos abound with young girls in rainbow colored outfits and thick curly hair claiming: we are the baby tigers and we will only marry someone who is Muslim. Many years have passed since these innocent days caught by oversized handy-cams, and the mantra has been relegated to an archaic corner.

On the telephone, I could hear the heaviness in my uncle's voice, the stiffening of his shoulders. I could sense the loss he felt, for both my cousin choosing to leave Islam and also for the innocence of those days, when he had hoped that he was doing and saying all the right things. He told me that he would never speak to her again, and that my young cousin was now considered an apostate. He felt through this decision she had turned her back on our family, and had separated herself from the traditions, and beliefs with which she had been raised. The whole family is against her now, he told me, and no one wants to speak to her. In response, I offered a series of well intentioned platitudes from a young girl in an American inflection which barely scratched the surface of his hurt. But my insistence grew with his anger, and my voice grew closer to the edge, in a desperate attempt to relay my idea of Islam, my belief in God's mercy and the human ability to make choices,

my conviction in the Islamic concept of unity, there is no God but God.

My battle cry became, "Allah is most merciful, *bismillah hir rahmanir raheem*." The question became, if Allah is most merciful, most compassionate, and these are the words Muslims acknowledge before beginning any task, how then can we deny Allah's mercy?" How can we say a member of our own family is an apostate, never to be spoken to again?

There was a bit of irony, though, as I said these words to my uncle. Through the conversation, I realized that everyone in my family had some kind of relationship with Sadaf, everyone but me. I suddenly felt guilty that I had not spoken to Sadaf in nearly ten years, but I had been busy in my own life, and to be quite honest, I never imagined that we shared much more than a surname.

But this, I decided this was not acceptable. If I was claiming that my religion was one of mercy, and compassion, then I could not be one to let a family member be left alone because of a difference in faith. This is not what I understand of family. There is an Arabic word which I have grown fond of over the years, *samaha*, incidentally similar to the name of my uncle's daughter, Samiha. The essence of *samaha* is "an easygoing attitude toward life and others that does not allow for harshness, intolerance, or fanaticism." I remind myself of this word when I find my faith fitting too nicely in a box, times when I start to become too comfortable. In this case, my comfort was not in the

cushion of my faith, but in my ignorance of Sadaf's story. If I did not contact her, she would be alone, and would be left with no choice but to believe that Muslims did not live up to Allah's mercy, made no use of Allah's compassion, and denied the grace of divine will. As a Muslim, I could not allow for this, and as a fellow human being, I could not deny someone's story.

Our conversation lasted over two hours, late on a Wednesday night, to the early hours of the morning. Sadaf told me how she was saved early in the morning, around 5.30am, on April 21st, after waking from a terrifying dream. She told me of her quest for peace, her years living in the houses of various family members, being the rebellious middle child. She told me about the story of Job, how deeply it had touched her, knowing that he lost everything and people told him to renounce God, yet he remained steadfast in his belief. She told me of her love for God, her newfound respect for her body as the creation of God. We talked about how we had both searched for truth when we were seventeen years old, and where our roads have led us. She explained to me the nature of her church services at Calgary Baptist, and the bible studies which help her understand the nature of God, helping her understand her own nature. She stressed to me the love in Christianity,

the idea that before anything is asked of us, before we perform any duties, we are loved by God, that this love is unconditional. She explained to me what it means to evangelize, and bring the good news. In turn, I expressed my ideas of human choice, the infinite roads to our higher self, and the concept of unity in all the differences in our faiths, colors, and languages. Through the joy and difficulty of speaking to my cousin, after all these years, I grew a deeper understanding of a verse in the Qur'an which says:

And among the signs of God is the constitution of the heavens and the earth, and the diversity of your-languages and colors; surely these are signs in that for those who know" (20:22)

The language Sadaf uses to speak of her faith in some ways may be similar to mine, but her faith is vitally different from my own, which in turn is very different from that of my uncle. However, it is Sadaf's sincere conviction in Jesus Christ, and my sincere conviction in Allah, and Muhammad as the last prophet, that gives us the comfort and solace we desire in our lives. My hope is that our shared conviction, in full sincerity and truthfulness, will allow us to desire this solace and comfort for each other.

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