

Faith: Knowing We Can Together Witness a Brighter Tomorrow

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It was growing up as a Muslim-Arab-American in Waverly, a small rural southern town in Tennessee, where I learned one of the key lessons of my lifetime - what it means to live a life of faith. This is where I had the privilege to attend a Catholic School, a Baptist School and a public school; where I left to go spend my summers in the Middle East; and where I leaned on my community with desperation as an 11 year-old girl when my father was diagnosed with Stage 4 Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma. Given a two-percent chance of living, I prayed to God every night as hard as I could that he would make it. Joined by my teachers, my friends, and almost all the Christian churches in town every Wednesday and Sunday evening, my Muslim prayers were answered when Baba survived and beat the odds after qualifying for an experimental stem cell treatment that miraculously worked. For me, it was both faith and science together that helped my father survive his battle with cancer; and it was faith that helped my family keep our sanity as we coped with the mental, physical and emotional rollercoaster. We felt the power that comes with having faith and being surrounded by a diverse religious ecosystem that supported our own even though we were, to our knowledge, the only Muslim family living within 65 miles of Waverly.

Through this pivotal experience, among others, it is from my hometown of Waverly where I also learned the combined importance of faith, choice and secularism. At first glance, these three might seem to contradict one another. To me, they are complimentary. They are very much at the heart of what it means to be an American. *Without secularism*, how else could I have learned to practice my own faith as a Muslim while attending public and Christian schools? *Without choice*, how else could I have learned the importance of respecting every individual's decision regarding which religion they chose to follow or not follow? *Without faith*, how else could I have blindly believed in the impossible when all else seemed lost? And *without the freedom to explore the meaning of my own faith*, how else could I have explored the meaning of Islam? This freedom enabled me to realize that for me, being a practicing Muslim means living a balanced life that seeks truth, justice, peace, internal discipline, equality, moderation, reconciliation and productivity.

I've always felt a sense of belonging in Waverly because I could be my full committed self-surrounded by a loving community. As an Arab-American Muslim girl growing up in the predominantly Christian rural south I realized that faith is in part what enabled me to find this belonging. Sometimes, when I tell people about where I grew up, they seem shocked – as if to suppose that my ethnicity and my faith automatically excluded me from belonging in Waverly, Tennessee. Yes, my family and I witnessed and experienced, in some instances, exclusion and oppression. However, as a young child, I found a way to situate my own faith in my sense of belonging in America and in Waverly. That same faith stays with me today, and it drives me in my everyday actions as a citizen.

Throughout my legal studies, I realized that my faith continued to be grounded in fairness, equality, and justice for all. My faith became part of the foundation for who I am today – as a lawyer, advocate, mother, wife, sister, daughter, peacemaker, and friend. While my faith helps guide my internal moral compass that

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grounds and drives me - at the same time, my faith is not a means with which to impose on someone else's belief system or as a replacement for the law of the land.

Knowing that someone does not have to reciprocate in order for me to be true to my own faith, I am able to practice my faith in the workplace with both people from diverse religious backgrounds just as I did while growing up in Waverly. It is with this approach and attitude that I entered the workforce over a decade ago. Since then I have worked as a law clerk, a lawyer at an international law firm headquartered in Washington DC, a White House Fellow, the Assistant Commissioner for International Affairs for the State of Tennessee, and as a mediator and as an executive in the private sector. While I have faced challenges in each of these positions, I have managed my way forward by relying on my core values system, which includes my full personal commitment to being a practicing Muslim. My faith has taught me to uphold the dignity of every single member of humanity, including my own. I try to honor this commitment by: (i) respecting colleagues regardless of our commonalities and differences; (ii) working on long-term projects that are compliant with my internal moral compass and seek justice; (iii) being an active community member who helps advance a system that supports members of all backgrounds; (iv) realizing my own shortcomings and working on improving on a daily basis; and (v) creating the space and opportunities for people from all walks of life to feel embraced and welcomed.

Having been in a diverse set of work environments, I have found some places to be easier than others with regards to allowing one to be true to their individual practice and faith. I realized that what makes a healthy workplace environment is one that, among other things, (i) encourages individual choice and refrains from passing judgement onto those choices; (ii) genuinely respects multiple interpretations of faith; (iii) invests time in understanding a variety of belief systems; (iv) encourages shared communal curiosity around different religious experiences; and (v) avoids politicizing any one particular faith.

In addition to promoting inclusive work environments, I found it to be equally important to create "ground rules" around how to discuss faith in the workplace. The "how" and "why" one asks certain questions around is just as important in these instances as the "what" question is being asked. From experience, I've noted differences in how clients and employers of different faiths ask me questions about my own faith. Some questions are testing whether or not they can trust me, others genuinely ask me because they are curious and want to learn more. Given this common reality, it is helpful to encourage training around how to create a safe and productive environment for these kinds of encounters so that everyone can benefit equally. Without that, an employer runs the risk of making employees feel ostracized and unwelcomed, particularly those who belong to a faith different from the surrounding majority in that particular place.

Managed and administered correctly, encouraging people to be true to their faith and spiritual following can be an experience that strengthens the communal bond in the workplace setting. When people show up as their true authentic selves, they tend to not only be more committed and productive but happier as well. People want to feel that they belong at work as well. When managers and administrators make workplaces open and honest, it gives all of us space to belong and feel like a full and productive employee.

As a lawyer, in addition to the workplace itself, faith has played an instrumental role in some of the most challenging and difficult cases I have worked on in my lifetime. Knowing that peace cannot exist in a sustainable way without a fundamental cyclical commitment to equality, dignity, justice, truth and reconciliation, these elements are at the core of my work and area supported by what being a practicing Muslim means to me. Without my faith, perhaps I would have given up a long time ago on working towards ending global conflicts, or on believing that the US can mend its racial divides and exist in a non-racialized future by going through an intensive truth and reconciliation process, or on the conviction that

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local decision makers the world-over can reverse unjust decisions and right past wrongs. But because I believe and have seen people change their mind and replace negative norms with positive ones in the name of fairness, justice, and equality, I know that we can witness a brighter tomorrow together.

Thankfully, I am able to speak openly about this in my current work environment and am encouraged to help foster an environment for others to do the same. My hope is that one day people everywhere, including some in the United States, will have this luxury the world-over and are allowed to engage in an enlightened and secure community that supports all peaceful interpretations and expressions of faith.