



“BEING MUSLIM IN AMERICA”
Saturday, May 4, 2019 | St. Joseph Parish, Seattle
Presentation by Nazir Harb Michel

Good morning, thank you for being here, and welcome, welcome to all,

I want to also wish you another kind of greeting you might know: *Peace be with you.*

I remember from my churchgoing days, the warmth, joy and love with which we'd greet each other after the Eucharist: "Peace be with you," I'd say, with my hand extended toward an enthusiastic neighbor and a genuine grin on both our faces.

And then the other person's eyes would meet my gaze and extend her hand too, and return the salutation: "and peace be with you."

And then we'd each repeat these greetings over and over until the music of the choir hushed and it was time to sit again. I'd always wish there was more time to greet everyone in this way - it was my favorite part of mass every Sunday. Even greeting my mom felt more special in that moment.

Afterward, I would think about the people I saw but didn't get the chance to wish peace to in that special way. It lingered with me. But I always felt so good after this small ceremony. It was beautiful to me. I'd sit and continue smiling until some more mundane thought arrived and provoked a grimace or at least another face, another feeling, another way of being and the moment evanesced.

I remember the feeling, like a spiritual electricity charging this placeless part of me that powered a beautiful sixth sense - a sense I can only call 'familiality'. What is familiality? Have you felt it? For me, it is a kind of trust that is suffused with love. A feeling that the people around me are family. We trust each other. We are safe in this place we have made together. We love each other. We are not shaking hands in this greeting, we are momentarily holding hands, holding each other. Like our Lord holding us, sustaining, protecting, enfolding us, and simultaneously emanating warmth and love to us, through us, and creating togetherness. Such a gift! It is not just saying or wishing "peace" in the abstract, but, in that moment, creating it, and suspending - if for a few seconds - that actual state and feeling of peace with another human being. Just because we are both human and there.

...

In high school, 17 years ago, I converted to Islam.

You may have gathered that before then, I was Catholic. Actually, for about a year before that, I wasn't really anything. I might look back now and say I was searching. But that's not how I felt at the time. When I was 12, my mom wanted me and my two younger brothers to learn about Catholicism. She wanted us to learn the faith and start to take the Eucharist. We needed to undergo 'confirmation' and, before that, we'd need to take a class. I remember the first day, before starting class, the teacher wanted to gain a sense of where I was in my faith. She asked me to write down who I thought Jesus was. So I did. I wrote a couple of pages and when she read them sat in front of me, I remember the look of concern that came over her



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face. It seemed I had mentioned everything except Christ’s divinity. She checked with me to see if I just forgot. I told her that wasn’t something I was sure of. She stepped out and a few minutes later the priest, Fr. Jim, entered the room. He sat with me. He was very kind and jovial. I’d never seen him from so up close before. We were usually too late to mass to ever get to the front pews! He scanned what I had written and asked me if I understood that Christ’s divinity was a basic tenet of Catholicism. I told him I wasn’t sure. Knowing my background, that my mother was Catholic and Mexican and my father was Muslim and Lebanese, he asked me if I knew *why* I didn’t want to be Muslim. I told him I did not know. He smiled warmly and with a look of old, hard-earned wisdom he gently advised me to learn about Islam. To read the Quran. To know Muslims. And, then, he promised, if after one year of careful study, I still wanted to be Catholic, he would happily admit me into the class and confirm me.

Weighed down by my own forms of Islamophobia, I took Fr. Jim up on the challenge to study another religion but not Islam. Not yet. At the age of 12 I was too young to watch the news or understand politics. My Islamophobia was fueled by experiences I had with my dad’s family, or rather, didn’t have with them.

In Mexico, where I was born, my mother’s family was a happy and cohesive unit. Growing up, I’d tell my mom I missed Mexico because ‘there, everyday is a party.’ And it felt like that because the family was always together at my abuelitos’ house. It was the homebase. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner, my mom’s 9 brothers and sisters and my many cousins gathered, played music, told stories and jokes, and supported each other. One person’s problem was everyone’s problem. Together, they prayed the rosary daily, and when the little town’s church bells rang, the familia Michel took their de facto designated rows of pews and prayed together in the chapel where my uncle, Padre Alonzo, was the priest. We, including me, were all baptized there. Everyone got married there. Every funeral service was held there.

That, to me, was family. That was my religion.

My father’s family was... different. Now I know that they had left Lebanon, their home for generations, as migrants to the newly independent country of Kuwait in the late 50s. At age 19, in 1976, my dad left Kuwait to study economics in San Antonio at My Lady of the Lake, a Catholic university in Texas. There, he’d meet my mother in a loud discotech, and fall in love at first site. Despite my mother’s rejections, he dropped out of school, illegally crossed the border into Mexico by train and moved to the town my mom worked in - Juarez. He studied Spanish and asked my mom on a date every day for 6 months until one day, finding him camped out at her front door (where he had spent the night) in the morning, she finally relented. My dad knew she was the one. But getting my Abuelo’s blessings for marriage took him nearly two years. They would marry in my uncle Alonzo’s chapel, buy their first house in Juarez, and have their first son - me - before my dad told his parents what he had done. In a scrawling fax, he wrote them a letter in Arabic, telling them how he spent the last 5 years. His father thought that all this time he was studying medicine in America. Needless to say, they were shocked. My grandmother left Kuwait shortly after receiving the letter. She flew to Mexico without telling my father. My mom met my grandma, or *tayta*, in the delivery room of the hospital where she was giving birth to me... while she was giving birth to me. My



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grandma had shoved her way through security and pushed aside the obstetrician to become the person who delivered me out of the womb. She raised me over her head and recited the Islamic call to prayer into my ear - an old Muslim tradition - as a blessing. Then she met my mother. The story would be published in the local newspaper: “Arab Baby Born in Juarez Hospital”.

The Lebanese civil war started in 1975 and didn't end until 1990. Kuwait, where my father's parents had raised their 7 kids, decided to expel its Lebanese inhabitants during that time. But Lebanon was in war and my grandparents could not return. Refugees, my father applied for visas for all of them and all of them were granted visas to come to America. They were saved! They settled in the city of Seattle where my parents would moved us eventually.

My dad's family hadn't planned any of this. In their minds, once the war ended, they would return to Lebanon. Their sojourn in America was to be temporary, limited. Their time away from their aunts and uncles and cousins, their neighbors and friends, their family, mosque, their entire world... was supposed to end and everything was going to be better again.

When we'd visit them in their always-rented, never bought, homes, they were glued to the news. I didn't understand why they were down, gloomy, and so irritable. Why they were in America but only spoke Arabic. Why they seemed to be in hiding rather than integrating with the community. Why they dressed and acted funny. I didn't know. I didn't understand that their hostility to my mom might have been born out of my father's decision to leave them completely out of his life for 5 years. Or that the religious conflict that was part of the impetus for the civil war in Lebanon that destroyed their country, might have been irking them too whenever they'd see my mother at family gatherings.

I remember they tried to teach me and my brother that the sign of the cross was not just a sin but would instigate an automatic rejection at the gates of heaven above which are written the words - in Arabic - “there is no deity but God, and Muhammad is his Messenger”, the Islamic profession of faith. Christians, they swore, would be doomed to eternal hell if they crossed themselves and didn't, or couldn't read those words above the pearly gates. That all intuitively felt wrong to me. How could I embrace a religion that condemned my mother and half of my family? The family with which I felt most at home.

My grandma would try to convince me to persuade my mother to convert. One night, when they knew my dad was working the night shift, my grandparents came to our door and coerced my mother into their car. With no common language to explain what was happening, my mom was scared. They drove to a mosque in Northgate. An Imam (Muslim cleric) was there waiting. My grandparents instructed him to make my mom say the profession of faith and become a Muslim so she could be saved. The Imam recognized the look of distress and on her face and asked to have a moment alone with my mortified mother. He spoke with her in English and told her what her parents in law wanted her to do. He said he could not accept someone's conversion if it was coerced - that violated a teaching directly out of the Quran. So my mom



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asked him to lie for her. To tell them she had uttered the words and was “registered” now. He assured her that no conversion would have taken place because, as the Quran says, there is no compulsion in faith.

My dad’s family scared me. And to me, because of the way they spoke... not about politics or the war in Lebanon, or the financial struggles they faced in America, the cultural isolation, the linguistic marginalization, or the social exclusion they suffered... but seemingly always about or in terms of Islam... I blamed their religion. It was all I could see to explain their behavior.

They lacked the cohesion and love and logic of my mother’s family because they were Muslim. When I was younger, I was sure that there was only one religion in the world - as in, there is only one theology, one story that everyone believed about God and prophets and prayer, etc - and that the differences I perceived were therefore entirely because of the different languages people spoke. Nothing more. But as a young adolescent, having learned more about the existence and nature of different religions... and starting to discover the news... after growing up watching my dad’s family try again and again, to return to Lebanon and then inevitably fail and come back begrudgingly to the United States... I blamed Islam.

A year later, in my freshman history class, I met our high school’s only Arab and only Muslim student. He sat down next to me and introduced himself. He immediately offered up that he was Kuwaiti and when he heard my name he asked me if I was Arab too. I told him I was and he asked me if I was Muslim. I said my father is. Then class started. After class, I asked him if he’d like to volunteer at the local middle school with me. He did and one day, I decided to share with him what I was contemplating at that time. A question that I had asked of several theologies I had explored in books and encyclopedias... I scratched it down on a torn corner of a piece of paper and handed it to him while he was helping someone with their math homework. It read, in my awful handwriting: “what is the meaning of life?”

That was the beginning of a four-year conversation that would soon include two devout protestants and a deeply questioning Catholic-turned-atheist. We met every day, including weekends, and talked and talked and talked. For hours. We read books together. We invited religious leaders of different faiths to meet with us and answer questions. We were by far the coolest kids in high school...

That kid from Kuwait who sat next to me in history class that day, Maitham, would become and remain to this day my closest friend. He would invite me to his home frequently where I’d meet his parents and their family of friends and co-religionists. Their community. Their neighbors. Their cousins and aunts and uncles. They gathered before dawn to chant these beautiful elaborate poetic prayers, veritable epistles to God, welcoming the rising sun as a symbol of hope in the universe - all before school and work. It was so different but also magical and uplifting. They would gather for lunch on weekends and laugh and sing, play Middle Eastern instruments, recite epic rhythmic poetry and tell and retell centuries-old stories that everyone knew by heart. At dinner, they’d take turns hosting the community to pray and eat and sing. Maitham’s father had memorized 20,000 lines of the poetry of Rumi - a great, Muslim scholar of Islam and an enlightened romantic. His poems were, in his words, the interpretation of the Arabic Quran into



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the language and culture of the Persians. Their mosque was warm, welcoming, full of respect for the men and women who attended. Everyone was addressed as Sir, Madam, Doctor, Brother or Sister. They were artists and scholars of science and engineering, literature, history, religion, biochemistry, psychology, language and physics. They were the directors of Microsoft and Boeing, professors, and prolific authors. They ran for city councils and invited the mayor, the police chiefs, and leaders of other faiths to engage in deep discussion and in prayer.

They were happy, cohesive, loving, and logical and they brought me into their fold without hesitation, stint, or lines. They had become my family too. My religion.

Still, I hesitated to embrace what I felt inside me growing, which was a commitment to the Islamic path to God. It wasn't until one day when my dad had to work late and couldn't pick me up from school - and so I walked all the way home. It took an hour. I was carrying my heavy baritone saxophone in hand. It was dark by the time I reached home. I was knackered, breathless and it being Seattle, fairly drenched. I opened the door and the house was dark and quiet. It could hear the raindrops tapping and wrapping against the living room window. There was one light on - my dad's desk lamp and directly beneath it was a brand new green leather-bound Yusuf Ali English interpretation of the Holy Quran with commentary. I remember being out of breath and feeling so confused. My dad was Muslim but not practicing - he drank and smoked and didn't pray. He had his reasons. But I'd never ever seen an English translation of the Quran before. In my years of studying, it didn't occur to me that such a thing could exist. Islam was something I grew up around and lived around with my dad's family but it was always different, other, and scary. I couldn't read Arabic so I couldn't read the Quran and that was that. All that I knew about it came from my agnate relatives' scarring actions and biting words. The parts they had felt it appropriate to share at various junctures.

I picked up that Quran on my dad's desk and took it to my room. I closed the door. I felt this energy coursing through me. My heart was pounding. I was alone but I did not feel alone. A heaviness grew in my shoulders and I sat in my chair but it didn't feel low enough. This inexplicable gravity pulled me into a bowing posture. I sat up eventually and opened the first page of the book. And there it was - the first chapter of the Quran. 7 short lines:

In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful.

I had never heard those words before

Praise be to God, the Cherisher and Sustainer of all the worlds;

All of the worlds? How mysterious. Intriguing. The worlds... Everyone? Not just Muslims?

*Most Gracious, Most
Merciful;*



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Repeated again... the
phrasing comforted
me...

*Master of the Day of
Judgment.*

God would be merciful
on that fateful Day, not
cruel or arbitrary.

*Thee do we worship, and Thine
aid we seek.*

And I heard the Psalm (115):
...”for the glory of Thy grace and
truth do we seek Thine aid, that
thou mayest be known to be a
God keeping covenant; for mercy
and truth are the two pillars of
that covenant.”

*Show us the
straight path,*

We need your
help, are you are
the Guide

*The way of those on whom Thou hast
bestowed Thy Grace, those whose (portion) i
is not wrath, and who go not astray.*

I then read in the commentary:
The path of the Jews and Christians,
the people who came before who
know and have faith, their path of grace

And in that moment I felt that pull again. I prostrated myself, resting my head on the carpeted floor and then and there I felt like I had met God for the first time. I felt an awareness of the enormity of the



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universe and this overwhelming sensation, like a fullness all over - a loving, sweet, funny, comforting, familiar presence all around me.. and I did not feel alone, or scared. Instead, I felt embraced like being held in the happiest sincerest family group hug. I felt peace.

And I knew then that I had become a Muslim. Bowed to the ground in humility, I joined the people who, for fourteen centuries, have whispered their truths into the earth in earnest humble supplication, then sat in silent repose together, shoulder-to-shoulder, rising in unison in celebration of God’s love and mercy, and of truth, of community, of the human family in peace together. Falling to the ground as one, and rising again as one. Every day. Five times a day all over the world, over a billion people, like ocean waves along the shore.

And that feeling... that peace inside me... became my family too. My people, all people. My faith, all faiths. My path. My truth. My religion.

3 long months later, I was a teenager up before sunrise looking in the mirror combing my hair over and over again, straightening my tie knowing later that afternoon my mom would pick me up to take me to the Rotary Club to accept an award and give a short speech. Listening to the oldies on the radio, I wasn’t ready when the music stopped. A plane full of people over New York City had crashed into a skyscraper. All I wanted was for the music to come back on. I was so annoyed. I got on the bus and no one was talking, no yelling or laughing. It was somber. The boisterous bus driver was subdued. The radio was on loudly repeating, detailing the events in New York on that day September 11th, 2001. I remember my feet feeling ice cold and being able to see my breath like smoke hanging in the air.

Everything changed that day. My being Muslim could no longer be my own. On that very day, that very morning, only minutes after the second tower fell, I stood before an audience of community elders who comprised the members of the local Rotary Club. I was there with my mom, holding a now-insipid, meaningless prepared speech about community service, for which I was accepting an award. I looked out and saw a community that was hurt and afraid. I heard people crying trying to reach their sons and daughters who worked in the twin towers or were in New York City that terrible day. Almost no one was paying attention to me in my oversized suit standing behind a microphone.

“My name is Nazir,” I said. I put the speech I had written down. “I know you’re scared. I am too.” “Over the summer I converted to Islam. My father is Muslim, so I’ve always lived around Muslims. Islam, however, the Islam I studied for years that moved me and inspired me to do the community service in our schools and hospitals that you’re recognizing me for today, could never have motivated such violence and destruction, or such anger and hate.” They were words meant to comfort me as well as them. Trying to make sense of the incomprehensible.



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All morning we had been hearing “Al-Qaeda,” “Islamic terrorists”, and “Osama bin Laden” ad nauseum on every news channel.

My parents were frightened for me. In all honesty, they expressed fear that I would be influenced by extremism and urged me to be careful and not fall prey to an ideology of hate. I was mad at them for that. For the insinuation that somehow the way I pray and the scripture I draw inspiration from, made me someone other than the son they had raised, now vulnerable to a geopolitical ideology of pseudo-theologized militancy. That they didn't think it necessary to have the same conversation with my two younger, Catholic, brothers, hurt me.

I forgave them over time, but that pain has fully never subsided because the same offense is repeated against me and 1.7 billion of my fellow human beings who identify as Muslim, every single day.

What does Islam have to do with terrorism? Why is it that we, as a society, know that every Muslim country on the planet, except for one, has been colonized by Western countries - we know that the same is true of non-Muslim sub-Saharan Africa, of Christian and Catholic Latin America, of Hindu and Sikh South East Asia, of Confucianist Far East Asia, and, of course of Native Americans and Aboriginal peoples before all of these other groups - how is it that we know and see that, indeed, all of the post-colonial countries in the world have and continue to struggle with economic development, political instability, democratization and autocracy, militancy and militarism, all hues and shades of ideological extremism, including religious - and yet we look at the Middle East and North Africa, 1/5 of the Muslim population of the world, and we blame, of all things, Islam, a 14-centuries old religion whose project it was to unite Jews, Christians and all the tribes of Arabia, indeed all people into a covenant of peace?

What explains this fear and even hate of Islam, I believe, is in many ways, what explained my own Islamophobia when I was younger. Not knowing, or knowing to even ask, about the context that my dad's family came from - one of war, and financial turmoil, one of geopolitical instability, one of post-colonial existential crisis - I foolishly, solipsistically, facilely, blamed what was visible just above the surface; what I had only heard bits and pieces of from the mouths of my relatives without fact checking or questioning; I blamed the religious language they couched their ideas in, the form in which my family members' scattered thoughts took when they spoke about their many afflictions... a form they used because it was the organizing agent of their lives before the expulsion from Kuwait, before the Lebanese Civil War, before coming to America and slowly realizing that they would never be able to return to the communities they loved and helped to build - that they'd be refugees in a strange land forever... before their loved ones were killed in war, before the day they found my dad's aunt and her family had died in an aerial assault that razed her apartment building... victims of inter-state failures to solve problems through diplomacy... before they felt themselves forgetting their language and culture... Before they were made to feel colonized again by the cruelty of happenstance, unprepared for life in America, under-educated, unable to find gainful work, struggling with poverty and the indignity it comes with... before all of that pain and loss, the senselessness through which they saw their worlds implode... before all that... there was that gently



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whispered call to prayer... through it all there was this string of pearls, the majesty of the Quranic verses they learned as children and repeated 5 times a day... connecting and threading through each atrocity, carrying them from one day to the next... the only thing that still and always made sense... that felt like home... was, their faith, their family, their religion... there was Islam.

My family doesn't represent 1.7 billion Muslims, nor do I, nor does the community of Muslims I found my spiritual home with in Seattle... how could any one person represent such a large and diverse population... the majority faith of 92 of some 160 of the countries in the world... and that lives as minorities in every other one of those countries? I can't even remember what my wife asked me to pick up on the way home from work, let alone keep track of the complex and variegated life circumstances of 1.7 billion people. My story is my own.

What I can tell you is that 1/1000 of a percent of the world's population of Muslims is ever exposed to militant ideology. And a smaller subset still is ever recruited into a terrorist organization... and even fewer serve on the battlefield or commit an act of violence.

What I can tell you is that since 9/11, there have been 1.3 million civilian casualties of the Global War on Terror, the vast majority of whom, by virtue of geography, were Muslims.

What I can tell you is that so-called “Islamic terrorists” out there target and kill Muslims more than they kill non-Muslims at a ratio of 36:1. In fact, they have a term for us - the overwhelming majority of Muslims who oppose their vicious ideology - they call us “the near enemy.” Ayman Az-Zawahiri, the leader of al-Qaeda and longstanding intellectual guide of the group devised the term. He calls non-Muslims, “the far enemy”. The onslaught of their hate is principally aimed at me and my the 99.9999% of Muslims who reject their militant propaganda.

Yet, it seems that, at a time when the world can agree on very few things... when the right and the left seem unable to find a common language, let alone a single objective... all sides agree that the religion of Islam and the world's Muslims, not just the few of them who become terrorists, but all of them... are a problem.

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Since the 2015 presidential campaign season, Islamophobia has been on the rise in the United States and around the world.

- During the course of 2015, there were approximately 174 reported incidents of anti-Muslim violence and vandalism, including: 12 murders; 29 physical assaults; 50 threats against persons or institutions; 54 acts of vandalism or destruction of property; 8 arsons; and 9 shootings or bombings, among other incidents.
- Anti-Muslim violence was higher in 2015 than pre- 9/11 levels with American Muslims approximately 6 to 9 times more likely to be targets of hate crimes. The number of



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incidents in 2015 is also higher than the total number of anti-Muslim hate crimes reported in 2014: 154.

- In the year after the first candidate announced his bid for the White House in March 2015, there were approximately 180 reported incidents of anti-Muslim violence, including: 12 murders; 34 physical assaults; 49 verbal assaults or threats against persons and institutions; 56 acts of vandalisms or destruction of property; 9 arsons; and 8 shootings or bombings.
- As Mr. Trump called for shutting down mosques in the wake of the Paris terrorist attacks and the mass shootings in San Bernardino, California in December 2015, anti-Muslim attacks initially tripled with nearly half of those attacks directed against mosques.
- Anti-Muslim attacks surged once more in December 2015. There were 53 total attacks that month, 17 of which targeted mosques and Islamic schools and 5 of which targeted Muslim homes.

In 2017, 2 Americans of Indian origin were shot and one killed by an angry man who shouted at them before drawing his gun, calling them “Middle Eastern”, a common Islamophobic slur.

A Muslim man in Northern Virginia was assaulted and bitten on the face after being called anti-Muslim slurs by a former consultant to a Virginia senator.

4 mosques were burned down in arson attacks across the country.

A young African-American Muslim man, age 18, was found dead hanging from a tree in a wooded area outside of Seattle. He had gone missing in November of last year.

6 people were shot and killed in a terrorist attack by a young white supremacist in Quebec, Canada while they prayed in their mosque.

On March 15th of this year, I was at work where we help news clients get world news first, when the room was silenced by the clamour of people shouting, drowned out by the thunder of an assault rifle firing when a white supremacist terrorist in Christchurch, New Zealand entered two mosques on a Friday during congregational prayers - like Sunday mass - and, in a live feed posted in real time online, killed 51 people and injured 50 more as they prayed silently in their sun-soaked houses of worship.

“According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, the number of hate groups rose from 892 in 2015 to 917 in 2016. The number of anti-Muslim hate groups saw the greatest rise, increasing to 101 from 34 in 2015, according to the annual census of hate groups by the SPLC. The increase in anti-Muslim hate crimes coincided with the increase of these hate groups, the report said.”

2017 studies showed that 62% of non-Muslim Americans "seldom" (26%) or "never" (36%) interact with Muslims. More than half (52%) also report negative attitudes toward Muslims.



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In a report I helped put together on American Catholics’ views of Muslims, we learned that only 14% of American Catholics say they have a favorable impression of Muslims. The most exposure poll takers had to Catholic-audience publications, the less favorable their views of Muslims were.

The Thinktank New America found 71% of Republicans surveyed said they don’t believe Islam is compatible with US values - overall, 42% of Americans agree with the statement.

53% of Republicans, and 33% overall, said they’d feel concerned if a mosque opened in their neighborhood.

These aren’t merely facts. These, I wager, are problems each of us needs to think about addressing. What are the solutions we continue to debate nationally? A “travel ban” affecting 7 Muslim majority countries - now in effect. The current administration is also considering designating the Muslim Brotherhood a foreign terrorist organization. The reverberations of this could affect thousands of Americans who are Muslim who have ever donated to the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR), the only organization of lawyers that defends American Muslims.

How would you feel if you were Muslim in America?

Now Imagine

Imagine someone in your church. In your synagogue. Your temple. Or your community center, country club, or school. A cousin of yours. A brother or sister. A parent. A spouse. A child. You yourself. Lost in an instant. Not by accident. Murdered by an angry person full of hate and rage. Hate that isn't even directed at the person you're imagining. Would that it were at least something personal. Rather, a blind rage that sought to end the life - to stop the breathing and dreaming and movement and every relationship - of just anyone who this angry, hateful person saw as an enemy. An enemy. And why? For no other reason whatsoever than because of what he heard someone else say about "the Christians". "The Jews". "The Catholics". "Blacks". "Mexicans". "Asians". "Muslims". And just like that, a person you knew, loved, depended on, needed, couldn't see yourself living without, prayed for, laughed with, cried with, ate with, walked with, grew old with, saw and heard every day... your friend, your best friend, your mom, your dad, your brother, sister, neighbor, wife, husband, grandpa, grandma, aunt, uncle... in a second. Is gone. Vanquished by a hateful individual who believed with every fiber of his being that that this other human being was a threat to him, reduced to nothing more than an enemy in an imaginary war between "us" and "them". Over what? Skin pigmentation. A piece of cloth on someone's head or face. An accent.

Imagine it happening to you. A loss of someone you love - so suddenly killed by unbridled, blind hatred. That person being hurt severely, in shock, terrified, alone, filled with pain and then dying. By the hand of an assailant with all the malice of intent a person could muster. Taken away. Her murderer didn't even



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know who she was. Didn't care. All she was to him was "a Jew". "A Black". "A Mexican". "An Arab." "A Muslim". An enemy. Nothing more. Collapsed into a label. An object of unimaginable, unfathomable rage.

Gone now. A memory. Someone you and everyone who knew her, knew him, them, miss for the rest of your life.

Because of a lie someone told one day:

"Those Papists, can never be loyal to anyone other than the Vatican! They don't belong here"

"Those Christ killers. Greedy, lying, dangerous"

"They're inferior to Whites, could never assimilate into polite, educated society"

"Their fake prophet was a war monger and a pedophile, preached wife beating, slavery, rape, violence"

"They don't worship the same God we do"

"Fear of Muslims is [RATIONAL](#), Islam is a cancer"

"It's the Judeo-Christian, not 'Abrahamic', tradition"

"American Muslims [celebrated](#) 9/11"

"They're uncivilized"

"Nuke Mecca, that'll fix all of this, end terrorism"

"They're evil"

"Moozlums"

"[Muzzies](#)"

"Islam is inherently violent, the Quran [teaches](#) violence"

"Islam is a political ideology [masquerading](#) as a religion"

"Criminals"



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“Towel heads”

“[#StopIslam](#)”

“Wetbacks”, “They’re taking our jobs, ruining our country”, “go back where you came from”

“[Muslim-Free America](#)”

"Thugs"

“Kikes”

"Gangsters"

“Mobsters”

“Muslim [problem](#)”

"Dirty"

“It’s [Islamofauxbia](#), a liberal conspiracy, there’s no such thing as Islamophobia”

“Jewish conspiracy”, “New York elites”, “Globalists”

“[Muslim-Free Zone](#)”

"Terrorists", “Islamic terrorists”

“Whites only”

“Christians only”

“Niggers”

“Sand Niggers”

“Fags”

"They hate us, hate our freedoms"



“BEING MUSLIM IN AMERICA”
Saturday, May 4, 2019 | St. Joseph Parish, Seattle
Presentation by Nazir Harb Michel

“Trannies”

“[Civilization Jihad](#), stealth jihad”

“[Islam hates us](#)”

“Camel jockeys”

"Bomb them back to the Stone Age"

“[Jihawg](#) bullets send Muslims straight to hell”

“[Fuck Islam](#)”

“[They all should die](#)”

“Register them”

“Ban them”

These lies are [more](#) than words. These slurs are the sound of hate. The germs that infect the feeble, the impressionable, the ignorant, the angry, the desolate, the people who've never met "a Muslim" or "a Mexican" or "a gay person" or "a trans person". Their token other is a composite of inaccurate, irresponsible, exploitative, sensationalized images and soundbites fabricated and circulated on internet forums, comment boards, [social media](#) posts, copy/paste e-mail chains, fake news sites, and conspiracy theorists who they never fact check. But also, all too often, mainstream [news](#) organizations who (should) know better like Fox, CNN, BBC, and others. College classrooms are not exempt, nor are elementary and secondary [schools](#). And since 2015, these are frequently the words of our [politicians](#) too - not just those of the president but his millions of supporters.

The words of hate are uttered by people everywhere now - they're written in the manifestos of white supremacists who plot and carry out terrorist attacks on minorities, especially recently, Jews and Muslims. How do these dangerous myths spread? They're unthinkingly repeated by someone because that person thought it was funny. Or witty. Or provocative. Or "had to be said". Because that person wanted fame or fortune and didn't care at whose expense it was taken. And many, then, come to believe that lie because so-and-so said it, the news repeated it. And that lie is [translated](#) from harmful words into harmful acts and even into laws, [policies](#) and [programs](#).

Loss



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I know what it feels like because my uncle was killed in an Islamophobic attack. Another crime of hate that was never classified a "hate crime" where his murderer knew my uncle only as "that Arab" whom "he got". He shot my uncle multiple times one night while my uncle worked the night shift no one wanted at a convenience store in Queen Anne. My uncle came here as a refugee with his parents. My uncle had a wife and four kids. He had six brothers and sisters. He loved his mom very much. Had buried his dad a few years before. My uncle wasn't interested in politics or particularly religious. He had a mortgage to pay, kids to feed and clothe, two of whom sorely needed corrective glasses and were at risk of going blind. That's what was on his mind that terrible night a few years after 9/11. Those are the people he could be seen in the security camera footage trying desperately to call before another bullet took the life from his hands, stopped his breaths, his thoughts, his laughter, his smile, his heart. And just like that, he was gone - a story in the Seattle Times. And his family was alone. And they were so so scared. And our already fragile family was irreparably broken. And the world would never be the same again.

His wife and kids went into hiding because people hated them for blaming Islamophobia. "There's no such thing". "It's not a phobia because Islam is scary and Muslims are threats". "Muslims did 9/11. They deserve what they got coming to them". "Leave if you don't like it, go back where you came from". His killer said in court that he was innocent because the War on Terror meant all Muslims were fair targets.

My uncle's family moved to another state and started over. Once refugees, now displaced.

My uncle and his wife came to the US fleeing war and policies that targeted them because of their nationality and religion. "Amriika", "America", how promising, they thought. A better place. "That's where we belong". "We'll be safe here. Have kids, work, be free and happy. No more wars. No more violence or persecution."

Our family became... still is... shattered. Lost.

Forever

"O lost soul, goodly soul, you may return to Me now, your Lord. You are forever loved. And forever loving. You have always been and will be received as you are, accepted and comforted by Me. Come along now, join the others, every soul is here with me. You can rest now. Rest in Me, in My paradise, forever."

Above is my translation of the Quranic verse written on my uncle's tombstone in the interfaith section of the Christian cemetery here in Seattle, in the United States where he is buried; in the country he loved, where he grew up, listened to music, fell in love, became an adult, raised children, toiled, struggled, and died. The verse is written in the beautiful and love-filled Arabic calligraphy of his younger brother. It was transposed into the stone that my grandma has washed by hand and adorned in flowers and prayed next to for hours, cried relentlessly at every week, for the last 13 years, 8 months, and 10 days.



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Remember my story about the greeting “Peace be with you” when I began this talk? Those are the words that Muslims, like Jews, use to greet each other in the mosque after prayers. Just like you. Those are also the words we use to greet each other outside of the mosque - in fact, whenever we meet one another or see someone we know is Muslim while passing on the street or in the mall. In many Muslim countries, “as-salaamu ‘aleykum” (peace be upon you) simply means “hi” and everyone, regardless of religion, uses the phrase and returns it: “wa ‘aleykum as-salaam”, and also upon you. So, I wish you peace, each of you. I sincerely hope you feel what I felt in church all those times, and what we Muslims feel when we greet each other, hold each other, in a brief moment of joy and peace shared with God and with one another, every day... even if just for this short moment let all the worlds stop and the only thing that matters is you and I and the love and warmth we pass to one another. In this gesture, making peace, you become a Muslim. The word literally means “peacemaker”. Islam does not precisely, in Arabic, mean “peace” as is often reported; it actually means “making peace”. Because, linguistically, it is a form that conveys a process, a difficult, at times arduous struggle. And the word for that struggle that goes into making peace with people you don’t know or necessarily think you like, that specific type of struggle has a name in Arabic: *jihad*. It doesn’t mean holy war. Or terrorism. Not by any stretch of the imagination or the Arabic language. It is the struggle to make peace with yourself, to prepare yourself for the absolute humility you need to then go out and make peace with every human being you encounter. And hate, and violence, and war, and killing and maiming and insulting and offending one another... those things are not Islam. Those things are exactly the things Islam stands against.

My friends, I’d like to close with a line of Rumi’s poetry:

Out beyond all ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing there is a field. I’ll meet you there someday. And that day, when our souls lie down in that grass, the world will be too full to talk about.

Thank you.

Peace be with you.