

The Crossroads of the Identity Crisis

by
Eboo Patel

Preface by
Senator Harris Wofford



THE BUXTON READINGS

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Foreword

AS OUR WORLD BECOMES increasingly interconnected, it is as important as ever to understand those from different worldviews and backgrounds than our own. Forms of intolerance and violence continue to sprout in nearly every faith and world tradition, making it incumbent upon those who seek a better world to understand the situational factors that contribute to its development. In the following reading, Dr. Eboo Patel, a Rhodes Scholar and founder of the Interfaith Youth Core of Chicago, attempts to do this by reflecting on his own faith and recounting his experience as a Muslim growing up in Chicago. Eboo's call for dialogue between followers of different religious backgrounds is compelling and resonates closely with the philosophy behind the Buxton Initiative.

The Buxton Initiative began when former U.S. Ambassador J. Douglas Holladay, a Christian, and Dr. Akbar Ahmed, a Muslim diplomat and scholar, met at the National Press Club in Washington D.C., soon after September 11, 2001. Somehow, in this crucible of division, their friendship grew to become a bridge between disparate communities. The two men decided to start the Buxton Initiative in order to stake off a safe place for dialogue between leaders who might not otherwise overcome the distrust that divided their communities.

The organization is named after Sir Thomas Buxton, a nineteenth-century reformer who combated injustice in the form of slavery. Buxton was a member of a coalition of Members of Parliament that met

together across party lines, abolishing the slave trade and eventually slavery itself in the British Empire.

Today, the Buxton Initiative seeks to foster relationship and reconciliation among individuals of different faiths and worldviews. Our simple belief is that we must learn to live with differences, connect on a deeply human level, and seek the common good. The following reading, “Crossroads of the Identity Crisis,” introduced by friend and former Senator Harris Wofford, is another in our series of perspectives on the faith journey and the importance of building bridges in a world increasingly polarized and divided. Our hope is that our work and such readings will inspire others around the globe to seek ways, both large and small, to be a part of the solution. Our Muslim friend, Dr. Eboo Patel, sees service as a necessary and vital key to bringing unique individuals together to make a difference while building trust. Coming from various faith traditions, they celebrate service and selflessness as a means to unite. May Eboo’s example inspire a generation to be radical “solutionists” in our challenging times.

Carpe Diem. ☺

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Preface *Beyond Dialogue to Action*

BY SENATOR HARRIS WOFFORD

IN THE AFTERMATH OF the attacks on the Twin Towers of New York and the Pentagon in 2001, and the subway and bus bombings in London in 2005, we came to know the names of the young Muslim men who carried out these attacks. We read about the catastrophes they caused but seldom do we see their faces or hear their stories.

In what you are about to read—the first chapter of a forthcoming book by Eboo Patel—we can almost see the faces and hear the voices of four of the London bombers who killed in the name of Islam. With research and imagination, drawing on his own experience as a Muslim who grew up in America, studied in England, and worked around the world, Eboo brings to life the stories of these London bombers and of some of what turned them to hate.

In this vivid account of how fairly ordinary young Muslims became murderers for a cause they believed to be ordained by God, Eboo Patel deftly weaves in his own story and that of his Muslim family who hail from India. He tells of his cousins in Bombay who hid as Hindu mobs with machetes roamed the streets in 1993, looking for Muslims to kill. He recounts how his aunt in Nairobi, Kenya, reacted with cold fear in 1998 when she heard the blast with which Al Qaeda destroyed the American Embassy where her husband had just gone to work. Eboo

tells of his own experience in Cape Town in 1999 after a bomb went off next door to the café where he was meeting a friend.

During his three years studying in Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar, Eboo regularly used the subway station and passed the bus site where the bombs took the lives of so many residents going to work. Eboo recalls the struggles he faced as an adolescent with slipping grades and the wrong group of friends. He wonders whether, in another place and time, he might have been drawn to the fiery Sheikh Omar, organizer of a radical youth organization, who was a key factor in the fateful course taken by the four young perpetrators of the London attacks. “Maybe I would have sought his discipline and approval and discovered my identity in the imagined community of the global jihad,” Eboo says.

Knowing what Eboo has gone on to do and reading what he has written here and elsewhere, I doubt he could ever have succumbed to the siren calls for a suicide mission from the fanatic Sheikh Omar. But he did experience a constant barrage of racist bullying in his school years in suburban Chicago and remembers the “gut-wrenching feeling of being excluded from mainstream society.” He considers himself lucky that his “free-fall was stopped by the YMCA.” Nevertheless, his recognition that a piece of the young men’s story was a part of him and the haunting thought that Sheikh Omar got to them “before we did” may be part of what drives him now to spread far and wide the message of the Interfaith Youth Core he organized nine years ago.

The “we” he refers to are a group of young people of diverse backgrounds who were involved in the creation of the Interfaith Youth Core. They asked themselves why there weren’t more young people involved in interfaith discussion and why real service wasn’t an integral part of the interfaith movement. Eboo then suggested, “Why don’t we make it happen ourselves? Why don’t we build it?” And building it is what they have been doing, with the watchwords: “Beyond Dialogue to Action.”

From Oxford, Eboo spent his vacations engaged in interfaith youth projects in South Africa, Sri Lanka, India, and Europe, developing the theory and methodology for the new organization. After completing his PhD in 2002, he returned to Chicago and threw himself into building the Interfaith Youth Core. Its aim is to strengthen the young participants’ own religious identities, foster understanding between religious communities, and encourage cooperation to serve the common good.

The 9/11 attacks added a new sense of urgency. With leverage from a Ford Foundation grant they were able to hire a small staff and get underway. Eboo's pitch for financial support was strong: "Osama bin Laden doesn't run his network on the cheap. If we want a different kind of world, characterized by understanding and cooperation, we better expect to pay for it."

Among other things, Eboo was especially emphatic that youth be at the forefront of this initiative. To those who tend to discount kids, thinking that they're always focused on their own lives, Eboo answers, "Young people thirst to be part of a movement, to live beyond themselves. Over and over again I'm overwhelmed by the depth of desire to connect with the broad range of humanity that I see in young people. You know who doesn't write off kids? Religious extremists. Think about the stories you hear of religious violence. It's committed by 21-year-olds. The 21-year-old isn't directing the religious violence. The 21-year-old is involved because a religious extremist recognized the power of young people and got them involved."

Eboo warns that the work by engaged young people of diverse faiths must be demanding and significant. The volunteer service to be rendered must be important: "If all that is offered is a chance to make T-shirts for a conference, if you don't see power in young people, you can just forget it," he says. Those working at the Interfaith Youth Core grew up feeling that they could do more than other people let them do. Their organization is a way "to create the space to let them do more for others." In the chapter before you, he writes, "It's not a place young people need so much as a role, an opportunity to be powerful, a mount from which to shape their world."

All this rings true for me and apparently for many young people as well. Eboo reports that some ten thousand youth have participated in their Days of Interfaith Youth Service, an idea first suggested and started in Chicago in 2003 by members of the organization's youth council. They then asked, "Why not do it in every city, on every campus?" In 2006, aided by DVDs and training sessions, the interfaith service days took place in about fifty sites, with more than four thousand students, faculty and staff participating.

Combining action with reflection through dialogue is the operating principle of service-learning. Incorporating interfaith dialogue among

elementary, secondary, and college students engaged in service to the community could produce a quantum leap—in quantity and quality—in the growing national service and service-learning fields.

Eboo says he was inspired by older examples of youth service, from the Peace Corps to national service programs in the AmeriCorps network such as City Year, Public Allies, Teach for America, and the National and Global Youth Service Days sponsored by Youth Service America. In turn, I suggest that those programs should look to the Interfaith Youth Core as an example of how to go beyond action to dialogue.

On a personal note, at four-score-years-and-one, let me admit that my hope is stirred and my heart leaps up when I read about the Interfaith Youth Core and Eboo's vision and plans. I don't want to wait for his book to be published, so I've gone online to find links to his publications already in print, including his postings as a panelist on the *Washington Post* and *Newsweek* online discussion of religion, "On Faith." In this preface, I've also drawn on the transcript of Eboo's remarkable conversation with Jean Case, president of the Case Foundation and chair of the President's Council on Service and Civic Participation.

Sixty-five years ago, during World War II, as a high school student in Scarsdale, New York, I started the Student Federalist organization. Our mission was to campaign for a union of democracies to win the war and serve as the nucleus of a post-war world federation with power to keep the peace. By the time I entered the Army Air Corps on my eighteenth birthday in 1944, we had more than fifty chapters.

After the atomic bombs brought sudden or slow death to hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, our organization spread to hundreds of campuses and many thousands of students around the country. The United Nations fell far short of what we had sought, the Cold War closed in, and the nuclear arms race began. So it is no surprise that I salute the Interfaith Youth Core as a new start in the age-long search for One World. Dealing with the issue of religious differences, interfaith youth service and dialogue offer new ways and means for coming generations to learn what it means to be a citizen of the world.

In later years, from helping President Kennedy and Sargent Shriver organize the Peace Corps, collaborating in the War on Poverty including the launching of the Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA)

in the mid-Sixties, to my experience in the last two decades helping to build the institutions of National Service, Service-Learning, and America's Promise, I have seen firsthand the potential and power of asking young people to serve and to lead. I was on the White House lawn, as President Kennedy's special assistant for civil rights, when a young volunteer being sent forth to overseas service by the President was asked why he had joined the new Corps. "No one had ever asked me to do anything unselfish, patriotic, and for the common good," he said. "Kennedy asked."

I will never forget the moment at the end of the four-day Civil Rights march from Selma to Montgomery in 1965, as our band of several hundred marchers grew to many thousands who had come from all over the country to join us on the last leg—black and white, men and women, young and old, Christians, Jews, and Muslims. Several former Peace Corps teachers from Ethiopia, where I had served as Peace Corps director and representative to Africa, joined the march. They proudly carried a sign declaring, "The Peace Corps Knows Integration Works."

Similarly, Eboo Patel and his colleagues in the Interfaith Youth Core know that the formula "Beyond Dialogue to Action" works. And they know how to ask. We can hope that the pilot programs of the Interfaith Youth Core will do for both the interfaith and the service movements what a pilot in a furnace does: ignite the whole. ☺

Senator Harris L. Wofford was born in New York City in 1926. He attended the University of Chicago before graduating from both Yale University and Howard University Law Schools. In 1961, President John F. Kennedy appointed Wofford to the post of Special Advisor for Civil Rights. In this role, he assisted Sargent Shriver in founding and developing the Peace Corps to encourage youth service at an international level. Wofford was president of the State University of New York's New College at Old Westbury (1966–70) and of Bryn Mawr College (1970–78).

From 1991 to 1994 he served in the U.S. Senate representing the state of Pennsylvania. He was a leader in the Senate effort to secure universal health insurance. Senator Wofford played a key role in enacting the legislation that created AmeriCorps and the Corporation for National Service. In addition, he coauthored, with Congressman John Lewis, the legislation establishing the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday as a day for volunteer service. Since then Senator Wofford has been an important figure in many service initiatives. He remains active as a board member of organizations including America's Promise, Campus Compact, the Points

of Light Foundation, Youth Service America, the Pericles Project, and Arnold Schwarzenegger's After-School All-Stars. He has edited, authored, and coauthored books including *India Afire* (1950), *Embers of the World* (1969), and *Of Kennedys and Kings: Making Sense of the Sixties* (1980).



The Crossroads of the Identity Crisis

EBOO PATEL

One can only face in others what one can face in oneself. On this confrontation depends the measure of our wisdom and compassion. This energy is all that one finds in the rubble of vanished civilizations, and the only hope for ours.

—James Baldwin,

from the introduction to *Nobody Knows My Name*

HASIB HUSSAIN, LEFT HAND hanging slightly out of the pocket of his jeans, shuffles into the Luton railway station just before 7:30 AM on July 7, 2005 wearing an indifferent expression on his face and a pack on his back. Three young men accompany him. They look like any other group of young people heading for a day touring the museums and art galleries of London. They all wear indifferent expressions. They all wear packs on their backs.

But it is not water bottles and summer novels that they carry. Instead each pack contains a carefully mixed concoction of hair bleach, food preservatives, and heating chemicals.

Hasib Hussain's pack was the last to blow. It detonated at 9:47 AM on a double decker bus near Tavistock Square, peeling the top off and killing Hasib and thirteen others. Hasib was eighteen years old.

An hour earlier, at the Russell Square Tube station a few blocks away, Germaine Lindsay had detonated his pack. It was the deadliest of the four bombings, destroying the lead carriage of the southbound 311 train

and killing twenty-eight people. Germaine was nineteen years old.

The other two blasts occurred within seconds of the Russell Square explosion. Muhammad Sidique Khan sat on Circle Line train 216. Seconds after it left Edgware Road, traveling west to Paddington, the explosives on his back tore apart his car like a can opener and impacted an oncoming eastbound train. Seven people were killed. Muhammad was thirty.

On the other side of central London, in the heavily Muslim east end, Shehzad Tanweer blew himself up on a westbound Circle Line train leaving Liverpool Street station for Aldgate. When the lights came on, the floor of the train was full of people covered in blood. Eight people were killed. Shehzad was twenty-two.

Shahara Islam was the first of the dead to be buried. A twenty-year old British-born Bengali Muslim, she was riding the No. 30 bus on her way to her job as a cashier at the Co-operative Bank, Angel branch. I cannot help but imagine her smiling at her murderer, the tall and endearingly awkward Hasib Hussein, when he climbed aboard weighed down by the death in his backpack. The two should have been friends, discussing the challenges of being second generation South Asian Muslims living between the tawdry permissiveness of British youth culture and the traditionalist piety of their parents' homes. "Our dear daughter is returning to her Lord, a bloodstained martyr," her parents said during the funeral with seven thousand mourners, Muslim and Christian, Jewish and Hindu, Sikh and Zoroastrian, whispering prayers.

The world lives in London, and when bombs go off, it dies there. Ghanian-born Gladys Wundowa was riding the No. 30 bus on her way from her cleaning job at University College London to a class in housing management. Giles Hart, a British Telecom employee, had held voluntary posts ranging from chair of the Polish Solidarity Campaign of Great Britain to Vice-Chair of the British Humanist Association. An activist in the peace movement and a member of the Anti-Slavery society, his family released a statement that read, "It is tragic that he fell victim to the very evil against which he had struggled." Anthony Fatayi-Williams, Nigerian by heritage, born of a Christian mother and a Muslim father, an engineering executive by trade whose passion was reconciliation in his native Nigeria, was also murdered on the bus. "How many mothers' hearts must be maimed?" Anthony's mother

asked in a speech she gave after the bombing.

Terry McDermott opens *Perfect Soldiers*, his book on the September 11 hijackers, with the image of Muhammad Atta, the suspected leader of the group, padding around his Hamburg apartment in blue flip-flops. It seems so incongruous that this slight loner could have been responsible for the deaths of three thousand Americans and the profound shift in international affairs that followed. “We want our monsters to be outsized, monstrous,” writes McDermott. “We expect them to be somehow equal to their crimes.” But the world is a peculiar place, and McDermott, after conducting the definitive study into the lives of the nineteen hijackers, was forced to conclude, “the men of September 11 were, regrettably, I think, fairly ordinary men.”

So were the men of July 7. “Suspects’ Neighbors Say There Was No Hint of Evil,” was the title of the story in *The New York Times*. Shehzad Tanweer, the twenty-two-year old Aldgate bomber, loved Elvis Presley’s version of Eddy Arnold’s song, “Make the World Go Away.” “I thought his only interest was cricket,” Shehzad’s uncle said, anguished face still expressing disbelief. Shehzad worked in his father’s successful fish and chip shop, and drove around town in the family’s red Mercedes. He wore brand name clothes, worked out regularly, and studied sports science at Leeds Metropolitan University. Friends described him as infinitely likeable, more apt to talk about sports and cars than anything else.

Mohammad Sidique Khan was a learning mentor at Hillside Primary School. He was universally appreciated by parents, students, and faculty for his commitment to assisting the newly immigrated children with everything from school lessons to athletics. As a teenager he went by the nickname Sid and wore cowboy boots, expressions of his fascination with all things American. As he grew older, he was the guy young South Asians and Muslims in Leeds would go to if they needed help. “He gave me good advice, had a good head on his shoulders. He was rational,” a young man from the neighborhood told *The New York Times*. Khan’s wife had been an advocate for moderate Islam and women’s rights, and his mother-in-law received an honor from Queen Elizabeth for her community work.

Germaine Lindsey was described as one of the cool kids in school, smart, funny, and always smiling. Born in Jamaica, he converted to Islam at fifteen and became well-known for his recitations of the

Qur'an at the Leeds Grand Mosque and his robust efforts to convert his classmates. Germaine married a white British Muslim convert and the two had a baby together. Neither his mother nor his wife could believe Germaine had become a suicide bomber. His mother remembered Germaine mourning the victims of September 11 and his wife would not accept that Germaine had left her and their baby behind.

Hasib Hussain was the youngest, the shyest, the least remarkable, the most impressionable. When he was a child, Hasib bought his candy from Ajmal Singh's corner shop, like all the other kids in Holbeck, an ethnically mixed neighborhood in the British city of Leeds. He went to primary school a block from his home and he loved kicking a plastic soccer ball down the street where he lived. His father worked in a factory, and his tight-knit extended family had been in the area for thirty years. It was his mother's call to the police, reporting that Hasib had not returned home from his trip to London with friends and was not answering his cell phone, which broke the case open.

Tall and lanky, Hasib Hussain tried hard to fade into the background at Matthew Murray high school, but the white toughs picked on him anyway. The sermons at the local mosque rarely addressed this reality. His parents' advice was to pray more and do better in school. He started running with a group of Pakistani Muslims who fought back, a crowd that provided him with support and identity but was estranged from the pious Muslim community of his household and mosque. Scared that their son was losing his way, his parents sent him abroad, thinking that religious influence from the Muslim world would straighten him out.

A cousin observed that Hasib returned not only more devout, but more political and strident in his views. "I thought he had been brain-washed," he told *The Guardian*. Habib began spending more time with Mohamad Sidique Khan. Khan had recently rejected Leeds' mosques for practicing what he claimed was a diluted and false form of Islam and become part of the inner circle at the Iqra Learning Center.

When radical Muslims traveled through Leeds to spread their message of proper Muslim behavior plus hatred for the West, they held their meetings at the Iqra Learning Center. In addition to traditional Islamic literature like the Qur'an, the Hadith and books on Muslim law, the store carried materials on western conspiracy theories against

Islam. Part of the collection included DVDs that showed scenes of Muslims being maimed and murdered in the Middle East, the Balkans and Chechnya juxtaposed against President George Bush saying the word “crusade.” “It was slick and really made you feel angry,” Amear Ali, a thirty-six-year-old Muslim who lives in Leeds told the Associated Press. Ali described how the owner of the bookstore approached him with the offer of religious education lessons. First came the proper way to do Muslim prayers, then the lectures about injustice against Muslims around the world, and next the DVDs. “You could see how it could turn someone to raw hate . . . I know it was propaganda and was made to make you feel this way. But what about young guys who see this material as a call to do something?”

That is exactly what Sheikh Omar Bakri Mohammad wants. A Syrian-born middle-aged father of seven, he lived in North London for nearly two decades, supported in part by a monthly British welfare check of over five hundred dollars, before decamping for the Middle East soon after the London bombings. He helped establish Hizb ut-Tahrir, whose mission is to re-establish the Islamic Caliphate. In its study circles, Hizb recruits learn that Muslim identity is necessarily opposed to the West. The 2003 Hizb conference in Birmingham drew eight thousand people, many of them young. Zeyno Barain, Director of International Security and Energy Programs at the Nixon Center, says “Hizb produces thousands of manipulated brains, which then ‘graduate’ from Hizb and become members of groups like al-Qaeda . . . it acts like a conveyor belt for terrorists.” Sheikh Omar left Hizb, or was asked to leave, after he stated that British Prime Minister John Major should be assassinated for his role in the first Gulf War, and that his head should not be kept. After Sheikh Omar’s departure, Hizb attempted to re-fashion itself as a nonviolent organization committed to a puritan Muslim vision.

Unable to preach violence through Hizb, Sheikh Omar went on to organize a radical Muslim youth organization called al Muhajiroun in the early 1990s. He used this position to preach sermons and post web messages calling young British Muslims to wage jihad against the West in Iraq, Israel, and Chechnya. He referred to the September 11 bombers as the Magnificent 19. A poster advertising an al Muhajiroun event had pictures of each one set against a glorious, glowing backdrop. Sheikh

Omar blamed British foreign policy for the London attacks and said of the hundreds of young British Muslims who attend his sermons, “They know that the Prime Minister has his hands full of the blood of Muslims in Palestine and in Iraq and in Afghanistan. We hear from many who say they want to attack.” Sheikh Omar is a master institution-builder and youth organizer. He understands precisely what buttons to push to harden a young Muslim’s fluid religious identity into a terrorist commitment. The itinerant Muslim preachers who inspired the radical study circle at the Iqra Learning Center and the locals who organized it likely learned their trade through Sheikh Omar’s networks.

How did awkward, shy Hasib Hussain become a suicide bomber? Sheikh Omar’s people got to him before we did.

After the flurry of phone calls to friends and family and the relief that they were safe, after the prayers that my wife and I said for the victims and all those left wounded by their loss, I thanked God for saving my skin again. In my life, religious violence has always existed in the grey area between reality and imagination. My cousins in Bombay describe locking themselves into their apartments in 1993 as Hindu mobs armed with machetes roamed the streets looking for Muslims to kill. My aunt tells about the cold fear that struck her heart when she heard the loud blast that was the Al Qaeda bombing of the American Embassy in Nairobi in 1998. Her husband, a diplomat, had left for work a few minutes before. She thanked God for weeks that his journey to the center of the city had been delayed that day. In November 1999, I left late for an appointment at a waterfront cafe in Cape Town, South Africa. As I approached, I started noticing glass shards strewn around, and then I heard the wailing sirens. “What’s going on?” I asked a cop. “A bomb went off at a pizza parlor,” he responded. It was next door to the café I was supposed to meet a friend at.

London I lived in for three years. It was where I did the research for my doctorate. I have close memories and a clear picture of each of the sites that was bombed. Edgware Road and Aldgate had the best kebab stands in the whole city. Tavistock Square was my favorite park, full of anti-war memorials. I rode the elevator at the Russell Square Tube several times a year and walked the few blocks to the British Museum, where I would stand in front of the Elgin Marbles hoping that the

genius of the ancients would provide inspiration for my thesis.

Tavistock Square may never offer the same calm. The Circle Line may never feel normal again. It will be impossible to ride the elevator at Russell Square without remembering the people killed below. All changed forever by four young men who prayed in the same language I consider holy.

An eerie feeling crept over me as I stared at the faces of the London bombers, especially the three who traced their history back to the sub-continent. Their travails in school, their relationships with their parents, their indifference to Islam as adolescents followed by an intense re-engagement—it all felt familiar. I sensed a flicker of recognition from a deep place. A piece of their story was a part of me.

I can imagine going to Hasib Hussain's home for dinner. I would have given salaams to his father at the door, taken my shoes off, admired the Qur'anic calligraphy and the picture of the ka'ba, the most important site in Islam, on the wall. I would have immediately known the curries his mother was cooking from the smells wafting through the house. When I complimented her dinner, she would have looked away shyly, but not before a happy smile crossed her face. I would have sat with Hasib's father in the living room after dinner, drinking Indian masala tea; sweet with sugar, spicy with cinnamon, fragrant with cardamom. We would have made the obligatory comments about global politics, wondering when India and Pakistan would finally work out the issue of Kashmir. Perhaps his father, his Muslim solidarity flaring for an instant, would have told me how angry he was at America for ignoring the plight of the Palestinians for so long and for believing that you can bomb countries into democracy. Then he would have hurriedly said, "But I love the American people. It is the government who does all the bombing."

Inevitably, we would rest upon the subject of life in the West. He would have shook his head and said that England is hard—you can make a living, yes, but the culture is a stranger to you, and then it takes your son and makes him a stranger too. He would have told me that he only wants his son to marry a nice Muslim girl, have a family, and make a good living. "I think computers is the best profession nowadays," he would have mused, twisting the ends of his mustache. Then his voice would fall a little and he would confess the problems that

Hasib has had at school—the falling grades, the truancy, the fights. He would sound confused about why. Where was the famed education and social mobility of the West? And then he would have spoken about how sending Hasib abroad had straightened him out. He now wears a Muslim cap and prays regularly, and he no longer goes around with those boys who, rumor has it, were into alcohol and worse things.

The only problem was that Hasib didn't want to go to the local mosque anymore. In fact, he had taken to insulting it. His new friends had started praying at the Iqra Learning Center. Hasib came home from there with books and DVDs, and he spent all his free time reviewing that material. There must be something in there like a firecracker. Now, when he made off-hand comments about the plight of Muslims elsewhere, Hasib grew furious, and hurled angry words about the West and the importance of returning Islam to power, using terms like caliphate. He would have asked me, a few years older than Hasib and also a second generation South Asian Muslim in the West, if I understood what his son was going through.

I would have swallowed hard.

I know his son's anger in a dangerous way. I remember feigning illness so I could stay home from school as a teenager, afraid to tell my mother the truth: that a group of white kids in gym class had taken to cornering me in the locker room, tearing off my shorts and hitting me with wet towels, all the while shouting "sand nigger" and "curry maker." When I was crumpled in a corner covered with welts, they raced upstairs to tell their girlfriends what they had done to "the Hindu." After I finally got myself together and limped into class, the gym teacher would yell at me for being late and pal around with my tormentors like he was in on the torture. The girls would snicker and refuse to stand next to me during volleyball, telling their boyfriends, "You never said he smelled *this bad*."

My parents, as loving as they were, simply could not relate to my reality. My mother was convinced that if I would only raise my math grade, the other kids would respect me. "Say your tasbih," she would add, referring to the Muslim prayer beads. It made me feel worse to tell her what happened in school, so I stopped. Plus, my parents were never home. My father hated his job in corporate advertising and was looking for a way out, and my mother had recently received her CPA and

was still getting accustomed to the challenges of balancing professional and family life. My brother and I were left to fend for ourselves.

I was surprised to hear my father shouting at the television screen during the first Gulf War. He had been a strong Reagan supporter during the 1980s, and only had two words for 1988 Democratic presidential candidate Michael Dukakis: “idiot liberal.” But he could not contain his fury at President Bush. “Say the name of the country right,” he would yell every time Bush gave the ‘I’ in Iraq the wrong inflection. He was beside himself when Bush indicated to the Shia and Kurds of Iraq that the U.S. military would come to their aid if they attempted to overthrow Saddam, and then announced while playing golf that he didn’t think the American military going to Baghdad was the right thing, knowing full well that this meant certain death for the Muslims who had trusted him. “Muslims are dying by the thousands and these people don’t give a shit,” he would bellow.

And then, Bosnia. My father was glued to international news and would regale me with the stories and images of the horror every chance he got. “They are using rape as a tool of war and the strongest military in the world is doing nothing,” he shouted. Eyes popping, he turned to me and said, “What if the neighbors came over and tied you up and made you watch as they killed me and raped your mother, and there was a policeman on the corner doing nothing? That is exactly what is happening in Bosnia and America is that idle policeman.”

My father had always been knowledgeable about world affairs, but never active in them. He is a profoundly decent man with a strong personal spirituality, but he was never a ritualistic Muslim, and certainly not one inclined to side with his co-religionists over the country he felt indebted to. But when my father felt a part of his identity was under fire, however secondary it might have been in his overall makeup under normal circumstances, it flared and rose to the surface and began dominating his personality. Bosnia was the straw that broke the camel’s back. My father had silently watched the powers that be wreak havoc in the Muslim world for decades—the U.S. support of Iran’s despotic Shah during the 1970s, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan at the end of that decade, Israel’s military response to the Palestinian uprising in the late 1980s. If such events could anger my Reaganite father whose religious belief was strong but private, I understand how the fury of

Muslims with deeper ties to the global ummah and less success relating to the West spurred them into action.

Looking back, I see flashes of the ingredients that prepared the ground for Hasib Hussain's suicide mission in my own life. A gut-wrenching feeling of being excluded from mainstream society, in the form of a constant barrage of racist bullying. A vague sense of being Muslim from my mother without any real grounding in how that was relevant or useful to my life. A growing consciousness, through my father, that people I shared an identity with were being horribly treated elsewhere, often by people who looked like the ones who were bullying me here.

Like Hasib, I took a step down the path of adolescent risk-taking. Unable to find my place in junior high, I started hanging out with kids who pushed their way to the back of the bus, smoked cigarettes across the street from school, stole wine coolers from their parents' refrigerators, and bragged loudly about touching their girlfriends' breasts, while the girls in question giggled within earshot. My mother called them, "the boys who ride dirt bikes." My dad made it clear that he didn't want them around. But my parents often didn't get home until seven PM or later on weekdays, and so I snuck around with this group as much as I could. Truth be told, I didn't like them much. But as long as I laughed at their crass jokes and brought my collection of heavy metal cassettes to their homes they seemed amenable to letting me hang around.

Like Hasib, I needed a course correction. My grades were slipping. I was talking back to my parents and coming home with stories glorifying the fights I had seen my friends get into. Perhaps in another place and time, I would have followed a Muhammad Sidique Khan into the back room of an Iqra Learning Center and listened to a man with a regulation-size beard scold me for partaking in adolescent temptations when Muslims across the world were suffering. Maybe I would have sought his discipline and approval and discovered my identity in the imagined community of the global jihad.

How does one ordinary young person's commitment to a religion turn into a suicide mission and another ordinary young person's commitment to that same faith become an organization devoted to pluralism? The answer, I believe, lies in the influences youth have, the programs and people who shape their religious identity.

Religious totalitarians like Sheikh Omar are exceptionally perceptive about the crisis facing second generation immigrant Muslims in the West. They know that our parents, whose identity was formed in the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia a half century ago, have a dramatically different set of reference points than we do. They know that the identity we get from them feels irrelevant, that it is impossible to be a 1950s era Pakistani or Egyptian or Moroccan Muslim in twenty-first-century Chicago or London or Madrid.

In many cases, our parents built bubbles for themselves when they moved west, a little world where they could eat familiar food, speak their own language, move in the old ways. And because they recreated a little piece of Karachi in Manchester, or a part of Bombay in Boston, they assumed that their children would remain within the cocoon. But we second- and third-generation Muslims cannot separate ourselves from the societies we live in. We watch MTV, go to public schools, cross borders that are invisible to our parents dozens of times a day and quickly understand that the curves of our lives cannot adapt to the straight lines our parents live by. Raised in pious Muslim homes, occasionally participating in the permissive aspects of Western culture, many of us come to believe that our two worlds, the two sides of ourselves, are necessarily antagonistic. This experience of two-ness is exacerbated by the deep burn of racism. It is much worse for South Asian Muslims in Britain than it is here in the States. They listen to the Prime Minister say they are British, cheer the local sports teams, but still find themselves virtually under siege by gangs of white youth, some wearing the trademark red shoelaces of the National Front, one of several well-organized white racist groups in Britain.

As we grow older and seek a unified Muslim way of being, it is too often Muslim extremists who meet us at the crossroads of our identity crisis. They say, “Look how Muslims are being oppressed all over the world. You, who are living in the belly of the beast and indulging in its excess, have only one way to purify yourself: to become death and kill.”

Where are the Muslim leaders who understand this complex challenge, who are helping young people develop a coherent, relevant Muslim identity in the West? Most Muslim leaders are busy meeting other needs of the community—building mosques and Muslim councils, developing relationships with politicians and urban police depart-

ments. But most are not involved enough in the lives of young people.

People like Dr. Umar Abd-Allah, Sheikh Hamza Yusuf, Imam Zaid Shakir, and Professors Sherman Jackson and Amina McCloud in the United States are the exception. They understand that the American project and the continuity of Muslim identity are symbiotic, not opposed to one another. They are some of the leading intellectuals in contemporary Islam, and they spend an enormous amount of time running seminars for Muslim college students and retreats for young Muslim leaders. One of their counterparts in Britain, Zaki Badawi, spent a lifetime trying to address the challenge of nurturing Muslim identity in the West but knew only too well that the type of leadership he exemplified was all too rare in Britain. When Tony Blair asked him and a group of other senior Muslim leaders why radicals like Sheikh Omar were so effective with young people, Badawi said: “The young people who believe in him [Sheikh Omar], we do not have access to them.” The truth was, not enough were trying.

A senior leader of the Leeds Muslim community made a similar confession to *The New York Times*: “Why this damage to their own streets, their own cities, their own communities?” he asked out loud. “Maybe if we had paid attention then this wouldn’t have happened.”

A young Muslim who worked at a corner shop in Leeds expressed the same frustration from his perspective: “The older generations and the younger ones just don’t talk like you think they should. Extremists don’t walk into mosques and say ‘Excuse me, would you like to join me in blowing up London?’ It just doesn’t work that way.” What he meant was that extremists take the time and energy to build strong relationships with young Muslims, while too many members of the established older generation don’t even try to connect.

Reading this, I could not help but think of a funeral I attended for the mother of a twenty-year-old Muslim friend. The death came as a complete shock. Sohail was sleeping when a neighbor knocked on the door and said that his mother, an active woman in her fifties, was lying on the front lawn. She had had a heart attack while shoveling snow off the driveway. The imam who performed the funeral looked uncomfortable around Sohail, his sister, and the group of grieving young people who had developed deep affection for their mother. His sermon at the burial consisted of the statement, “This woman was a good Mus-

lim and taught Qur'an and Hadith to her children. You must follow her example and teach Islam to your children." Not a word of comfort about the spiritual meaning of death and the afterlife in Islam. No arm around Sohail's shoulder. No lines of transcendence from Rumi about returning to our source. Only a short, cold command. During the most difficult time in Sohail's life, his religious leader failed him. If Sohail ever had a question about faith, the absolute last person he would seek out is this man.

I was lucky. My free-fall was stopped by the YMCA. Since my mother started working, I had been in after-school care and summer camp at the B. R. Ryall Y in Glen Ellyn, the suburb of Chicago where I was raised. Kids who wouldn't talk to me in school buddied up to me at the Y. We played capture the flag and ultimate frisbee and made up break dancing routines. One day, when my parents were especially late picking my brother and me up, I decided to walk home. I was on the roof of my house removing my bedroom window when I heard frantic shouting from the driveway. It was my father and several of the Y staff. They had been driving around Glen Ellyn for the past hour looking for me. There were still people in the woods behind the Y searching to see if I had gotten lost there. My dad was furious. He explained that my impulsiveness had worried and inconvenienced a lot of people. I was a little scared going to camp the next day. But Sheila, one of the camp counselors, rubbed my head and said, "I tired my feet out looking for you, kiddo. Man, I'm glad we found you. You're one of my favorites here and I don't want anything bad to happen to you." I almost jumped into her arms.

As I grew older, my camp counselors encouraged me to join the Leaders Club, a YMCA group for teenagers that focused on volunteering as a key to leadership development. There are Leaders Clubs at Ys across the country, and every summer there are one-week camps called Leaders Schools where Leaders Clubs in different regions gather. If Y camp was where I first discovered I could be liked, the Central Region Leaders School is where I first recognized I could create and contribute. People were always asking me to take charge of something. I designed the Wednesday service project we did at a senior citizens' center. I played the lead in the end-of-week skit. My name showed up on a regular basis in the daily newsletter. Staff sought my advice on how to deal with troubled participants. I was asked to give nominating speeches for

people running for President of Leaders School, and was elected to the Council one year myself.

I felt physical pain when the week of Leaders School was over. The confident, creative, contributing somebody that emerged would have to be folded back in so that I could make it through school days without being noticed by the bullies. But the memory of the person I had been that week, the person I could be, remained. My grades rose, I stopped hanging out with the boys on dirt bikes.

The YMCA's secret is simple, and it stems from a genuine love of young people. The conventional wisdom is that young people are scrambling for their place in things. The YMCA knows that, deep down, young people need more than that. A place is too passive, and because the scheme of things is constantly shifting, too fleeting. It's not a *place* young people need so much as a *role*, an opportunity to be powerful, a mount from which to shape their world. And so the YMCA nudges them in the direction of leadership—fourteen-year-olds in charge of ten-year-olds at camp, college students coaching high school basketball teams.

At Leaders School, we sang a song called "Pass it On." It used the metaphor of fire to speak about the sharing of religious faith. I would sing it around the house for weeks after Leaders School was over (I once slipped and sang a few lines in front of my high school friends, for which I got tortured mercilessly for months). In one of the moments when my father was feeling especially righteous about his Muslimness, I overheard him expressing concern to my mother that the YMCA, which was, after all, the Young Men's *Christian* Association, was teaching us Christian songs. "Do you think they are trying to teach Christianity to our kids?" the tone of his voice a kind of auditory chest-thumping.

"I hope so," my mother responded. "I hope they teach the kids Jewish and Hindu songs, too. That's the kind of Muslims we want our kids to be."

In an off-hand comment made when I was a teenager, my mother guessed the arc of my life. ☺



The Buxton Initiative

VISION

To foster reconciliation among people
from different faiths and worldviews

MISSION

To establish a safe table supported by friendship and trust
where candid dialogue and understanding
among people from different faith traditions and life experiences
can find ways to live with differences

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