

**Toward an Islam of Grace:
Owning Up Instead of Being Wound Collectors
By Asra Q. Nomani**

**U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Homeland Security
“The American Muslim Response to Hearings on Radicalization within their Community”
June 20, 2012**

www.asranomani.com
asra@asranomani.com

*O ye who believe!
Stand out firmly □
For justice, as witnesses □
To God, even if it may be against
Yourselves, or your parents
Or your kin.*

—“Al-Nisa” (The Women), Qur’an 4:135

Wake-Up Call

In early March 2011, in the pre-dawn darkness of a cold, rainy morning, I stirred awake my son, Shibli, now 9, to make sure we got seats for the first hearing of the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Homeland Security on a critically important topic: “The Extent of Radicalization in the American Muslim Community and That Community's Response.”

As the sun rose, we stood sheltered from the rain in the marble and limestone threshold to Cannon House Office Building at the corner of Independence Avenue SE and New Jersey Avenue SE, the first in line, waiting for the building’s doors to open. I felt, as a boy born into a Muslim family, my son should be witness to history. Born in 2002, he is part of the first generation born after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on the United States by 19 hijackers acting in the name of Islam, and the issue of radicalization inside the Muslim community is an issue that his generation will inherit. I wanted him to be witness to the important, albeit difficult, conversation that was to be had in the hearing room.

To me, the hearings represent an important wake-up call that we, as a nation, are not going to continue to simply tap dance around the reality of an extremist ideology of Islam that is wreaking havoc in the world. My son was thrilled to miss a day of school, staying for the entire hearing, earning him a sticker from a U.S. Capitol Hill Police officer. (Having a Pokémon game with him helped during some of the slow moments.)

For today’s hearing, “The American Muslim Response to Hearings on Radicalization within their Community,” I bring my son again, this time to sit in the front row behind me with my parents. Thank you to the honorable Chairman Peter King and members of the Committee for the invitation to speak.

In Islam, we have a symbolic manifestation of accountability at the end of every prayer, turning to say, “*As-salam-ailaikum,*” or “Peace be upon you,” to metaphorical angels that sit on our shoulders, recording our deeds, bad and good, for our judgment day. In my life, my parents and my son symbolize to me the people to whom I feel most accountable, and I testify today, emboldened by the values of truth telling, honesty and service my parents taught me, invoking our Muslim faith, and with a clear sense of *farz*, or duty, to do whatever I can do to ensure a better future for my son and his generation.

What I hope to do this morning is speak to you from the heart as an American and as a Muslim, but most importantly as a mother. I know that the issue of radicalization within the Muslim community and the community's response to it is very polarizing, but I hope that we can speak to each other from a place of sincerity so that we can protect and express the values and principles in which we believe, guided most of all by higher principles of truth-telling and justice.

In my testimony, I will focus on the topic of the hearing—identifying the patterns in the American Muslim *response* to the hearings on radicalization—and I will draw broader conclusions about Muslim responses to the issue of extremism in our community and offer recommendations on how the response can be transformed within an Islam of grace, more healthy and healing for all sides in the conversation. Except for describing how I have seen radicalization express itself in my life, I won't spell out the many ways that an extremist ideology of Islam has taken root in Muslim communities since that isn't the scope of this particular hearing.

Unfortunately, I believe that, inside much of our Muslim communities, we have departed from our very clear sense of holding ourselves accountable. The Muslim community's response to the hearings on radicalization within our community—much like the response of many communities to internal problems—hasn't been one of taking ownership of our problems but rather engaging in a strategy of deflection.

This same strategy of deflection has expressed itself in our wider response to radicalization, terrorism, and the presence of an intolerant interpretation of Islam in our world today.

We are very much a culture of denial, fixated on perceived wounds.

Indeed, all of us carry wounds from generation to generation and throughout our personal lives. Slavery in the U.S., the Holocaust, apartheid in South Africa, the Rwandan genocide, the religious wars in Ireland, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the smoldering tensions in Kashmir. These are just a few historical examples of deep wounds passed from generation to generation, both on the personal and societal level. On a personal level, our wounds can be emotional or physical abuse, abandonment, death, poverty, and so much more. On a societal level, they can manifest in war, genocide, authoritarianism, civil injustice, and also so much more.

How we respond to wounds comes to define us, as individuals and communities. It very much guides the ways in which we respond to challenges and conflicts in the world.

I would argue that many in our Muslim society have adopted a culture as “wound collectors,” holding onto grievances and responding to scrutiny with a strategy characterized by four very distinct elements: denial, deflection, demonization, and defensiveness.

I believe we have the capacity to practice an Islam of grace that includes compassion, forgiveness, truth telling, and owning up.

I speak from several vantage points. As a mother and as a Muslim, I have witnessed the radicalization of my community over my lifetime, and I care very deeply about directly challenging the interpretation of Islam that fuels militancy and terrorism. Pakistani militants and al-Qaeda operatives, including 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammad, kidnapped and killed my friend and colleague from the *Wall Street Journal*, Daniel Pearl, in the name of Islam.

As a former reporter for the *Wall Street Journal* for 15 years, I have witnessed communication strategies that work and those that don't. As a journalist reporting, writing and commenting on extremism for the last decade for publications from the *Daily Beast* to the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, *Time* magazine and the *Washingtonian* magazine, I have observed and reported on the communication strategies of Muslims from ordinary citizens to government officials and the leaders of militant and terrorist organizations. As an activist in the Muslim community for women's rights and tolerance, I have faced the response of Muslim leaders,

organizations and individuals to issues of controversy. As I write my testimony, a Muslim blogger has already tried to discredit my fellow witnesses and me as “astroturf Muslims,” in the politics of marginalization and *takfir*, the act of proclaiming other Muslims “non-Muslims,” if they dare to challenge conventional wisdom.

Finally, as a cultural trainer for the last three years to the U.S. military and other federal agencies, including the FBI, I have tapped my graduate studies in international communications, emphasizing cross-cultural communications, to translate communication patterns expressed in traditional Muslim cultures to military and federal personnel deploying to Afghanistan and Pakistan. I work with one purpose: to save lives.

Radicalization

To come to the conclusion that we have responded to radicalism from a place of denial, I had to first become convinced myself that radicalism exists inside of our communities.

Born in 1965 in Mumbai, India, into a conservative Muslim family, I have come to accept this truth after a lifelong journey that has brought me face-to-face with the darkest expression of Islam in the world today.

In the summer of 1969, I arrived in the United States with my older brother, Mustafa, to join my parents as immigrants to this country. In India, my mother had worn the full-face veil and black gown that is called the *burka*. Her mother, my *nani*, wasn't at her husband's deathbed when he passed from this earth because men were visiting at the moment and she was required by her family's interpretation of Islam to leave the room.

My family settled in Morgantown, W.V., where my father, Zafar, was a professor of nutrition at West Virginia University and my mother, Sajida, ran a boutique. Growing up, my best friend was Nancy Drew.

In this country, my family practiced a conservative but open-minded interpretation of Islam. I didn't go to junior high school dances but my parents allowed me to run track in shorts and a tank top. My father started a mosque but I wasn't allowed to enter because the men had imported a tradition that women and girls aren't allowed to enter mosques. My mother taught me to read the Quran at home.

As a child, I saw the encroachment of intolerant interpretations of Islam into our American Muslim community. At potluck dinner parties of the local Muslim community, we had met freely as families, with no separation between women and men, but in the mid-1970s, I found myself, as a girl, relegated to separate areas with the women. As females, we always got less food and fewer bottles of Sprite. One thing the American civil rights movement had taught us that I found to be completely true: Separate is *not* equal.

By the 1970s, the government of Saudi Arabia had gotten oil money and on the campus of West Virginia University we were starting to see students from Saudi Arabia, importing their country's strict Wahhabi interpretation of Islam to my community, bringing with it sectarianism, sexism, and intolerance.

For most of my life, I sat on the fence, calculating, like many in our community, that it was just easier to look the other way than confront difficult truths. I lived in denial. I was one of the many moderate Muslims who simply covered or walked away from confrontation, intimidated into thinking we are less pious or faithful—or concluding it isn't worth the bother. Social ostracism is one weapon in silencing dissent.

Sept. 11, 2001, was my call to action. I flew to Pakistan to make sense of the ideology of Islam that had inspired the 19 hijackers to kill themselves and some 3,000 others.

On January 23, 2002, I directly faced the darkness that has been expressed in the name of Islam. Daniel Pearl, a close friend from the *Wall Street Journal*, was visiting my rented home in Karachi, Pakistan, with his wife, Mariane, when I stood by the gates to my house with Mariane, waving goodbye to him as he set off in a yellow taxi for an interview from which he never returned.

Danny was kidnapped off the streets of Karachi, held in captivity for about a week by Pakistani militants who ascribed to a radicalized interpretation of Islam called Deobandism, a sort of Wahhabi ideology of South

Asia. He was then brutally slaughtered in the name of Islam by men who laid their prayer rugs upon the bloodied floor to raise their hands to the heavens, saying *salam* to the metaphorical angels on their shoulders before slipping into hiding.

Later, the mastermind of 9/11, Khalid Sheikh Mohammad, confessed to killing Danny with his “blessed right hand.” When the FBI and Pakistani investigators came to my house to tell Danny’s wife that they had received a video, “The Murder of the Spy-Journalist, the Jew Daniel Pearl,” documenting Danny’s murder, Mariane ran into the bedroom she had shared with Danny, slammed the door shut, and sent shock waves of blood-curdling screams into the night air.

Outside the door, I sat on the stairs, collapsing my head into the open palms of my hands, speaking to myself the Muslim prayer for protection that my mother had taught me in my earliest days, trying to make sense of the men who justified killing my friend because he was Jewish.

I faced another challenge: I had just discovered I was pregnant. My boyfriend, a Muslim, had told me we would wed before Danny’s kidnapping, but he had left on the first day of Danny’s kidnapping in fear of getting trapped in an international dragnet. By the Islamist laws of Pakistan put in place in 1979, under the influence of the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam promoted globally by Saudi Arabia, I was a criminal because I wasn’t married, my baby as evidence against me.

Needless to say, I returned home to West Virginia, where my son was born on October 16, 2002. When I was in the delivery room, doctors told me that my son’s heart rate was falling precariously low. I started saying “Allah hu” with every breath, inhaling the power of the Divine and exhaling it out into the universe.

In these two moments of peril, I tried to invoke a higher spirit for all of the reasons that religion was created: to usher forward calm and solace.

Over the next years, as I tried to make peace with my faith, I realized that our Muslim world is in a spiritual crisis. Since September 11, 2001, we have been challenged as a community. For some of us, that has meant promoting an interpretation of Islam that is tolerant and good. I embrace an interpretation of Islam that we call “Islamic feminism,” rejecting the second-class status afforded women in much of the community, going into the main halls of mosques in the U.S. reserved only for men, an act for which I’ve been harassed in mosques around the country from my hometown mosque in Morgantown, W.V., to Los Angeles, Seattle, New York City, and Washington, D.C., including the “9/11 mosque” in northern Virginia, ironically a place of refuge for some of the 9/11 hijackers, former al-Qaeda propagandist Anwar al-Awlaki, and the Fort Hood shooter, Major Nidal Hassan. In 2000, women at 66% of the U.S. mosques prayed behind a curtain or partition or in another room, compared with 52% in 1994, according to a survey of leaders of 416 mosques nationwide.

In my mosque in West Virginia, I got a copy of a Quran published by the government of Saudi Arabia. The original first chapter of the Quran innocuously reads:

“Show us the straight way. The way of those on whom Thou has bestowed Thy Grace. Those whose (portion) is not wrath, and who go not astray.” (1:6-7)

Changing the translation, the Quran published by the King Fahd Complex for the Printing of the Holy Quran in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia spells out exactly who has gone astray: the “Christians” and the “Jews.”

“Guide us on the straight way. The Way of those on whom You have bestowed Your Grace, not (the way) of those who earned Your Anger (such as the Jews), nor of those who went astray (such as the Christians.” (1:6-7)

I found the same spirit of frightening theology in a book distributed by our local Muslim Students Association, *Women in the Shade of Islam*, by a Saudi cleric, arguing for an interpretation of Islam of a

controversial verse, 4:34, to allow a husband to “beat” his wife. And pulling sermons from a Saudi website, alminbar.com, one of our imams warned us from going on the “dark path” of the West. Under trial to be banned for protesting these disturbing teachings, I borrowed from religious reformer Martin Luther and posted “99 Precepts for Opening Hearts, Minds, and Doors in the Muslim World” on the front door of my mosque (Attachment 1).

For others, the challenge has meant clinging even more tightly to tradition and ideology so that our identity cannot be shaken as an *ummah*, or community. The net effect has been devastating. We are failing our youth. We are failing the world. And we are failing our faith.

It is for the future of our children that I firmly believe we have to change the course of relations between Muslims and the West. My experience in Karachi was life changing and propelled me onto a path as a writer, challenging conventional doctrine, interpretation and ideas in my Muslim community. I call my new incarnation *jihad bil kulum*, or “struggle of the pen,” to assert a new way of thinking about taboo topics from militancy in the community to issues of sexuality, women’s rights, and truth telling.

Last month in May 2012, reporting for *Washingtonian* magazine, I attended the Guantanamo Bay arraignment of the five defendants charged for the 9/11 attacks, including Khalid Sheikh Mohammad. Cues about how important Islam is to the thinking of these five men speak volumes. Defendant Ramzi bin al Shibh did the call to prayer in the military courtroom, to be followed by Khalid Sheikh Mohammad laying his prayer rug toward Mecca and leading the four other defendants behind him in prayer to the heavens. They ended their prayer as we all do, in our Muslim communities: saying *salam* to the figurative angels on their shoulders.

Saving Face

Like every faith, honesty, truth, and justice are values of importance in Islam. But the notion of truth telling in the Muslim community is a complicated one.

From a cross-cultural communications perspective, pioneered by scholars such as Edward T. Hall, societies and individuals fit into two typical models: high-context and low-context. This analysis is by no means black-and-white, but it’s a frame of reference.

High-context cultures are typically characterized by communication styles that require a lot of context, family lineage, for example, having great value. These cultures include countries such as Afghanistan, Japan, China, Pakistan, India and nations inside Africa, Latin American and South America. Muslim communities fit into this category.

Low-context cultures, in contrast, require little context, an individual’s personal identity, for example, being more important than ancestry. They typically include the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, and most other Western nations.

There are some characteristics of high-context, shame-based cultures that express themselves in confronting difficult issues, such as the issue of radicalization in the Muslim community. One of the most important elements is how Muslim communities are largely characterized by a high value for honor and an aversion to shame. Muslim communities, like so many, are largely shame-based societies, and they don’t take easily to admitting their problems.

In the name of honor—and saving face—many in the Muslim community circle the wagons and deny ugly truths, like many communities respond when they feel like they are under siege. In these cultures, saving face trumps truth telling. Since these cultures are also collectivist in nature, a criticism against an individual or a discussion of a specific issue is often taken as an affront against the entire culture.

Thus, in these cultures, people often take a very defensive posture to issues that risk embarrassing the community. In a discussion on the specific, narrow issue of radicalization in the Muslim community, we get defensive statements filled with hyperbole, such as, “The U.S. is at war with Islam,” “Not all Muslims are

bad,” and “Islam is on trial,” rather than precise, nuanced discussions. This has very much been the response of Muslim organizations to the Committee hearings and the broader issue of radicalization in the Muslim community. A discussion of a precise issue is perceived as an affront to all.

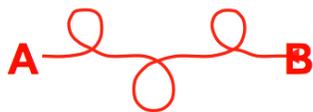
In low-context cultures, when we can ask a simple question, “Is there a radicalization problem inside of Muslim communities?” we expect a straight-forward answer: Yes or no, moving directly from the questioner at point A to the respondent at point B. In fact, in low-context cultures, largely defined by guilt instead of shame, confessions have great value. It works to tell someone in a guilt-based culture: “Go ahead. Get that off your chest. You’ll feel better.”

Figure 1: Low-Context Communication Style



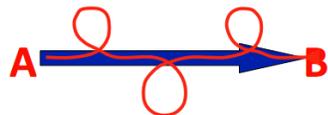
In high-context cultures, we get a long-winded, loopy contextual answer between point A and point B. In shame-based cultures, individuals don’t feel better by confessing; they feel worse for bringing shame upon themselves and perhaps their family and community.

Figure 2: High-Context Communication Style



What can occur when these two styles meet is classic cross-cultural communications clash.

Figure 3: Cross-Cultural Communications Clash



In the case of the Committee hearings, we heard about the issue of extremism in white supremacist communities, the perceived civil rights abuses against Muslims, the historical legacy of colonialism, and the illegitimacy of commentators on the issue. For the most part, from Muslim critics of the hearing, we didn't get a straight answer to the question of radicalization in the community.

In much the same spirit, when former 60 Minutes correspondent Ed Bradley asked Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, a prominent American Muslim leader, about the 9/11 attack, Mr. Rauf responded with a contextual answer: “It is a reaction against the policies of the U.S. government, politically, where we espouse principles of democracy and human rights and where we ally ourselves with oppressive regimes in many of these countries.” The response caused Mr. Bradley to even stammer: “Are — are — are you in any way suggesting that we in the United States deserved what happened?” Mr. Rauf responded, “I wouldn’t say that the United States deserved what happened, but the United States policies were an accessory to the crime that happened.”

The net result: a classic case of cross-cultural communications clash. Mr. Rauf drew the ire of American listeners who didn't want to hear the historical context of the attacks, and he got head nodding from Muslims who appreciated the context he brought to the discussion.

‘Wound Collectors’ and ‘Couch Jihadis’

In 2005, Joe Navarro, a former FBI special agent, coined the concept of terrorists as “wound collectors” in a book, *Hunting Terrorism: A Look at the Psychopathology of Terror*, which incorporated years of experience analyzing terrorists worldwide from Spain to today’s Islamic movements. He wrote that “terrorists are perennial wound collectors,” bringing up “events from decades and even centuries past.” He noted: “Their recollection of these events is as meaningful and painful today as when they originally took place. For them there is no statute of limitations on suffering. Wound collection to a great extent is driven by their fears and their paranoia which coalesces nicely with their uncompromising ideology. Wound collecting serves a purpose, to support and vindicate, keeping all past events fresh, thus magnifying their significance into the present, a rabid rationalization for fears and anxieties within.”

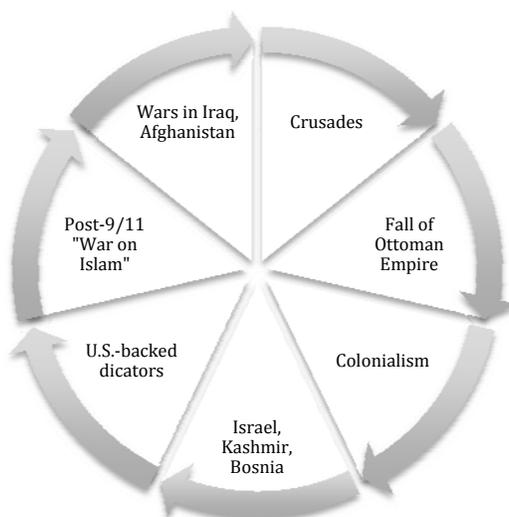
To me, this phenomenon extends to the larger Muslim community, where there are wounds expressed in living room debates that earn many Muslims status as “couch jihadis,” as one U.S. law enforcement official referred to them in conversation with me. I grew up eavesdropping on these “couch jihadis” in the men’s sections of our dinner parties. Indeed, Mr. Navarro, told me, “Collecting wounds become cultural,” for communities worldwide. Clearly, knowing a community’s wounds is important to understanding its history, Mr. Navarro said, but he noted, “The beauty of extremism is that it doesn’t allow forgiveness.”

In the Muslim community, you could spin a wheel and pluck from a number of grievances that would have as much relevance today as when it was first experienced. I call this a “circle of wounds” that very much express themselves in our Muslim communities.

Steven Stosny, a psychologist and the author of *Love Without Hurt*, counsels individuals struggling with wounds defining their interpersonal relationships, but he says wounds can also define a culture or community. “There is a cultural quality to wounds,” he told me. “Collecting wounds holds the group together.” He said that wounds can also lead to “denial and complete insensitivity” of others hurts. Approached a different way, however, healing can emerge: “When you can focus on another’s wounds,” he said, “you heal your own.”

In America, I would gently suggest, we haven’t yet healed the wound from 9/11. And in the Muslim community, we have a circle of wounds from the Crusades to the modern day wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Figure 4: Circle of Wounds in Muslim Communities



Culture of Denial

In the years since 9/11, the Muslim community has launched obtuse public relations campaigns that don’t

address issues of radicalism head-on, but rather focus on these perceived wounds. Speaking as a journalist, this is a disastrous PR strategy, whether it's expressed by Union Carbide following the Bhopal, India, disaster or by Muslim organizations following the 9/11 attacks.

This strategy expresses itself in Muslim communities worldwide, leading outsiders to ask frustrated questions such as, "Why doesn't the moderate majority Muslims speak up against extremism?" Often, many Muslims think they are speaking up, but they don't realize their statements are filled with denials and deflection.

In 2008 in Pakistan, local pop stars attempted to challenge the issue of militancy in the country with a song akin to the U.S. pop song, "We are the World." To me, they did the kind of tap dance that frustrates so many. I call it the "tap dance of denial." The Pakistani song was "*Ye Hum Naheeh*," or "This is not us," in Urdu, the official language of Pakistan. In the lyrics, the pop stars refer to the militancy exported from Pakistan to targets from London to Mumbai, India, and Time Square, New York, and sing, "This story that is being spread in our names is a lie." There is an obfuscation of the truth in their denial.

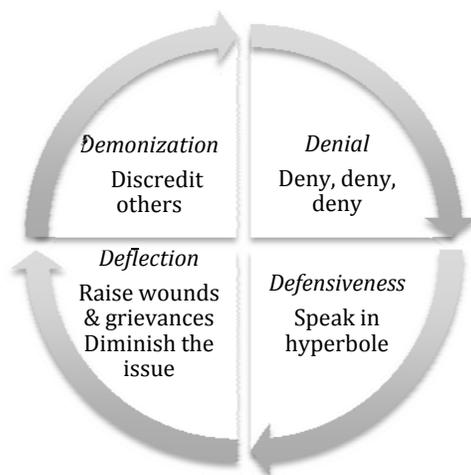
In a moment of clarity, the singers acknowledge a truth about the self-destructive nature of militancy and terrorism to the Muslim community—and the consequence of paralysis. "We are scared of the dark so much that we are burning our own home," they sing. The singers ultimately acknowledge the grief at hand for all: "Your hurts are a deep sea—our wounds are deep."

Studying the response of Muslims to difficult issues from the House hearings on radicalization to the presence of Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad, Pakistan, near the nation's capital, I've identified four elements typically found in the Muslim community's leaders and citizens as they attempt to save face:

- Denial: Outright denial of the problem.
- Demonization: Employing this approach, it's common to attempt to discredit others.
- Deflection: Diverting the discussion, most often to grievances and wounds.
- Defensiveness: Framing the discussion as an attack on the entire culture and religion.

This dynamic expresses itself in a self-perpetuating circle of denial that feeds anger, frustration, and hurt.

Figure 5: Circle of Denial in Muslim Communities and Beyond



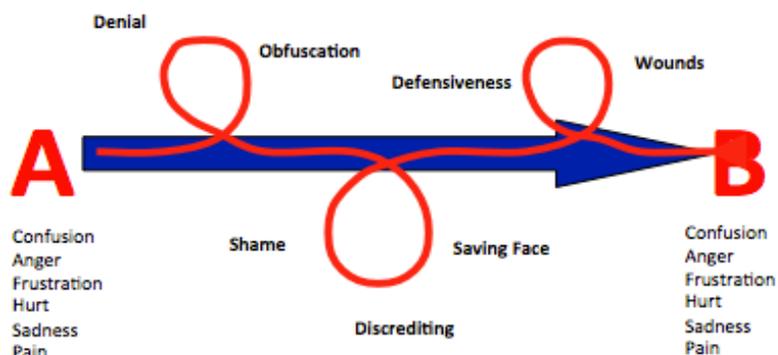
The net effect of the communications culture clash is disastrous for all sides, leading very often to anger, hurt, pain, confusion, and anger for everyone. Even in jest, in an episode called, "To Kill a Mockingturd," after the

killing of Osama bin Laden in Pakistan, comedian commentator Jon Stewart crumpled a piece of paper in frustration, responding to former Pakistani leader Pervez Musharraf's denials about knowledge of bin Laden's presence in his country, Mr. Stewart asking, rhetorically: "You know what hurts the most?"

Mr. Stewart responded, "You lied to me! You lied to me!" He ended: "I can't talk about this!"

This same cycle of frustration and anger occurred, from my perspective, in the wake of the announcement that a mosque was to be built near Ground Zero for the 9/11 attacks in lower Manhattan, Imam Faisal Abdul Rauf an early proponent. Many New Yorkers perceived the plans to build the mosque as insensitive. I agreed. The cycle of confusion, anger, pain, frustration, hurt, and sadness spilled over onto the streets of New York on the anniversary of 9/11 as protestors against the mosque confronted supporters.

Figure 6: Culture Clash between Muslim Communities and Others



In our Muslim community, the constant airing of grievances can paralyze us from taking personal responsibility for problems within our community. We live in a state of shame and victimization. That leads to insensitivity, defensiveness and denial. For example, after 9/11, leaders at a Long Island mosque with which Chairman King had had good relations were quoted in the newspaper, repeating conspiracy theories. The mosque's interfaith director at the time said: "Who really benefits from such a horrible tragedy that is blamed on Muslims and Arabs? Definitely Muslims and Arabs do not benefit. It must be the enemy of Muslims and Arabs. An independent investigation must take place." Chairman King later told the *Washington Post* about his distress over the reaction: "At this key moment for our country, the worst attack on us in history, these people who I thought were my friends were talking about Zionists and conspiracies," he said. "They were trying to look the other way while friends of mine were being murdered."

Breaking the Silence

To me, the Committee hearings have not been a witch-hunt and Chairman King is no Joe McCarthy, the senator who led hearings on communism in America. Far from being harassment, the Committee's hearings have represented a chance for U.S. Muslims to break out of the culture of denial and acknowledge the extremism in our community.

Our worst enemies in America, I would argue, are Muslim interest groups and leaders, who do more to deny the problem of Muslim extremism than to defeat it, thus furthering the alienation of the Muslim community in the West and elsewhere. We need to acknowledge that there is a problem.

Our community heroes should be individuals such as the first witnesses at the Committee's hearings: Zuhdi Jasser, a former lieutenant commander in the U.S. Navy who battles ideologues at mosques in Phoenix and nationwide, and Abdirizak Bihi, a Somali-American who has challenged extremism in the Minneapolis community that has led to so many Somali-American youths going to their native country to fight for the Muslim extremist group al-Shabaab. Both have challenged extremism in their communities, but they have done so at great personal cost. They realize, I believe, that we have a greater imperative to right wrongs than

be silenced by fear of shame.

It's never easy to speak honestly about the "dirty laundry" in any community. In 2003, when I wrote about sexism and intolerance at my local mosque in Morgantown, West Virginia, a moderate young Egyptian-American attorney met me at the local Panera Bread. He had told me that he supported me but when we met he said, "Stop writing." His rationalization: "You are shaming the community."

Liberals complain that the hearings on American Muslims are a racist blame game. They often attempt to discredit and marginalize any Muslims trying to express their truth about the radicalization of Islam. This is what I witnessed happen to the Muslim witnesses at the first hearing. From my vantage point in the fourth row of the packed hearing room, sitting next to my son, Shibli, I was left with a very lasting memory. The hearing didn't amount to the much-anticipated slam against Muslims but rather it devolved, ironically, into an attack on the Muslim witnesses. It was horrifying to watch and more difficult to explain to my son.

The attempt to discredit war stories from the trenches in the battle against extremist interpretations of Islam is extremely troubling to me because so much of the inspiration for reform comes from the success of liberals in the U.S. civil rights, women's rights, and other social justice struggles. I'm as liberal as you can get: pro-gun control, pro-choice, pro-union, and pro-same sex marriage. But, on this issue of challenging extremism inside Islam, the hearing revealed to me that many liberals, sadly, are overlooking a serious issue of extremism, in the name of political correctness. While well intentioned, this approach is, to my estimation, short-sighted. If we continue at this rate of denial, as a nation, we don't stand a chance against al-Qaeda and Islamic militancy.

To me, the stories of the witnesses resonated. They expressed the same dynamics of intimidation that others and I have experienced trying to challenge dogma at our mosques. What's so disheartening is that women's rights and civil-rights leaders and activists have fought the same forces of intimidation and theological distortion that we face in the Muslim community when we challenge the dogmatic. We should be natural allies. Challenging the authority and legitimacy of other Muslims is usually the tactic puritanical Muslims (and all ideologues) use to silence reformers. It's a game in which Muslims try to out-Muslim each other.

Interestingly, conservatives have recognized the importance of challenging Islamic extremism. The liberals attack leaders such as Chairman King as the wrong person to lead the discussion. But the reason I support these hearings is that, at least, this Committee has the courage to hold this conversation and to explore this critical and contentious situation.

As the final gavel fell, one of the activists hurled one final insult at Jasser, the Phoenix physician. "You hate-monger!" she yelled at him. But Jasser had accomplished something very different: As a Muslim, he had broken the silence that only empowers the extremists.

'Owning Up'

There is a Quranic verse that reminds us of our divine imperative to testify to the truths of problems inside our community:

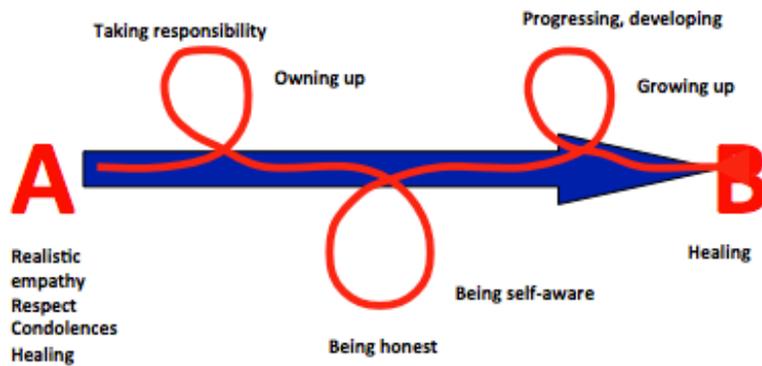
Oh ye who believe! □Stand out firmly for justice, as witnesses to God, even if it may be against yourselves, or your parents, or your kin

—“Al-Nisa” (The Women), Quran, 4: 135

To transform our culture of denial, we need to do something very simple: own up. We have Islamic values of forgiveness, truth telling, and honesty to take personal and societal responsibility for acknowledging,

challenging, and ultimately defeating radicalization within the community from an Islam of grace.

Table 7: Growing Up: An Islam of Grace



On the part of the West, there are elements of communication that we can contribute to bridge the gap:

- Realistic empathy can at least acknowledge the wounds. It doesn't have to be expressed as sympathy but rather just empathy for the grievances, wounds, and frustrations that are a part of highly contextual perspectives that many Muslims bring to the conversation.
- Simply being respectful affords some level of humanity in the conversation.
- Expressing even condolences for the perceived injustices can help mitigate the pain.
- With that, perhaps, can come some healing.

On the Muslim side, there are elements of communication that we need to incorporate:

- Owning up to the problem of radicalization and extremism in our communities by being honest about our problems.
- Taking responsibility for our problems so we can be part of the solutions. This amounts to being self-aware so we recognize our problems and our inclination to deflect and deny.
- Progressing and developing our institutions so we give Muslims viable opportunities for expression in politics, the media, and public policymaking.
- I say this in most loving way possible, but we need to grow up, forgiving and approaching the world from a rational perspective, allowing healing not only to others but ourselves.

Dr. Nancy Snow, a professor of cross-cultural communication at the University of California in Fullerton and a friend who has taught this topic with me to the U.S. military, told me, “We face a problem on how we all can move from a place of wound and grievance to one of redemption and hope. We seem to be at our farthest point from each other now. We can choose to keep our distance from each other, but if we do, we’ll never heal. We need to come out from the dark places that distance us from each other. We often say in communication circles that sunshine is the best of disinfectants. It refers to shining a light on the darkness, those hidden parts of us that fester—anger, hate, grievance, revenge.”

As a Muslim, this is our *jihad bil nafs*, or our struggle of the soul, for us as individuals and as a community. As an American, this is our personal and societal battle, as well.

The Muslim community has many valuable contributions to make to the U.S. and Western society, including our focus on values such as truth and justice, but these important values and truths are lost when our most visible representatives resort to terrorism—and the voices from within our community engage in the cycle of

denial.

We allow shame, or *sharam* as it's said in my native language of Urdu, and honor, or *ghairat*, to silence us. To me, this is the voice of our ego, and thus we need to be engaged in this *jihad bil nafs*. We need to choose reason and rationality, not shame and denial. We would be best served by exercising *ijtihad*, or critical thinking, owning up to issues the community's internal problems and issues so it can move past them, evolving and maturing.

We have to shake off the fear of shame and own the problems inside our community. In a sense, we need to be shameless. We have to realize that neither our community nor Islam has to be defined by criminals such as Major Nidal Hassan and Faisal Shahzad, but they will be if we don't accept these men and their ideologies came from our communities but we reject their thinking. Muslim communities may have legitimate grievances about U.S. foreign policy, but those grievances, too often, become excuses for avoiding the ugly truths about radicalization in our communities.

On the eve of this hearing, Rodney King, the victim of police violence years ago, died, his simple message enduring: "Can't we all just get along?"

As Muslims, it is up to us to stop walking on eggshells and avoiding a critical conversation about the dangerous interpretations of faith that exist in our community. It is up to us to lead an intelligent, nuanced, honest conversation, rather than just jumping to the blanket defense of Islam. If we own the problem, then we can all own the solution together.

Last year, when my son was in second grade, before the first Committee hearing, he came home with an assignment he had completed in school, titled, "Rights and Responsibilities." In it, he answered the question, "What does it mean to own up?" He responded by confessing that he didn't always brush his teeth when he told me he had. (I had no idea.) Seeing the early lesson my son was receiving in "owning up," I realized that this was the simple mandate we had to realize in our Muslim communities.

My personal heroes are my father and my mother, because they chose truth telling over status in the community. My father lost his position on our local mosque board when he stood with me for women's rights and tolerance. He also lost his friends. My mother prayed with me in the men's section of the mosque, and she stopped getting invitations to potluck dinners. What they remind me is that, beyond board positions, potluck dinners, and shame, it is our duty, as Muslims, to testify to the truth even if it is against our "kin."

Sitting behind me during my testimony, symbolically over my shoulders, they are the manifestation, to me, of the greater mandate we have as Muslims: to express an Islam of grace that is honest about our extremism, radicalization, and terrorism and constructive in our solutions.

As I would with the angels, I will express one thought to all, upon the end of my testimony, "*As-salam-alaikum*," or "peace be upon you."

###

Attachment 1

99 Precepts for Opening Hearts, Minds and Doors in the Muslim World

These precepts invoke the 99 names for Allah, or God.

1. The Loving One: Live with an open heart to others.
2. The Only One: We are all part of one global community.
3. The One: All people – women and men, people of all faiths, cultures, and identities – are created and exist as equals.
4. The Self-Sufficient: All people – women and men, people of all faiths, cultures, and identities – have a right to self-determination.
5. The Creator of Good: All people have a human right to happiness.
6. The First: A fundamental goal of religion is to inspire in us the best of human behaviour.
7. The Preserver: Religion isn't meant to destroy people.
8. The One Who Gives Clemency: We aren't meant to destroy people.
9. The Absolute Ruler: We are not rulers over each other.
10. The Owner of All: No individual or group of individuals may treat any of us as property.
11. The Mighty: Spirituality goes far deeper than mere adherence to rituals.
12. The Appraiser: We are the sum of our small deeds of kindness for others.
13. The Inspirer of Faith: It is not for human beings to judge who is faithful and who is not.
14. The One with Special Mercy: Humanity and God are best served by separating the 'sin' from the 'sinner'.
15. The Finder: Virtue doesn't come with wealth.
16. The Supreme One: All people are created with an inner nature that seeks divine nature and is disposed toward virtue.
17. The Doer of Good: Thus, live virtuously.
18. The Greatest: Have the courage to take risks.
19. The Possessor of All Strength: Have the courage to stand up for your beliefs, for truth and for justice even when they collide with the status quo.
20. The One Who Honours: Respect one another.
21. The Magnificent: Glorify one another with kind words, not harsh words.
22. The Forgiver: Forgive one another, and ourselves, with compassion.
23. The All-Compassionate: Be compassionate with one another.
24. The Compeller: Love the soul even when we don't love the 'sin'.
25. The All-Merciful: Be motivated by love of God, not fear of God.
26. The Supreme in Greatness: Be kind, respectful and considerate with one another.
27. The One Who Rewards Thankfulness: Appreciate the freedoms you enjoy.
28. The Accounter: Know that we are all accountable for how we treat one another.
29. The Gatherer: Know that anyone you wrong will testify against you on your judgement day.
30. The Expander: Be friends to one another.
31. The Exalter: Win the greatest struggle – the struggle of the soul, jihad bil nafs – to good.

32. The Highest: Rise to the highest principles of Islam's benevolent teachings.
33. The Giver of All: Rise to the highest values of human existence, not the lowest common denominator.
34. The One Who Opens: Live with an open mind.
35. The One Who Enriches: The Qur'an enjoins us to enrich ourselves and our communities with knowledge.
36. The Subtle One: Islam is not practiced in a monolithic way.
37. The All-Forgiving: We allow ourselves to be more positively transformed if we accept rather than despise our dark side.
38. The Maker of Beauty: Islam can be a religion of joy.
39. The Maker of Order: In any society governed by oppression and senseless rules, there will be rebellion, whether expressed publicly or in private.
40. The Guide to Repentance: Evil is social injustice, discrimination, prideful rigidity, bigotry and intolerance.
41. The Nourisher: We were all created with the right to make our own decisions about our lives, our minds, our bodies and our futures.
42. The One Who Withholds: Certain traditions and ideologies betray Islam as a religion of peace, tolerance and justice.
43. The Creator of the Harmful: Repression creates fears that are manifested in dysfunctional ways.
44. The Generous: Women possess the same human rights as men.
45. The All-Comprehending: Chastity and modesty are not the sole measure of a woman's worth.
46. The Last: Puritanical repression of sexuality and issues of sexuality is self-defeating and creates a hypersexual society.
47. The Seer of All: The false dichotomy between the private world and the public world leads us to avoid being completely honest about issues of sexuality.
48. The Majestic One: The Qur'an tells us: There is no compulsion in religion.
49. The All-Aware: The Qur'an enjoins us: Exhort one another to truth.
50. The Knower of All: Thus, seek knowledge.
51. The All-Powerful: Do not put any barriers in front of any person's pursuit of knowledge.
52. The Ever-Living One: Reject ignorance, isolation and hatred.
53. The Truth: Live truthfully.
54. The Praised One: Praise worthy aspiration, not destruction.
55. The Manifest One: Be the leader you want to see in the world even though you lack position, rank or title.
56. The Perfectly Wise: Lead with wisdom.
57. The Originator: Open the doors of ijtihad (critical thinking) based on istihsan (equity) and istihsal (the needs of the community).
58. The One Who Is Holy: Honour and respect the voices and rights of all people.
59. The Sustainer: Empower each other, particularly women, to be self-sustaining.
60. The Governor: Do not allow anyone to unleash a vigilante force on any man, woman or child.

61. The Hearer of All: Be honest about issues of sexuality in our communities.
62. The Expeditor: Lift repression.
63. The Guardian: Reject a sexual double standard for men and women.
64. The Restorer: Reform our communities to reject bigoted, sexist and intolerant practices.
65. The Righteous Teacher: Question defective doctrine from a perspective based on the Qur'an, the traditions of the Prophet and ijihad.
66. The One Who Resurrects: Know that we all will face a reckoning for our deeds.
67. The Guide: We must open the doors of Islam to all.
68. The Creator of All Power: We are in a struggle of historic proportions for the way Islam expresses itself in the world.
69. The Mighty: The Qur'an is clear: Stand out firmly for justice, as witnesses to God, even if it may be against yourselves, or your parents or your kin.
70. The Satisfier of All Needs: Political expediency does not override our morally compelled duty to tell the truth.
71. The Responder to Prayer: Spiritual activism is a noble pursuit.
72. The One Who Humiliates: Sexism, stereotypes and intolerance are the common denominators of all extremism.
73. The Giver of Life: We cannot accept murder in the name of Islam.
74. The Inheritor of All: Racism, sexism and hatred are unacceptable in God's world.
75. The Taker of Life: Dogmatism and intolerance lead to violence.
76. The One Who Abases: Making women invisible is a defining feature of violent societies.
77. The Just: Women and men are spiritual and physical equals.
78. The Equitable One: Women's rights are equal to men's rights.
79. The Witness: Nothing we do is without a witness.
80. The One Who Prevents Harm: Rejecting injustice is more important than protecting honour.
81. The Delayer: Honour can be the worst expression of ego.
82. The Judge: Justice is not what the majority believes is right.
83. The Forbearing One: We are not judges of each other.
84. The Ruler of Majesty and Bounty: If change will come tomorrow, we should not wait but should create it today.
85. The Trustee: Thus, know women have an intrinsic right to be leaders in all capacities in our Muslim world, including as prayer leaders or imams.
86. The Creator: Reach inside to create the change you want to see in the world.
87. The Forceful One: Stand strong for justice.
88. The One Who Subdues: Stand up to extremists and all forms of extremism.
89. The Self-Existing One: Break the silence sheltering injustice and intolerance.
90. The Originator: Create a new reality.
91. The Glorious: Stand up to the forces of darkness.

92. The Watchful One: Question the source of hate in order to dismantle it.
93. The Protector: Respect women's equal rights and human dignity, from the mosque and the public square to the workplace and the bedroom.
94. The Avenger: Use principles of social justice to define our communities.
95. The Everlasting: Stand up to create an everlasting Muslim world that will enrich our global society.
96. The Patient One: Exercise patience as a virtue, not as an excuse.
97. The Source of Peace: Live peacefully with others.
98. The Light: Create cities of light to overpower the darkness in our Muslim world.
99. The Hidden One: Ultimately our choice is only one: We must create communities with open hearts, open minds and open doors to all.