

OK
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Overcoming Reality

I'm sick of it.

I'm sick of the divisions within Milwaukee that split our city into concrete racial clusters. I'm sick of people treating those with darker skin colors as if they are somehow inferior. I'm sick of being placed with my Muslim brothers and sisters into a small box that defines us all – every single one of us – as terrorists.

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I'm sick of being divided.

When in public, my religion of Islam is clearly stamped upon me because of the *hijab*, or headscarf, that I wear around my head. I don this hijab with pride; more than an article of clothing, I am wearing a verse from our holy book, the Quran.

But for countless Muslim women, the pride that this hijab brings for them, as well as the beauty behind its ordinance from God Himself, is being overshadowed by their fear. In recent months especially, anti-Muslim rhetoric has grown into a rampant plague, spreading fiercely to every crevice and corner of our nation. So commonplace has this bigotry become that I no longer feel surprise at the news headlines, social media posts, and political speeches that undermine us. It's frustrating, to say the least, and yet I have become almost numb to this discrimination. Slowly, painfully, and stealthily, the hatred and ignorance toward my fellow Muslims has become an unwelcome but definite part of my life.

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Change happens, though. It always does. What we must remember, however, is that when change happens for the better, it is only as a result of those who choose to act, and most importantly, overcome.

During one of the recent Friday sermons at my local mosque, the *imam*, who has the role of leading the prayers, said something while standing at the pulpit that continues to drive me forward. He reminded the hundreds of men and women sitting in front of him that Muslims alone are not the only minority group being marginalized in the United States, and that at this point, history is simply repeating itself. By returning to the stories of the Native Americans, the blacks, the Japanese, the Germans, the Chinese, the Irish, the Jews, the Mormons, and the Catholics – the list goes on – everything is put into perspective. These detailed histories allow us to realize that the situation of Muslims today is far from unique. To put it harshly, it's our turn – a fact that hurts me to state, especially in “modern, progressive” times, but it's the reality. Still, we *shall* overcome these struggles, just as so many have done before us.

The common phrase “This, too, shall pass” is one that I often refer to in times of struggle. Yet in writing this essay, I realized that this phrase is not enough for one who strives to make this world, and the outlook of others upon it, far more positive. Rather, by being firm in the belief that “We shall overcome,” this instills in us a resolve to never give up hope, no matter how vast the obstacle. I vow to act upon this phrase in both my attitude and my actions, not only for my own sake, but for all those around me who are a part of this reality.

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Islamophobia in America

The United States has a long and brutal history of racism and discrimination and, while we have come a long way, it is still present today. Imagine hearing your name over the announcements of a flight with the message you'll be watched and then being kicked off the plane, the plane you spent money to be on, all because people consider someone didn't find your presence comfortable. Imagine being a 14-year-old, designing a project for your teachers and then being arrested an hour later because it was perceived as a bomb. Imagine you are working and then being beaten because someone believed you were a Muslim. Muslims, Sikhs, and even Middle Eastern Americans perceived to be either, are constantly being beaten, insulted, and discriminated against simply because of a nonexistent threat. With the right tools, we shall overcome islamophobia in America.

A phobia, by textbook definition, is an extreme, irrational fear. Islamophobia is the fear, or dislike, of Muslims. This leads to the question: why do we fear Muslims? Why are they immediately seen as a threat? The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 have been ascribed to islamophobia in America. Though those attacks were devastating, why was all the blame immediately placed on one religion? KKK members were Christian, but majority of Americans are Christian and don't face the adversities of Muslims. The underlying cause of islamophobia is racism, though most won't admit this. Though Muslims are not being killed like African-Americans, the blatant racist attacks against Muslims are similar to the Ku Klux Klan attacks against black people in the 1900's. We overcame that calamity, and we shall overcome this one too.

As a young Black woman, I understand how it feels to be discriminated against. The dirty looks, the insults, and the fear of being attacked is all too familiar to me. Knowing that feeling, I feel it is my civic duty to speak out against discrimination and racism. Even those who have the privilege to not experience these things, as a human being you should be compelled to speak out against injustices. Minorities as a whole should come together as a collective and fight this fight against Islamophobia, the same way minorities came together to fight against things like: Civil Rights, LGBT rights, and female rights.

So, we've identified the problem, now it's time for a solution. The best way I can think of is to imitate the steps of the Civil Rights movement. First, we must acknowledge that Islamophobia exists and stems from hatred. Then, we must report incidents of Islamophobia as hate crimes. This will stop people from partaking in heinous acts against Muslims because they fear punishment. We must separate Muslims from terrorists. This will eliminate the fear of Muslims and stifle the stereotype that all Muslims are bad. Also, we must educate people of the true beliefs and values of Muslims, so we have a clear understanding of what they are and are not.

In closing, we need to understand the effects racism and discrimination has on people. Slavery, segregation, and the mistreatment of Black people has left Black people angry and bitter in America. So we should ask ourselves, do we want to do the same to Muslims?

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Crime, segregation, and poor education are typically the first things one would think of when asked about Milwaukee. Politicians and the like often look down on the city, but not without plenty of ammunition. With the highest incarceration rate for African-American males in the United States, an ACT average six points below the college readiness standard, and one of the highest achievement gaps between African-Americans and Caucasians in the country, it can be difficult to see anything other than these numbers. Even I, a native, am guilty of letting this mindset affect my perception of Milwaukee. I used to count the days until graduation, where I could escape to college and move somewhere calm and suburban. This is what had been ingrained in me since childhood, where the area you lived in dictated how successful and happy you were. It wasn't until the end of my junior year until I opened my eyes and began to appreciate Milwaukee as the gem it truly is. Although there are obstacles, there are certain measures that can be made to improve Milwaukee significantly, this includes a higher quality education, rehabilitation focused prisons, and a focus on building confidence among students. With these methods, together we shall overcome the stigma against Milwaukee and make strides as a city.

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The average classroom in the Milwaukee Public Schools district is grim. Students are stuffed into a classroom, where often times there could be 40 students to a single teacher. And this has a tremendous effect on student performance: according to the district report card in the 2013-14 school year, we have a 31.7% achievement rate for students compared to the 66.4% for the state average. In fact, MPS underperforms in all areas aside from one, where we hardly meet expectations. Out of 134 schools, 55 fail to meet expectations and 0 significantly exceed expectations. To combat this, it's important to reduce the average class size so each student can feel as if they have opportunities to interact with their teacher one on one with no hindrance. I often feel as if I'm not able to truly connect with teachers on a personal level simply because they have so many other students to focus on. Making each pupil feel as if they're truly important is crucial, and although there are countless spectacular teachers who try to do just that, it's difficult when we're often more akin to cattle than people.

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As demonstrated by the Stanford Prison Experiment in 1973, prison as an environment is capable of altering human behavior. Otherwise healthy individuals can come out completely different, more sadistic and likely to commit more crimes. This is where the infamous cycle of prison, crime, and prison again stems, as 43% of prisoners are arrested at least once within 5 years of their release. Focusing on rehabilitation as opposed to simply prosecuting every wrong-doer will work toward preventing repeat offenses and producing more exceptional members of society.

Maya Angelou once said, "if you don't like something, change it. If you can't change it, change your attitude" and this proclamation perfectly reflects how my relationship with Milwaukee has shifted from aversion to admiration. No one denies or ignores our faults, moreso we appreciate the positives and look to overcome.