

Where the Anti-Muslim Path Leads

Written by Anya Cordell

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ANYA CORDELL, AUG 1 2011

Anya Cordell, the recipient of the 2010 Spirit of Anne Frank Award, imagines what Anne Frank would say about growing anti-Muslim sentiments.

“How soon do we expect that Muslim children should renounce or denounce their parents, and how are they to arrive at the supposed wisdom of this renunciation?”

If I were Muslim, I'd kill myself.

“If I were Muslim, I'd kill myself.” No, that's not what was said. It was: “If I looked like him, I'd kill myself.”

The speaker was my favorite uncle, commenting on an overweight man, across a hotel pool. Considering how much self-talk I had engaged in to convince myself to be seen in a swimsuit, visiting my California relatives, I absorbed this pronouncement in shame and silence, trying desperately to hold onto shreds of self-worth.

Appearance-ism

This statement by a member of my fashion and beauty obsessed family epitomizes why I've devoted myself to efforts against what I call “appearance-ism”, or appearance-based judgments of ourselves and others. On some level, I feel that my life is at stake, at least a life with any sense of worth and joy, in the ‘imperfect’ body I have. I've also come to discover that appearance-ism is a universal experience, that even great beauties are objectified in our culture, that almost everyone can relate in some way to the injustice of judgments based on appearance and thereby come to deeper understanding regarding other forms of bias.

So that became my mission; to teach what I most need to learn. But it's taking me a long while, and I'm not done yet.

The man at the pool could have been a brilliant cancer-curing scientist but apparently that didn't matter in light of his fatal flaw. Although the man and I could have fixed ourselves up with diet, exercise, spray-on tans, and liposuction, I often think of the ways in which we humans are, AS IS; the size, shape, color, configuration and ethnicity we naturally are, with which we need to make peace in order to walk in the world, not feeling we'd be better off hidden or even dead.

Babies, as is

Babies are born, as is, into families, with genetics, histories, heritage and often, religion, and they haven't any choice about most of that for a very long time, if ever. Is it a crime to be born a particular color, or into a particular culture or religion? Is it currently a crime to be born a Roma? (Judging from various European policies, it may be). Was it a capital offense to be born a Jew, at the time of the Holocaust? In essence, it was. And is it now, absurdly, the fault of every child born to a Muslim family to have the audacity to be what they simply are? How soon do we expect they should renounce or denounce their parents, and how are they to arrive at the supposed wisdom of this renunciation?

Many pronouncements about “all Muslims”, flying fast and loose, seem to hold some hope that Muslims magically

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disappear. Or maybe, unlike leopards, they could change their spots, just stop being Muslim. I heard a renowned “expert” on Muslim affairs say that getting rid of all Muslims wasn’t “practical”, while he inferred it was desirable. (Surely the world would then be almost perfect.)

There are those who assert that all Muslims, worldwide, are more concerned with hating, converting and destroying others than with simply living, eating, supporting their families, and doing what most everyone on Earth does. If that were true, wouldn’t they be achieving vast amounts of destruction in communities worldwide? Instead, those who characterize Muslims as hateful and bent on domination are themselves the most hateful and bent on converting all Muslims (if they won’t do themselves in, as my uncle thought the man at the pool ought to do, sparing us the unpleasantness of having him in our sightlines).

All Muslims?...All Jews?

When I hear the presumptions about all Muslims these days, I, a Jewish woman, silently substitute “all Jews” and then I know how terrifying and incendiary this language is, because we’ve already seen how these scenes play out, in all too horrific reality.

I have wondered whether those screaming the stereotypes the loudest would take any responsibility when people accept their cues and assume they have license to target innocent Muslims, presumed ‘multi-culturalists’, and others in hate-crimes, or worse. The horrific attack in Norway, in which the perpetrator credited those who inspired him, has answered this question. No, they won’t take responsibility. So why are they screaming; what are their goals? To simply get elected or make fortunes selling books and speaking engagements? Surely they want to affect policies, and influence thought, and become richer and more influential. But, apparently, without worries of consequences.

I’d like to ask the Muslim-bashers, “Then what?” after every pronouncement, and push them to follow their vision further down the path. After our culture makes it clear that we abhor all Muslims, and we abhor everything we believe that they believe, then what? After we’ve pronounced that all who are born Muslim, that all who call themselves Muslim, (we don’t bother to ask them what this means to them), are unwelcome in our midst, then what? After we’ve made it clear that unless they cease to be themselves, we’re not sure they deserve to be, at all, then what?

Just as my uncle suggested the man at the pool disappear, many apparently wish that Muslims would disintegrate into thin air. When this doesn’t happen, then what? After Muslims worldwide have absorbed progressive shock waves of hatred and condemnation, and after some of them internalize the trauma and respond, then what? What do we imagine happens next when people are treated as Muslims are, currently?

On a precipice

We are on a precipice, looking over the edge. Humans have stood on this precipice before. We know about the times when people were willing to—or were manipulated to—push others, many others, over the edge.

The perpetrators of 9/11 were at this precipice, and they were willing to generalize that their victims and the sanctity of those victims’ loved ones were worth sacrificing for some bigger vision. They didn’t care about the particulars of the individuals, even of the Muslims, they destroyed. They weren’t bothered by facts. Whether their targets were brilliant doctors, scientists, artists, or extraordinarily kind individuals was irrelevant. They had no willingness to be patient, thoughtful and careful of the consequences of their actions. They felt some crisis required them to act immediately and unquestioningly. How then, does frantic and careless generalizing and stereotyping in any way contradict the horrific suffering engendered on 9/11?

White guys

Some white guys have committed extraordinary destruction; guys like Norway attacker, Anders Behring Breivik, or Jared Loughner who wounded Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords and killed others, or uncounted hooded Klansmen, or Jim Jones, or Timothy McVeigh. Guys like Benjamin Smith, the white supremacist who killed my black

Where the Anti-Muslim Path Leads

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neighbor and a Korean student in 1999, or Frank Roque who murdered an innocent Sikh man on September 15, 2001, because he wore a turban and Roque was out to “kill the ragheads”, or Mark Stroman who murdered two innocent men, one Muslim and one Hindu, and blinded a third man, after 9/11, claiming he was a patriot, doing what others wished to do, if they had his “nerve”. Amazingly, Rais Bhuiyan, the surviving victim, a Muslim, worked arduously, though unsuccessfully, for a stay of execution, to save the life of the man who tried to kill him. (See www.WorldWithoutHate.org or the World Without Hate facebook page.)

I know Rais, who is a humble hero, exemplifying healing and forgiveness, and the families of five of these victims. I know where their “ground zeros” are, and how the exigencies of daily public life have reclaimed the locales where these family’s lives shattered into pieces. No memorials set them apart as hallowed sanctuaries. In innumerable “ground zeros”, the world over, families have clawed at earth with bare hands, desperate to rescue or recover loved ones, but these families don’t ask for anything other than the hope of putting one foot in front of the other and moving sadly forward from unspeakable tragedy.

In response to the acts of terrorism committed by the white guys mentioned above, there are not wholesale smears of white guys. That would be absurd, because we know that white guys are individuals; no two are alike. But isn’t religion a common, shared belief in basic tenets? Judging from the disagreements and controversies in every family, organization and religion—sects within sects, differences of interpretation, ritual and practice—how can we possibly ascribe unanimity of belief to a fifth of the world’s population? Do we insist that all Jews and Christians are in complete accord with every line of the Old and New Testaments, with no variables in interpretation, as the Koran is now selectively quoted as supposed proof of every Muslim’s flawed makeup?

Muslims won’t simply disappear. So what do we really expect or want of them? What is our assessment of what some now offhandedly characterize as “the Muslim problem”, on this anniversary of 9/11, and its terrible associations and images.

All the Muslims I know grieve September 11 rather than celebrate it, which they’ve been accused of doing. They grieve it because they are decent human beings. Additionally, they feel constant suspicion directed at them as they try to live their lives while absorbing the shame and blame now heaped upon all Muslims, worldwide. They are between a rock and a hard place, damned for whatever they do or don’t do.

Afraid

And they are afraid. Following a school presentation, a student whispered to me, “Thank you so much for your program. I’m Muslim, but no one here knows it.” Chilling.

Since 9/11, the anti-Muslim drumbeat has impacted vast numbers of innocent Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, Arabs, South Asians and others. We, who despair when our children are teased and bullied, are accepting and repeating despicable slurs about others, ricocheting through our culture. I felt compelled to stand up against people being attacked, even murdered on the basis of snap judgments. I felt compelled to reach out to the families of people I didn’t know, across the country, and to speak about their losses. For these efforts and for my work against appearance-ism and the designating of any group as “Other”, I received the 2010 Spirit of Anne Frank Outstanding Citizen Award from The Anne Frank Center USA

So, as we approach the tenth anniversary of 9/11, what should we say of those who are reaping money, power, prestige or votes via the incendiary vitriol with which they are soaking the culture like gasoline, requiring a single match to become a conflagration?

What would Anne Frank say?

I imagine what Anne Frank would tell us, if she could, about the smears, stereotypes and generalizations now being shouted so incessantly, and about the times when people have had to try to “pass” or hide, to be safe. I believe she would say that just because many people scream something does not make it true. I believe she would point out the

Where the Anti-Muslim Path Leads

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tremendous disparity between the Nazi stereotypes of Jews, and the real Jews, like her, who were destroyed by such propaganda, and the practices and policies that flowed from it.

I believe she would remind us of what happens when generalizations are carried to their conclusions and when it seems politically impossible to speak out against those who are shouting the loudest. I believe she would take note of leaders backing down from principles, each one cuing the next that this is in accord with the tenor of the time. I believe she would grieve that some Jewish organizations are not speaking out against the dangerous climate, and instead are participating in it.

I believe she would beg us to be allies for those who are not our ethnicity, our religion, our 'tribe'—as the non-Jewish friends who supported her family in hiding took extraordinary risks to be her ally. I believe she would exhort people who have never even met a Muslim not to accept wholesale characterizations, and to befriend Muslims.

I believe she would warn us of a very slippery, very dangerous slope, and she would remind us what happens next, and next, and next, as the progression unfolds incrementally but inexorably—the progression that starts with offhand remarks, then slurs, then stereotypes, then diatribes, then what? We ought to have a clear idea of such a progression by now, hopefully not one we'll only grasp later from a left-behind diary of a Muslim adolescent, who simply desired to walk in the world safely and openly.

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*Anya Cordell is a speaker, writer, activist. She is the recipient of the 2010 Spirit of Anne Frank Award, bestowed by The Anne Frank Center USA and author of **RACE: An OPEN & SHUT Case** which unravels presumptions of what we call "race"; named among the "books to change your life" by N'Digo Magazine. Anya, who is Jewish, founded The Campaign for Collateral Compassion, and has passionately countered post-9/11 hate-backlash against Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, and others. Her programs for children through adults tackle "appearance-ism", xenophobia, Islamophobia, and all stereotyping. See www.Appearance-ism.com*