

My Decade of Activism, Countering “Appearance-ism” and Fighting Islamophobia

Written by Anya Cordell

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ANYA CORDELL, AUG 20 2011

On September 11, 2001, I had no Muslim, Sikh or Hindu friends or acquaintances. I’m Jewish, but I wasn’t giving much thought to that, or to these other religions and what they may have to do with me. I would never have guessed that almost ten years later I’d find myself writing a piece with these lines:

*Is it a crime to be born into a particular culture or religion? 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?*¹

I would not have imagined that New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof would recommend this piece to his 900,000 Twitter followers², or that Queen Noor of Jordan would also do so.³

I would not have dreamt that in the wake of the attacks of September, 2001, I would find myself responding to a backlash directed toward innocent Muslim, Sikh, Hindu, Arab and South Asian people, and reaching out to families around the country I did not know, whose loved ones were murdered by self-appointed vigilante ‘avengers’. Nor would I have pictured myself receiving the Spirit of Anne Frank award from The Anne Frank Center USA, for these efforts and for my work against the designating of any group as “Other”.⁴

Rage and Retribution

On the Tuesday morning which we now call “9/11”, all of this was my unknown future. A few days after 9/11, I read the special issue *Time Magazine* printed on the attacks. The closing essay was titled, “The Case for Rage and Retribution”. The author described America as “messily tolerant”, but now called for “a unifying...sort of purple American fury, a ruthless indignation”. He went on:

*“A policy of focused brutality does not come easily to a self-conscious, self-indulgent, contradictory, diverse, humane nation with a short attention span. America needs to relearn a lost discipline, self-confident relentlessness. And to relearn why human nature has equipped us all with a weapon (abhorred in decent peacetime societies) called hatred.”*⁵

When I read this essay, I fell apart completely. If one of the bastions of reporting could call for ruthlessness and hatred, I believed the towers of civilization must be falling along with the Trade Towers. I imagined endless waves of hate being met with more hate, in which many, many innocent people would become victims, and many susceptible people would become perpetrators. I imagined a perpetual figure-eight of rage and retribution, exactly what the author had called for, though he apparently believed that one side could successfully master the position and vanquish the other, and then we would resume “decent” civilized life.

While justice and the prevention of terrorism were certainly called for, wasn’t it clear that “rage”, “fury”, “brutality”,

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“ruthlessness”, “relentlessness” and “hatred” (all prescribed by the author) were exactly the emotions that had inspired the murderers who planned and executed the attacks? If hate was the problem, how could hate be the solution?

Appearance-ism and the Media

I was already an activist, speaker and writer. I had grown up in a family obsessed with fashion and beauty and eventually I came to focus on the universal experience of the injustice I call “appearance-ism” (appearance-based judging of ourselves and others), and the designating of any group as “Other”. (My website is www.Appearance-ism.com) Everyone, I realized, (even those deemed “beautiful” who are often objectified”) knows there is something unfair about how they are seen from the outside versus who they truly are on the inside. I had discovered this core issue was an exceptionally valuable tool in inspiring others to combat all types of bias, a touchstone for envisioning a world in which everyone feels intrinsically worthy and safe.

My personal history made me acutely interested in the ways we can be conditioned to adopt not just fashions, but fashionable attitudes. The media can teach us which body shapes, sizes and colors to value, and can also train us to accept some very peculiar ideas, as any study of fashion can attest.

We are susceptible to other influences as well. The “Blue-eyed/ Brown-eyed Experiment” is a famous demonstration of how easily we can be taught by those we trust or see as leaders to accept unreasonable beliefs about the worth of others. A teacher was able to convince her students, in a single class period, that blue-eyed children were inferior in every way to brown-eyed children, and the brown-eyed students quickly displayed classic patterns of discrimination, based on the teaching.⁶

The media, which plays a powerful role in shaping perceptions, can morph into propaganda, telegraphing dangerous mythologies that can infiltrate a culture, fomenting dangerous, destructive policies. Throughout history, propaganda has made some people very rich and powerful, and has subjected and decimated others.

Racism is one example, which I had previously come to recognize as intertwined with appearance-ism. The shocking murder in 1999 of a black neighbor and a Korean graduate student by a white supremacist, targeting blacks, Jews and Asians—those he called “the mud races”—solely on the basis of appearance, galvanized my commitment at that time. I organized nightly walks from the murder site, which functioned as ongoing open-air meetings, forging many unlikely relationships in our stricken community, bridging many ethnic and religious divides.^{7,8} I had already written a unique double-sided book, *RACE: An OPEN & SHUT Case*, designed to unravel traditional presumptions of what we call “race”, and at the end of the year, I was invited to present it to the 1999 Parliament of the World’s Religions in Cape Town, South Africa, from which I returned, thinking that I knew the general direction my work was taking me.⁹

1700%

The aftermath of September 11 dramatically impacted and transformed my journey. I soon became terribly concerned with the few reports of hate-backlash being reported in the news. Researching this issue, I discovered a volume of attacks that were not being covered. I learned of the murder of a Sikh man in Arizona on September 15th, one of the few stories that made national news. But I also learned of two other murders that day, still largely unknown, of a Muslim man from Pakistan, killed in Texas, and a Christian man from Egypt, killed in California, who had brought his family to the U.S., ironically, to escape religious intolerance.¹⁰

The vast number of incidents of teasing, bullying, harassment, vandalism, arson and assault, (a spike of 1700%, the first year)¹¹ kept me fixated at the computer. I read about a number of other murders following 9/11¹², the common features of which were the ethnicities of the victims and the open cash register drawers or wallets left untouched by the assailants. Most of the murders were, nonetheless, deemed “attempted robberies” by the police, who often avoid designating hate crimes.¹³

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The motives of the killer of the Sikh victim were clear, however. He had sat in a bar, before the murder, bragging of his intention to “kill the ‘ragheads’ responsible for 9/11”. Another perpetrator who murdered two victims and blinded a third in one eye considered himself a great patriot. “I did what every American wanted to do but didn’t. They didn’t have the nerve,” he proclaimed. He stated his intention had been to go to a mosque and “go in shooting Arabs”.¹⁴

Some of the victims had received verbal taunts and written threats, notes they had discarded and tried to ignore. Their families recalled the threats but did not have physical proof. When I last researched these crimes, most of the killings remained unsolved, with numbers of the families of the victims feeling daily anxiety and fear of the unknown murderers of their loved ones, roaming free.

I went ever deeper into a vortex of concern for this issue, until one day, sitting with the details I had amassed, I picked up the phone and called the service station where a Hindu victim, a U.S.citizen from India, had died, where his widow now worked 16 hour days to keep her family afloat. I told her that I had read about her husband and how sorry I was and she began to cry. We stayed on the phone, while I overheard the transactions, customers paying for gas, lottery tickets and cigarettes, after which she would cry again, while I repeatedly told her how terribly sorry I was.

The call was a turning point. This was no longer a series of stories I was consumed with researching on the internet. This was a real woman, a real family, struggling to cope with the unfathomable loss of a husband, a father. As when my neighbor was killed, my impulse was to try to do something, but I was across the country from the victim’s family and had no idea how to help, particularly with their crushing financial worries. Meantime, the daily news was of the “portraits of grief” of the victims of 9/11 and of the charities created to support the needs of their families.

The Campaign for Collateral Compassion

I conceived an idea for an initiative I called The Campaign for Collateral Compassion¹⁵, to gain media coverage and awareness of these stories and concern for the stereotyping that was becoming commonplace, to channel aid to the families of the backlash murders, to ensure this issue was written into the history books and included in memorials being planned in relation to 9/11. I naively believed that the failure to address this issue was simply an oversight, and that once it was pointed out, all these goals could be fulfilled.

As the 9/11 charities began to amass unprecedented donations, I organized a petition drive and letter-writing campaign, directed to the Red Cross, arguing that these deaths were directly linked to the 9/11 attacks. Others joined in a vigil in our public square, with our own ‘portraits of grief’ of the backlash victims. Over 1400 people, many of whom had donated to the Red Cross 9/11 fund, signed petitions asking that the families of those who were murdered in the hate-backlash aftermath of 9/11 be included in receiving aid. A number of members of September 11th Families for Peaceful Tomorrows, who had lost their own loved ones on 9/11, exhibited collateral compassion in their concern about these other victims’ families, and they, too, wrote to the Red Cross, and lent their names to this effort.¹⁶

While the Red Cross was awash in a surfeit of funds they were finding so overwhelming that they were seen to be shoving it at recipients who had lost no loved ones,¹⁷⁻²¹ they asserted that helping these other victims was not their donors’ intent. In a series of letters, I and others argued since they hadn’t polled their donors how could they know their intent? We suggested they post this issue on their website and take a referendum. They could also tell their corporate donors of these families losing their breadwinners in direct relation to the 9/11 attacks, and ask them to aid these victims. I wrote letter after letter, made phone call after phone call. I sent a check to the Red Cross, earmarked for the families of those who were murdered, clearly establishing my own “donor’s intent”. The check was refused and returned.

The September 11th Fund, created in response to the 9/11 attacks, also amassed a vast amount of donations. They too, brushed off all entreaties to aid the families of the post 9/11 hate-backlash murder victims. Raking over every detail I could find on this matter, I discovered a donor survey taken by the Fund, asking donors their wishes regarding compensating victims of hate-backlash. In November 2001, 58% wanted aid to flow to the victims of hate crimes.²² Surely, this was proof of donors’ intent, verified by the Fund, itself. But repeated pleas and letters met

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repeated refusals, and the families languished with very little or virtually no financial help.^{23,24}

I also begged the media to cover the stories of these victims and their families. The message I continually received was that it was not patriotic to stray from the main story line of victims killed on U.S. soil by foreign terrorists. The responses typically ranged from indifferent to hostile. As the *Time* essay had stated, this was not the moment for “messy tolerance” or nuanced reporting. The “you’re either with us, or against us” mood prevailed, and it was repeatedly made clear to me that this issue was disruptive to the dominant narrative.

Finally, one day, I received a call from a reporter I had been badgering at *The Washington Post*, telling me that he would visit the widow at the service station and write a piece on her and her family. His poignant story appeared on the front page, describing the widow’s life working daily behind the counter where her husband had died, and her children had lost their father, and also lost a great deal of the time and attention of their mother. “Sometimes, I wish there was a reset button to fix the problems in life” her son said. “I could tell people not to go to the towers. And my father would be here.” The article elicited unsolicited checks from readers, proving, I thought, that if these stories were appropriately told, people would respond compassionately.²⁵

Lives and Living Rooms

Meantime, the head of the Sikh community in Arizona who had read of my work contacted me, and we enlarged an anniversary memorial to include the other men who were murdered around the country. I was invited to speak at the event.²⁶ The Sikh victim’s brother offered to host me and my family, though I felt terrible for imposing at the first anniversary of their tragedy. After a delayed flight, we arrived at midnight, increasing my embarrassment. As our rental car pulled into their driveway, our host in his turban and his sons, with their cloth-covered topknots, ran out to greet us as if we were long-lost relations. We felt embraced by them, and by the family’s wife and daughter, as we got acquainted over tea and snacks, beneath a portrait of the founder of Sikhism, a religion about which I knew absolutely nothing.

I had occasionally seen a man in a turban, or boys in topknots, and they had looked so foreign to me. Now I began to realize, at a deepening level, how vitally important it is to get into one another’s lives and living rooms, rather than walking down the street, seeing someone in a turban and thinking, “Why can’t we all get along?” or worse, “Who is this guy and what’s he doing in my community?”

The victim’s brother has since become a leading public figure, speaking out about his family’s tragedy due to stereotyping, and working ardently to prevent other families from suffering from profiling and irrational hatred, as his had.^{27,28}

After being with this family at the anniversary of their loss, I felt I could not abandon my friend, at the anniversary of her husband’s murder, so I flew there, as well, and was a guest in her home, my first real encounter with a Hindu family. Spending days with her in the station where her husband was killed, I heard story after story about the generosity of this man; how he would let customers without adequate cash fill their tanks with the promise they’d come back to pay. I was completely bowled over, having never imagined this scenario taking place in any service station in the country.²⁹

One of her friends and I organized a tiny memorial service at the station. During an awkward silence, a man from a local peace group began singing, “There Is a Balm in Gilead”. Although I didn’t know what balm was available to this family, the song seemed to work some temporary magic on all of us. It was one of the moments from this journey which I’ll never forget.

I also met an extraordinary man named Sam, who was Muslim, from Pakistan, who did not know this family before the murder. He owned a station down the street, and reasoned that only chance had prevented the murderer from killing him. He became a guardian angel to the Hindu family (crossing traditional ethnic and religious divides), helping them for years after the murder. He brushed aside my compliments, and I came to learn that his understanding of his faith simply required him to act charitably, so much so that he would pay his own employee to

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help out daily, to give my friend time to run errands or pick her children up from school.

Dissolving Layers

What was happening to me was a gradual dissolving of one layer after another of separation, misinformation, mischaracterization and ignorance. I had professed tolerance and worked against intolerance. As a Jewish woman I had felt it was essential to stand up to bias. Yet unconscious feelings of indifference, and vague unacknowledged stereotypes I held in relation to various groups, were being repeatedly contradicted by the reality of these incredible people. I was desperate to convey the sweetness and goodness of these new friends, wanting others to connect to this issue, as I had.

Eventually I began to offer programs for schools, universities, faith communities, conferences, corporations, and other venues, with this intention.

I focused on the stories of the murder victims, reasoning that if I could not get people to care about this, I certainly couldn't make a difference in regard to incidents of bullying, harassment, arson, assault, etc. I knew the story of a young man from Bangladesh, who was blinded in one eye, by the same criminal who had murdered my friend's husband, and a Muslim man, from Pakistan. But I told myself that since he had survived, I did not need to mention him.

When I formed a close friendship with a family from Bangladesh, however, I realized that there was a more hidden reason I had so blithely brushed off his tale. Bangladesh was so remote and unreal to me, that this man was also not fully real to me, until I could imagine my grief if any of my Bangladeshi friends lost their sight. Again I realized why it is essential to “get into one another's lives and living rooms”, as I say in my programs, in order to dispel the false judgments or disinterest we hold about one another.

Now the story of this man and that of Sam hold a most special place for me. I speak of them in contrast to the archetypical “Muslim male” stereotype portrayed in today's media. When any story refers to Muslims, the images we predominantly see are raging terrorists, or training camps, or groups of Muslim men, prostrated in prayer, shot from behind. Usually these images are juxtaposed in quick succession, creating subliminal linkages, implying that everyone who prays in this fashion is a potential terrorist. (When others commit violence in the name of their religion, do we ever see clips of whole groups praying in churches or synagogues, creating such associations?)

The implicit and explicit stereotypes disturb me. My images of Muslim males are very different. We don't hear of stories like that of the young Bangladeshi man, who, although his sight, education, and life were completely shattered by the assault, wrote that he now “sometimes [attends] a Christian church or a Jewish temple. There is no harm in seeking knowledge. I like talking to people. I hear their ideas.” This from someone, who, describing the moment before he was shot in the face, says his perpetrator asked him “Where are you from?” Then, he says, “Allah sent some angel and I turned my face a bit to the left, otherwise I would have been blinded in both eyes. My strong faith in God has provided me with the best counseling.”³⁰

An Extraordinary Mission

This amazing young man, Rais Bhuiyan, later became a humble hero, whose story was covered by media around the world. He worked tirelessly, though ultimately unsuccessfully, for a stay of execution, to save the life of Mark Stroman, the man who tried to murder him. Rais credited Islam as inspiring this arduous campaign. He set up a website, www.WorldWithoutHate.org, and a Facebook community grew up around this story, which impacted so many who encountered it. Stroman, transformed by this extraordinary mission, said that if he were to live, he wanted his own mission to be preventing the next Mark Stroman. Because of Rais' efforts, the killer's last words were, “Hate is going on in this world and it has to stop.”³¹ Here was a model in stark contradiction to the one offered by the Time essayist, a model that exemplified healing civilization, rather than decimating it.

The “Muslim Dilemma”

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When I hear media commentators speaking of “the Muslim dilemma” I find this expression terrifyingly, chillingly reminiscent of “the Jewish problem” which after being so described, was then used as justification for a horrifying “final solution”. I presume that the Muslim men I’ve just described are not factored into their offhand smears. Do those who are typecasting and yelling loudest about Muslims, actually know any or many Muslims, I wonder. Have they ever had a Muslim guest in their living room, or set foot in a mosque or a Muslim person’s home? Have they reckoned the numbers of Muslims and non-Muslims who have been the targets of backlash of all sorts in the aftermath of 9/11?

Do they bother to mention how many Muslims have revealed potential terror plots, and have prevented mayhem and tragedy, and how many Muslims have been victims of terrorist attacks? Do they care how many Muslim, Sikh and Hindu children are taunted, bullied and called “terrorists”, or how many parents send their children out each day with anxiety about their safety and well-being?

But I’m skipping ahead, compressing years of anti-Muslim smears, thinking of my friends and my indignation over the labels that are assigned to them. Early on, perceptions shaped policies, which, in turn, impacted perceptions. In 2002, so-called “special registrations” were enacted, requiring men and boys, aged 16 and older, from 24 predominantly Muslim countries to report to INS offices, solely on the basis of their country of origin. Senators Kennedy, Feingold and Congressional Representative Conyers requested suspension of this act.^{32,33} I, and others, organized protests in downtown Chicago.

I heard a speaker whom I’ve often quoted in my programs, lecture on these roundups and other aspects of generalized suspicion and profiling. He said that if we want to—and we need to—“connect the dots”, to effectively fight terrorism, to discover who is actually plotting destruction, it is not at all useful to collect millions more dots.³⁴⁻³⁶

The Binch

Another means of coloring perceptions was an animated caricature, which appeared online, soon after 9/11, called “The Binch”. It was based on the “Grinch”, transposed to represent Bin Laden, hence the “Binch”, an ugly monster. The cartoon was introduced to me as a “great way to teach kids about 9/11”. The narrator pronounces: “The Binch hated the U.S. the whole U.S.way. Don’t ask me why for nobody can say. It could be his turban was screwed on too tight. Or the sun from the desert had beaten too bright...”³⁷

I found this appalling. The turban of the Sikh victim, (which Muslim men in this country do not wear) was what had cued the murderer that he was a supposedly appropriate target, one of the “ragheads”. “The Binch” animation initially received over 400,000 hits. I’ve talked about it in programs ever since, to illustrate how insidiously, yet powerfully, the media teaches us the fashionable attitudes of the day. Hollywood, for example, makes it clear to us that heroes and heroines are typically standard “American” ideals in terms of appearance, while the villains are typically ugly, swarthy, Arab, etc.³⁸⁻⁴⁰ A leading pundit has stated that “the most unattractive women in the world are probably in the Muslim countries.”⁴¹ Depicting the “Other” as ugly is a classic propaganda ploy.

I wrote my own version of the poem, called “McVinch” (in reference to Timothy McVeigh, the American terrorist who bombed the Oklahoma City Federal Building), which I sometimes share in programs:

The guy hated the U.S.with such deep disdain

He killed tiny children with no remorse and no shame.

Had his military training hardened him to pain?

Maybe his blue jeans were constricting some part,

Or supersizing his meals left no room for his heart.

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Maybe TV or videos had made him this way

Or our violent culture had some part to play.

Of course, this is unfair, because we know that white guys in blue jeans, even those who have committed extraordinary destruction, are individuals and not representative of a group, at large, even when they perpetrate violence in the name of all “whites” or “white supremacy”. Nor would we say, in current political correctness, “Maybe his darkness discolored his heart”, or “Maybe his crucifix seared a hole in his heart” or “Maybe his yarmulke was pinned on too tight”, referring to a black, Christian or Jewish perpetrator, while maligning all Muslims is becoming increasingly normalized.

Through the Looking Glass

At the first anniversary of 9/11, the National Education Association website posted numerous links to suggested curriculums, for teaching students about the attacks. One, which simply encouraged tolerance and cautioned against blaming whole groups for the actions of individuals was pulled,⁴² after receiving intense pressure from the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, and its prominent directors who stridently, though erroneously, claimed on their website that “following the attacks, Americans have been strikingly free of prejudice and hatred”.⁴³ They were also quoted as saying, “we don’t need that usual pap about diversity.”⁴⁴

I began to feel we were on the other side of the looking glass, in a world of topsy-turvy values. I was seeing what seemed like the underbelly of our culture. But the people I’d come to know and care for so deeply were the reason that I simply could not stop my work, because I knew how unjust and dangerous the stereotypes were to them and others like them.

I argued with the director of a grief camp for children who had lost their parents to illness or violence, whose organization had received a flood of donations for the children of 9/11 victims. I begged him to invite the children of the hate-backlash murders to the camp. He responded that a boy with a topknot might terrify the other children. “Hadn’t the camp had ever hosted children whose parents had been murdered by someone of a different color?” He answered, “Yes”. “Why was this different?” I pressed. I suggested that the children would discover that their pain was identical and may well become future peace-makers, ardently working to put an end to the cycles of rage and retribution, as bereaved family members in various conflicts have exemplified,⁴⁵ but he had no interest.

My entreaties to funds which provided counseling and scholarships to children of 9/11 victims were also dismissed, (even one to which Arab Americans had contributed \$90,000⁴⁶) as were requests to other numerous charities which were struggling to find ways to distribute the vast amounts they had collected. Unprecedented donations had poured into a wide array of charities for September 11 relief. (Families of those who died on 9/11 received, on average, between 2 and 3.1 million—up to \$7.1 million—from charities and the federal compensation fund combined)^{47,48} But the families I’d grown to care about struggled to keep afloat.

Catch 22: It Must Not Have Happened

I participated in “Listening to the City”⁴⁹, a large multiple-day internet dialogue on plans for lower Manhattan. My intention was to convey the stories as part of the history of the 9/11 attacks and to advocate that this issue be included in memorials being planned for lower Manhattan. In a sort of “catch-22”, some of the participants refused to believe there was a backlash, because they hadn’t read of or seen it in the national news. If it wasn’t covered, it must not have happened. Again I encountered responses which were mostly indifferent, though some were extraordinarily hostile.

Civic Leaders, Being Uncivil

The cues for such hostility were all around. Even civic and government leaders were making statements that went beyond an implication of guilt and complicity of all Muslims, and associated “Others”. A U.S. Congressional

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Representative, when asked about terrorism, replied, “Well, look who runs the convenience stores in every little town in this country.”⁵⁰ Another Representative stated on radio, “If I see someone come in that’s got a diaper on his head and a fan belt wrapped around that diaper...that guy needs to be pulled over.”⁵¹ A third recommended “arrest[ing] every Muslim that crosses the state line.”⁵² In the ensuing years, we’ve seen this ‘trend’ ballooning, so much so that many politicians treat it as a requisite for garnering votes. Huge incomes and entire careers are now being concocted around being against Muslims. Strings of anti-Muslim insults, many which are blatantly genocidal, fill the internet, as if being anti-Muslim is the coolest ‘fad’ of our time.

There are bumper stickers stating, “It’s Time to Play Cowboys and Muslims” and a billboard claiming, “Safest Restaurant on Earth, No Muslims Inside”. The slurs were rampant, and have only increased in the intervening years.⁵³⁻⁵⁵ These are only a few examples. I select samples from long lists of such comments to share in programs.

I went into a recording studio and taped a piece, entitled, “In Search of Collateral Compassion; An Untold September 11th Story”. A local ABC news segment, “Someone You Should Know”, filmed me wrapping presents to send to the children of some of the victims. I did a radio interview with Chicago Public Radio,⁵⁶ a cable TV interview,⁵⁷ and there were a handful of stories then,⁵⁸⁻⁶⁴ and subsequently more, including an excellent overview of my work.⁶⁵, and a radio interview I did about hate, forgiveness and transformation in relation to Rais Bhuiyan’s mission.⁶⁶

But at that time, mostly I was met with myriads of excuses in response to my efforts. From early in my quest I had the impression that a message had been telegraphed throughout the culture; as if most everyone agreed with the *Time Magazine* essay and only I, and a small group of others, had failed to receive the script.

More Friends and Remarkable People

Eventually, I had to acknowledge that my hopes for The Campaign for Collateral Compassion were largely unrealized and I asked myself what two years worth of effort had accomplished. I had met remarkable people and had remarkable experiences. I could tell these stories, help to undermine the stereotypes which have become so commonplace. I framed my anti-bias programs to highlight this issue and convey why I had come to care about it so desperately.

During a discussion at one presentation, a Muslim woman said that she had heard my radio interview, and had pulled her car to the side of the road, she was so surprised that a Jewish woman was involved in this effort. We became close friends. A cancer support center asked me to focus on challenges to appearance and self-esteem for those grappling with disease. A mentor reminded me that the audience would be too preoccupied with their own very difficult challenges, and urged me not to talk about the post 9/11 issue. I, nevertheless, also incorporated this story, and its connection to appearance-ism. The response was warm and compassionate, even though, or maybe, because, the participants were facing their own traumatic issues and were sensitized to injustice, underscoring my belief that the common experience of appearance-ism is a potential key to concern for all sorts of bias.

At a conference where I presented a program, sponsored by the Common Bond Institute, another presenter had us share stories in pairs. My partner, a young woman from Lebanon told me of the destruction of her family’s home during Israel’s 2006 bombing of Beirut. As she told the story, tears welled in my eyes. When we were asked to debrief with the group, she jumped up to share how amazing she found my reaction, since I had revealed to her that I’m Jewish. At the end of the program a young Palestinian student approached me, and told me he had to apologize. “For what?” I asked. “Because I have hated all Jews,” he said. “You don’t need to apologize to me,” I insisted. Nevertheless, every time he saw me throughout the day, despite my protests, he apologized again; a clear example of the necessity of overcoming separation and misinformation in order to move beyond stereotypes.

The Vitriolic Climate

My experiences were in stark contrast to what I was observing in the culture at large. There, as we know, the stereotyping did not abate, but instead has exacerbated. In communities adjacent to mine, a series of lectures relating to Islam, Muslims and terrorism attracted huge audiences. One lecturer spoke of his hope that Islam would become “defunct, like Communism”. Another cautioned listeners that innocent-appearing Muslim neighbors,

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coworkers and classmates could well be “Islamist terrorists”. A Muslim friend, attending this talk, was terrified to walk to her car in the parking lot.

In response, a group coalesced. We called ourselves “Interfaith Neighbors”, to contradict the alarming trend. We wrote letters to the editor, did whatever we could, and tried to encourage people not to fall under the spell of fear-mongering in our own neighborhoods.

Certainly, 9/11 was deeply traumatic and this must be acknowledged. Subsequent attacks, committed by criminals espousing Islam as their justification, have created realistic anxiety and fear. Demagogues, however, exploited this trauma, using it to their own ends. Yet we seem to ignore the deep trauma that these events have brought to Muslims, numbers of whom were also victims of 9/11.⁶⁷ In a piece I wrote in September, 2010, when there was so much screaming surrounding the Islamic center in lower Manhattan, I addressed the “multiple traumas related to 9/11 and lower Manhattan”, impacting

...the victims on the ground, the rescue workers, the witnesses on the scene and watching on screens (all of us), and Muslims the world over who became instantly associated with something as horrifying and destructive as this event....

All the Muslims I know are traumatized by the stereotyping and characterizations that are now rampant. Rather than celebrating 9/11 (as they have been accused), they despair of it. All of them fear: children being taunted and bullied, adults being more vulnerable in public and in the workplace. They feel constant suspicion directed at them as they try to live their lives while absorbing the shame and blame being heaped on all Muslims, worldwide.⁶⁸

As the shrill and vitriolic climate has intensified, it is ever harder to stand up against it. Muslims are between a rock and a hard place, blamed for everything they do, or don't do. Those who are allies and advocates, who are speaking and working for justice, are also under attack. It is ever harder for students to find the courage to stand up to a schoolyard bully, teasing a child for being Muslim, let alone for grownups to stand up to those powerful adults who are making wildly successful careers out of smearing all Muslims, or stand up to the multitudes who are jumping on the bandwagon.

Yet as we, one by one, decide that it is too risky to speak up, the shrill voices increasingly dominate and drown out all others. They call for wholesale rage and retribution, exacted upon an enormous group of people, the vast percentage of whom are simply trying to live their lives and raise their families, like most everyone else. But once a case is made, as it was for slavery and the Holocaust, it can possess entire countries and cultures, smashing reason in its wake, wrecking untold damage upon innocents. The anti-Muslim rhetoric raging these days is illogical as well as unspeakably cruel. Ignorance can engender terrible mistakes, as Mark Stroman acknowledged before dying for his own ignorance and hate. In the wake of racism, murder and genocide, profound lessons are sometimes realized, but it's too late then to reverse the irreversible.

Separation and Misinformation

We need to get past separation and misinformation which are necessary elements for stereotyping and designating groups as “Other”. We need to find ways to genuinely connect and correct the false and destructive beliefs we hold of one another. I have some practical suggestions which follow this essay. We also need to create initiatives to bolster one another in contradicting injustice, to demonstrate how many people do not agree with hate and stereotyping.

I often think of the story of a Jewish family in Billings, Montana, who, in 1993, had a rock thrown through their window with a menorah lit for Hanukah. The response of the town was not silent complicity. Instead, the local paper printed full-page menorahs, which huge numbers of non-Jewish families taped in their own windows indicating solidarity and resistance to intolerance.⁶⁹

Examples such as this, or the story of the non-Jewish friends who supported Anne Frank's family in hiding, enabling

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her to live and write, before she was discovered and sent off to die, are typically held up as shining inspirations of those who stand against bigotry, intolerance and hate. Yet, too often, we honor the heroic characters of these stories without asking what is required of us in the face of similar circumstances. Receiving The Spirit of Anne Frank Award was a terrific honor, but I also think it carries a responsibility to continue being an ally, continue standing up to hate.

AS IS

My journey of activism originally grew out of my own self-interest and quest for survival, to believe that I am worthy, ‘AS IS’, in a family which prized beauty and fashion, above all. I came to learn that countering appearance-ism does not only relate to emotional survival, but to physical survival as well. When innocent people are attacked and murdered because of the color of their skin, or the wearing of headgarb as a tenet of their religious belief—in my own neighborhood, in my own time—I am compelled to speak or write or act.

“I’m Muslim”

Following a presentation, a student once whispered to me, “Thank you so much for your program. I’m Muslim, but no one here knows it.” This statement sent chills down my spine, reminding me of historic times when people needed to “pass” to be safe. The comment evoked Anne Frank. In programs I juxtapose a Nazi caricature of an “ugly Jew” with a photo of Anne, a real target of Nazi hatred. Sadly, there is a contemporary cartoon, from the editorial page of a major U.S. newspaper, portraying the country of Iran as a sewer grate with cockroaches streaming out of it—a chillingly familiar sort of caricature—which I also compare to Nazi imagery portraying Jews as vermin.^{70,71}

All Jews

When I hear the presumptions about all Muslims these days, I silently substitute “all Jews”. We should know how terrifying and incendiary this language is, because we’ve already seen such scenes play out, in all too horrific reality. But just because masses scream something does not make it true.

And those who are currently screaming the stereotypes the loudest take no responsibility when people accept their cues and assume they have license from society to target innocent Muslims in hate-crimes, or worse. One would hope these people would care about innocent Muslims being targeted or hurt by the generalized smears. But the smears are designed to convey that there are no innocent Muslims, so that any destruction becomes excusable. We’ve watched this play out now, repeatedly, most recently in comments by those pundits and bloggers who are most virulently anti-Muslim, following the Norway massacre.

We do not choose our innate qualities and characteristics, or our families and their religious backgrounds, genetics, ethnicities, etc. It’s chilling (and reminiscent of historic atrocities) to imagine that children should be expected to renounce their own parents for their heritage. Yet the pronouncements about “all Muslims” so prevalent today, seem to imply this hope, or that Muslims cease being Muslim, or, preferably, just disappear.

Some assert that all 1.5 billion Muslims are concerned with hating, converting and destroying others on a daily basis. If that were true, wouldn’t they be achieving vast amounts of destruction in communities worldwide? Instead, the people who characterize Muslims as being hateful and bent on world domination seem themselves the most hateful and bent on converting all Muslims, if they won’t simply vanish. I heard a renowned “expert” on Muslims affairs say that getting rid of all Muslims isn’t “practical”, while he inferred that it was desirable.

Then What?

I’d like to ask the Muslim-bashers, “Then what?” in regard to their pronouncements, and push them to reveal their ultimate vision. If they abhor all Muslims, then what? If all who are born Muslim or call themselves Muslim (with countless variations they don’t bother to clarify) are unwelcome, then what? After making it clear that unless Muslims cease to be themselves, they may not deserve to be, at all, then what? When Muslims fail to disintegrate into thin air, then what? After Muslims worldwide have absorbed progressive shock waves of condemnation and hate, and after

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some of them internalize the trauma and respond, then what? What do we imagine happens next when people are treated as Muslims are, currently?

It's also essential to note that, although the supposed justifications targeting Muslims now predominate, xenophobia is a slippery slope. Anti-Muslim rhetoric bleeds into encompassing others. Politicians casting general aspersions have referred to a South Asian staffer as “macaca”, (a monkey), a Christian female opponent of Sikh heritage as a “raghead”, another opponent as a “turban topper” who “could be a Muslim, a Hindu, a Buddhist, etc. who knows”.⁷²

Do we imagine that if Muslims magically disappeared, that hatred of an “Other” would also vanish, or simply morph into a new variation? Comments following the massacre in Norway prove the latter. The victims, who represented a spectrum of ethnicities and religions were smeared by certain commentators as being guilty of the crime of “multi-culturalism” or the children of multi-culturalists. They were labeled “would be assassins”, people who might well become dangerous, so could justifiably be pre-emptively killed. “‘Victims’ or Perpetrators?” was how one commentator captioned a photo of campers, taken before the massacre. “I don't get too upset when they face the karma that is their fate”, wrote this commenter.⁷³ Another showed a similar photo, with this caption: “Note the faces, which are more Middle [sic] Eastern or mixed than pure Norwegian”⁷⁴

A Precipice

In the piece I wrote over the outrage whipped up over the Islamic center planned in lower Manhattan, I argued that the vitriol and contempt had terrifying implications:

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 they destroyed, 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 or critical condition required them to act immediately and unquestioningly. How then, does frantic and careless generalizing and stereotyping in any way contradict the tremendous and horrific suffering which nineteen perpetrators, and those manipulating them, engendered?

Some white guys have committed extraordinary destruction; such as uncounted hooded Klansmen, or Jim Jones, or Timothy McVeigh. [Since writing this, Norway terrorist Anders Behring Breivik, and Jared Loughner, who wounded Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords and killed others, should be added to this list.] Guys like Benjamin Smith, the white supremacist who killed my black neighbor in 1999, or Frank Roque who murdered an innocent Sikh, or Mark Stroman who murdered two innocent men, one Muslim and one Hindu, and blinded a third, and other killers still at large who committed post 9/11 backlash murders.

In response to these acts of terrorism...there are not wholesale smears of white guys. That would be absurd, because we know that white guys are individuals; no two are alike...

I know the families of five of the victims of these killers. 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 their 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.

Since 9/11, the anti-Muslim drumbeat has impacted vast numbers of innocent Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, Arabs, South Asians and others, who have been the victims of assaults and worse. We, who despair when our children

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are teased and bullied, are accepting and repeating despicable slurs about others, ricocheting through our culture. Whatever one feels about the placement of the Islamic Center in lower Manhattan, why, I want to ask, is there almost no outcry about those who are reaping money, power, prestige or votes via the incendiary vitriol with which they are soaking the culture like gasoline only requiring a single match to become a conflagration?

I believe I know what Anne Frank would tell us, if she could, about the smears, stereotypes and generalizations now being shouted so incessantly. I believe she would say that just because many people scream something does not make it true. I believe she would point out the 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 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.⁷⁵

Haters, Not “Other”

So what can we do in the face of intolerance and what will happen to us if we try to resist it? There is a tale about a man, committed to justice, who arrived in a town in which injustice was rampant. He stood, speaking out, desperately trying to make a difference. Initially, folks gathered around, but over time, the crowds dwindled and eventually lost interest. A child finally confronted him, asking why he was still in the same place, shouting to no one. He answered, “In the beginning, I was convinced that if I were to shout loud enough, they would change. Now I know they won’t change. But if I shout even louder, it’s because I don’t want them to change me.”⁷⁶

The story captures the formidable resistance one faces in such work. One of the greatest challenges is trying to see the haters as “not Other”, trying to not hate those who hate, and thus become a hater, too.

No Reason

It’s a challenge to fathom what to do. I always believed that reason was the means to change. What is more absurd and unreasonable than making wholesale pronouncements about a billion people? But reason does not seem to deter those who make these unverifiable claims.

I recently toured Theresienstadt concentration camp with an 89 year old survivor of that camp and Auschwitz, the day after I visited the historic Jewish Quarter of Prague. I asked him how the Nazis could consider Jews subhuman, while featuring extraordinary works of Jewish art and science in a “Museum to an Extinct Race”⁷⁷. He smiled at me as if I were a child, saying, “You’re looking for reason. There was no reason.” He told me his mission, too, is not to be changed by the evil he experienced.

My Journey

I have an additional perspective on changing the world or being changed by it. Reflecting on my journey, I see that I stuck with my convictions, but I also changed. I thought I had discovered an issue that clearly needed redress and I believed I could make a difference. I had no idea what I was getting into. But once in the fray, I encountered people who awed me with their sweetness, goodness, courage, and resilience in the face of profound tragedy, and

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sometimes public indifference. These people changed me, gave me some hope for humanity, even while others made me despair. They made me utterly committed to an ongoing mission I could not abandon even after I discovered how difficult it would be. I became committed to trying to do “something”.

I didn't realize how each step would lead to another, and another, and another. I didn't know when I started that I may have to take risks to speak out for what I believe. I didn't expect to receive vile comments, and worse, directed at me, personally, and calling for the destruction of an entire people, in language that is all too familiar and chilling.^{78,79} Or that I would receive the kindest accolades for the same efforts that drew the most vitriolic comments. I didn't know that in the course of my journey, each step would make me more committed to the next. I didn't know that I would meet such extraordinary people with whom I simply had to ally, who would do the same for me. I didn't guess that I would be struck by the generosity of men I never met, never can meet, but nevertheless feel I know and am connected to, or that I would become friends with a man whose goodness literally transformed a brutal killer.

I could not have imagined a story about my work appearing on the cover of a local Jewish paper⁸⁰ the same week that I walked into the office of the editor of an Indian newspaper, who had also printed a story about my receiving the Anne Frank Award.⁸¹ Rather than formally shaking hands when we first met, he held out his arms to embrace me, with tears in his eyes, thanking me for my work. This was another of the many moments of my unforeseen journey which were pure gifts to me.

I have been changed, but not in the way the street corner activist in the parable feared. I became more myself, not less myself. I do what I do, because I simply cannot do otherwise. I am compelled to fight, encourage others to fight, and work alongside those who share these goals, against smears that cue people that it may be appropriate or acceptable to harm others, based on their features, ethnicity or religion.

I believe that innocent people have the right to simply live, in safety, and free from unjust slurs being heaped upon them. I believe it is never acceptable for innocent people to be written off as “collateral damage” for any “larger cause”, and I believe if everyone adhered to this single principle, (as opposed to wholesale “rage and retribution”), and pledged to never sacrifice innocents to their grand schemes, they couldn't go forward with wanton destruction and the world would be safer for everyone.

On September 11, 2001, I had no idea what was in front of me. I didn't know how much love and how much pain I'd feel for people who, on that day, were strangers, and how I'd come to feel as fiercely about their wellbeing as I would for my own family. I didn't know that the world in which we would come to live would necessitate these efforts. I didn't know how many incredible activists I would come to call friends and colleagues. I certainly could not have imagined a tale such as this would be the chronicle of my past decade's journey.

Some Practical Strategies

How do we overcome separation and misinformation, and create real relationships? How do we get into one another's lives and living rooms, and what should we do, or talk about, once we are there? I believe that “interfaith dialogues”, where people discuss the tenets of their faiths, do not typically forge great new friendships and relationships, and sometimes undermine them. When I think about my friends from so many backgrounds, traditions, and religions, I must admit I still know almost nothing about the precepts of their faiths, and what their prayers and holy books say, and this is not my major interest. I'm impressed with who they are, as people. And if they tell me that their religion plays a significant role in making them the great people I know them to be, then I admire that.

Sharing Events

I'm quite gregarious and I've been known to invite people I've barely met to our home. But once they are there, then what? My favorite answer is our family tradition of hosting an annual sharing party, to which we invite old friends and new acquaintances, asking everyone to bring music, stories, poetry, artwork, anecdotes, anything they'd like to share, (as well as food). We've experienced extraordinary sharings which have helped to forge and cement what might have otherwise been unlikely relationships, not just for us, but for many of the guests with one another. I've

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also reproduced this model at community-wide sharing events. It is a wonderful portal into encountering the sides of one another that we usually do not have many opportunities to see. It creates openings for conversations that become the seeds for true connections, going far beyond, “What do you do for a living?”, the sorts of questions that generally go nowhere.

Tapping the Natural Resource

Another simple, truly easy tool, is widely available, but almost never employed. Meetings, programs and conferences all contain an underutilized valuable natural resource for connecting people, who have sacrificed their time to get to an event they all found of interest to attend. If participants are offered the opportunity to provide contact information and—this is essential: just a short phrase about the issues that most concern them—we could easily identify others with whom to network and create actions, interest groups, friendships, etc. Names alone, on contact lists, are not enough information. We are not likely to contact strings of people we know nothing about. But even two words listed as a special interest, such as, “preventing bullying”, makes it possible for people to identify those who share specific concerns. When programs fail to provide any support for followup and networking, and participants leave without connecting, a vital opportunity is lost as we depart having at best exchanged a few business cards, not knowing those to whom we might reach out to enlarge our circles, to work with and heal our communities.

Walk Our Talk Walks

We use the expression “walk our talk” to allude to putting our ideals into action, to going beyond lip service. Walking, literally, is a perfect way to walk our talk about tolerance and outreach, to discover what we may share in common and to dissolve stereotypes. The walks that materialized in the wake of the hate-murder in my community are an easy to replicate prototype for bringing diverse people together. By setting a simple intention—walking to connect and to contradict bias in our communities—and setting a regular ongoing schedule, people can exercise while they meet others they may otherwise not typically encounter. There are many advantages to this sort of open-air ongoing ‘town-hall meeting’. No one has to set up chairs or coffee. No one has to cross anyone else’s threshold, or enter an unfamiliar house of worship. People who are unlikely to engage in dialogues or come to meetings, and who just want to exercise, are more likely to find comfort in walks they can drop in and out of, yet because the walks are regular and ongoing, unlikely relationships can actually develop. This can be enacted in neighborhoods, cities, college campuses. Using a Facebook page to post schedules, photos, and stories could make it simple to plug into such walks, in many venues, even while traveling or visiting different locales. I hope this is an idea which will be widely enacted.

Be An Ally

My best suggestion to cross the divides that often separate groups is this: Be an ally. Though it may seem the biggest stretch, it is the optimal path to forging unexpected relationships. I did not know, and still don’t know much, about Islam, Hinduism, and Sikhism when I reached out to strangers after 9/11. I simply knew that I could say, in all honesty, that I was truly sorry for their losses, that I deplored innocent people being targeted. I didn’t know where a single phone call would lead; how could I? One surprising step after another took me on a truly unexpected path, a journey of indelible experiences, both heart-rending and joyous, and most importantly, life-changing gifts of friendship and connection.

Join the Club; Be An Activist

Finally, becoming an activist has connected me with exceptional, kind people, who are themselves doing the most extraordinary work. This is indeed the crowd with which I feel most pleased to belong, the satisfaction of my ancient high-school yearning to find ‘my’ group. When they commend my efforts, I feel a reflection of my worth mirrored by them, because I am so certain of their’s. I feel I’m in the most extraordinary club which is open to everyone. When I encounter those who are most virulently fear-mongering, I wonder how congenial that group is, and what an unpleasant club that must be. Do they fear one another turning their acidic vitriol on each other, if they should ever disagree? Is a hate-fest their version of a celebration?

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Yet we certainly cannot write them off. Our biggest challenge is to be more attractive than those who tout rage and retribution as their ‘answer’ to prior rage and retribution; leading only to endless cycles of destruction. How to inspire haters to renounce hate, is our challenge. We face this hurdle within ourselves, as well, when we fall into feeling this way about the haters, or when we even fall into hating ourselves.

Because, if hate is the problem, how can hate be the solution?

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

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