

Open Mosque Day 2012

With the Southern California sun shining off its white marble walls and tall blue minaret, King Fahad Mosque in Culver City is hard to miss. But I almost did miss it.

As I turned my car around, I thought about how easy it would be to keep going straight instead of going to the mosque.

Visiting a mosque for the first time is intimidating. Though I've known many Muslims and studied Islam, I still worried about offending my hosts. Was I dressed properly? I had a scarf in my bag, but I didn't know what to do with it.

Still, I had promised to attend the Islamic Shura Council of Southern California's Open Mosque Day last year, so I found my way into the mosque's underground garage. It was empty. Was I in the right place?

I wandered the parking lot until I found a staircase labeled "women's entrance." My shoes clanked loudly on the marble steps, and I was relieved to see a reminder at the top of the staircase to remove them. I'd be less conspicuous in stocking feet. I tentatively opened the door into a lobby of more white marble -- a bright and cheerful space, but too pristine to make me comfortable.

A man wearing an "Ask me about Islam" shirt pointed me to presentation in the prayer room. It was basic information, responding to common misconceptions: Jihad means struggle, not holy war.

Don't most of us know that by now? After all, this year marks the 10th annual Open Mosque Day in Southern California (on Oct. 7, see shuracouncil.org for more information), and such events are common across the country as well. Open Mosque Day might not solve Islamophobia, but it's a useful starting point, even for those who think they know something about Islam.

Shakeel Syed, executive director of the Shura Council, likes to do a thought experiment with non-Muslim audiences. Close your eyes and think of a Muslim, he says. What image instinctively comes to mind?

"More often than not, it's the image of a Muslim with a long beard, wielding a sword in his hand," the clean-shaven Syed said as he sat with a mocha in his hand at a Culver City coffee shop. "I firmly believe that the overwhelming majority of the people in our country are good people at heart," he added.

But that doesn't mean we are immune to stereotypes.

Thirty-five percent of Americans think Islam is more likely to encourage violence than other religions, according to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. Moreover, 90 percent of us report knowing just "some" or less about Islam, and only 41 percent of us are acquainted with a Muslim.

With limited information, humans think about "the other" in simplistic terms. I know from my studies that the world's billion Muslims come from a wide variety of countries and cultures. But even if I don't imagine Muslims as terrorists, I do instinctively picture an Arab man.

Psychologists generally agree that placing people in categories is normal and unavoidable. "Orderly living depends upon it," Gordon Allport theorized in the foundational text on the subject, "The Nature of Prejudice." Studies since then have shown that all of us -- not just bigots -- hold stereotypes.

Eleven years after 9/11, bigots continue to promote the idea that American Muslims plan to convert us all by sword and impose sharia, Islamic law, on America. Women will be stoned for adultery, they warn.

These attitudes have consequences: Some vandalize mosques or pull hijabs off Muslim women. Legislators seek to ban Shariah but not other religions' systems of law. Many simply get nervous seeing a Muslim in an airport.

There's good news, though, for those of us who don't want to live in perpetual fear of our neighbors: Getting to know "the other" can change our perspective. The Pew Forum reports that knowing a Muslim personally makes a significant difference in whether we view Muslims favorably - - from 32 to 56 percent.

As I sat in the presentation last year, though, I wasn't convinced Open Mosque Day was the solution. Just then, afternoon prayer began. Boys streamed into the prayer room from Sunday school and lined up shoulder-to-shoulder with their fathers. I was struck at the variety of ethnicities standing side-by-side. It's one thing to know that Muslims are diverse; it's another to see it.

The men silently stood, knelt and bowed in the direction of Mecca, indicated by the *mihrab*, the focal point of the room. With an intricate, abstract design of blue tiles and some Arabic calligraphy, the mihrab points the worshiper toward God. But unlike a church's crucifix, it does so without providing concrete images to meditate on.

I went up to the women's balcony, a cozy room with the same intricate tile work and wall-to-wall carpeting as downstairs and a view of the top of the mihrab through windows that open up to the room below. Toddlers squirmed to look at me, and I smiled back playfully, just as I would in church. Standing barefoot before God seems to create a sense of intimacy.

Still, how do we know that they aren't silently praying for the destruction of America? It would be

easy to think Muslim women are oppressed because of the balcony. Simply knowing a Muslim doesn't guarantee we look favorably upon Muslims as a whole: only 56 percent do.

We tend to seek information that supports previously held beliefs -- and rationalize contradictions -- so it's important not only to show up but also to ask questions and keep an open mind.

Shahana Malik introduced herself to me after the prayer. She is not oppressed, she volunteered. The women's balcony merely gives her a comfortable space to pray.

This was just one woman's opinion. The advantage of Open Mosque Day is that I soon found myself surrounded by three other women.

As a member of the mosque's council, Samia Bano said she wants the mosque to provide services to immigrant mothers who know little English. This is the "women's issue" that concerns her -- not headscarves and women's balconies.

Najat Drissi's son, Osama, was ready to kiss the ground of America after visiting Morocco for the first time. "Our kids are fortunate to be here," she said.

Maleeha Aleem pointed to a "spokesperson" for Islam that surprised me: The Daily Show's Aasif Mandvi.

These are the moments that reshape thoughts about Muslim Americans, but we can also go further.

"It's in daily interactions that Muslims and non-Muslims must press one another to live the most positive aspects of our traditions," Irshad Manji, a progressive reformer of Islam, writes in "Allah, Liberty and Love: The Courage to Reconcile Faith and Freedom."

On the way out of King Fahad Mosque, I was surprised to run into two Mormons. Both Muslims and Mormons know what it's like to be thrown around like a political football, J.D. Payne, director of public affairs for the Santa Monica Stake, told me. The 2012 election season has proven him right, but Open Mosque Day gave him a support network. With his new connections and knowledge, he said, "I can stand up for Islam, and Islam can stand up for me."

Six months later, I ran into Payne at a conference on sharia. For both of us, visiting a mosque wasn't a one-day event, but the start of deeper relationships. The Muslim American community has opened its doors. It's up to us to see where they may lead.

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