

TOUGH QUESTIONS

2017.

A bitterly cold day in February.

I sit in the front row of the school auditorium as my friend Mandy France walks to the podium, tall, purposeful, the swell of her auburn hair flapping onto the shoulders of her pink blouse. My throat stings, on fire all day from a case of laryngitis. I cross and uncross my legs. I'm not nervous, exactly. Rather I feel jumpy, overeager, like a sprinter coiled in the starting blocks.

"Good evening," Mandy says to the audience.

Those two simple words calm me. Mandy has a way. A gift. Whenever I spend time with her, I feel bathed in warmth, softened by her humor. Her subtle spiritual power washes over and then lifts me. Especially lately.

"We're going to go ahead and get started," she says, the timbre of her voice sending out a signal. *Get ready. You need to hear this.*

On this chilly Thursday night in March, four hundred people—more than 25 percent of our town's population—have come to the school auditorium in Dawson, Minnesota, to hear a Muslim doctor speak about his faith. The doctor intends to tell the truth and enlighten people about Islam, a religion that has been repeatedly maligned and misrepresented in the media.

I am that doctor. I am that Muslim.

Mandy holds for a slow two count and says, "I'd like to welcome you tonight to our presentation entitled 'Love Thy Neighbor.' For those of you who don't know me, I'm Mandy France, the current intern at Grace Lutheran here in Dawson. I am a fourth-year seminary student at Luther Seminary in St. Paul. I'll be graduating in May of this year with my master's of divinity degree and then going on towards ordination in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America."

Translation:

I am a Christian.

Her credentials. Her passport. And in the town of Dawson—a rural community of fifteen hundred souls that nonetheless manages to keep five churches running—street cred. For a split second, I remember the night Mandy sat at our dining room table, telling a story that caused my wife, Musarrat, and me to laugh out loud. Some people from another church in town saw a yoga mat in Mandy's office and accused her of doing Islamic prayers in secret.

"As you all know, the rhetoric right now in our world surrounding the Muslim community is not the greatest," Mandy says. "It is hurtful, and the way the media has portrayed this community is harmful

and it is wrong. That rhetoric has led to a lot of fear, something that is known as Islamophobia. For my internship project I decided to examine what it means to truly follow Jesus Christ's command to love thy neighbor."

Mandy turns to Musarrat and me and beams a contagious smile. My smile widens, mirroring hers.

She swivels away, looks straight ahead. Her forehead creases, and I catch a sudden look of determination.

"I knew Dr. Virji from the clinic and had visited him a few times, actually as my doctor. I knew his family was the only Muslim family living in this community, and I approached them and asked if they would share with me and the community about their faith."

She leans forward and speaks with insistence.

"They easily—*easily*—could have said no, but they graciously said yes and invited me into their home without hesitation. They both work full-time jobs. They have three amazing children and took time out of their schedules to sit with me and educate me and answer my questions about their faith and talk about their experience being Muslim in America post 9/11."

Mandy shakes her head slightly. "These are people who are full of such grace, such dignity, and such acceptance of all people. To know this family is to know peace, and I can tell you that as a Christian person, I have learned more from them about what it means to follow the command 'Love thy neighbor' than I have from many Christians I have encountered in my life. I am honored to call them my friends and to call them my neighbors as well."

She takes a small step back to allow the words to sink in.

"Tonight, at this forum, we will have the opportunity at the end to engage in an open question and answer session. It is encouraged that you ask Dr. Virji those tough questions you have about the Islamic faith, the questions that you have about how the media portrays this faith, the questions you have wrestled with, the questions you might not otherwise ask. This is your chance to hear the truth from somebody who actually practices the faith."

I glance down at the outline I will use to deliver my speech, the eleven typed pages crinkling in my hands.

Ask Dr. Virji those tough questions.

Questions you have wrestled with. Questions you might not otherwise ask.

Three years ago, when we moved to Dawson, and up until the election of Donald Trump, Musarrat and I never knew that our neighbors even *had* tough questions about us, questions they might be afraid to ask. We felt only acceptance and welcome. Since then I've wondered if those questions always existed and the election only brought them to the forefront.

I remember the first time we visited Dawson. We walked through the hospital where I would serve as chief of staff and head of the medical clinic. We toured the school our kids would attend. We strolled down the quaint main street, taking in the post office, barber shop, Wanda's Diner, the two-lane bowling alley, pharmacy, grocery store, the well-appointed library. Behind the main street, we saw an incongruous cluster of Victorian homes and approached the town park, where a quirky arrangement of garden gnome statues greeted us: Dawson's claim to fame, at least locally. Finally, most memorable of all, we met several warm, welcoming, down-to-earth people. Musarrat and I felt that we had found *home*.

"It's like a fairy tale," Musarrat, who wears a hijab, said. "No one stared at me."

But after Trump carried the county with close to 65 percent of the vote and Mandy began hearing from church members that people had questions—and concerns—about us, Musarrat said, "I knew there was something underlying. It was too good to be true."

I love Dawson. I love the small-town manners, the intimacy, the proximity of everything. I often walk to work, a welcome change from sitting in traffic on the way to every other job I've had. Our neighbors look out for us, drop in to say hi, shovel our sidewalk in the winter. We never lock our doors. We wouldn't think of it.

Dawson, too, was the place where my career became my calling. I left a high-end medical center in a midsize city because it practiced "turnstile medicine": *Move them in and out as fast you can*. My position paid well, but that didn't matter. I felt frustrated and unfulfilled. In fact, I felt worse than that. I felt as if I weren't doing what I had been trained to do, what I was *supposed* to do: provide attentive and complete medical care to people who would become my patients and stay my patients for a long period of time, maybe even their entire lives. Because I was on a clock, forced to attend to a certain number of patients per day, I found myself focusing only on Mr. Smith's chest pain and not on Mr. Smith. In order to practice what I call "dignified medicine," I would have to move.

Rural America was—and is—experiencing a severe doctor shortage. The latest statistics reveal a ratio of one doctor to 256 patients in cities compared with one doctor per 1,900 patients in rural America. So I convinced Musarrat to leave urban Pennsylvania, where we lived close to her family, and relocate to tiny Dawson, Minnesota, in farm country, at the far western tip of the state. As with any move, we experienced a period of adjustment and culture shock—we were the only Muslims in town—but by the end of the first year, we'd settled in. The kids found their stride in their new school. I hit the ground running at the hospital, adding six new service lines, upgrading the equipment, and helping oversee a multimillion-dollar hospital remodel and expansion. Musarrat opened what would soon become an in-demand skin care salon in the center of town. Clients came to her from all over, some from neighboring towns and others from as far as Minneapolis, three hours away.

Then—three years later—came the 2016 presidential election.

Reality hit us abruptly, harshly.

Our government turned cold, referring to Islam as a cancer and suggesting that Muslims be put on a registry.

Anti-Muslim sentiment and hate speech blew across the country like a wildfire.

Even in Dawson. Our family's home.

The day after the election I exploded with anger. I wanted to leave. To flee. To escape.

Then—soul-searching.

A calming. A call for justice. For explanation. For *truth*. Resulting in this talk.

This necessary talk.

Mandy booked the Dawson-Boyd High School auditorium and put up flyers around town, announcing tonight's event. She used innocuous language, calling the talk simply "Love Thy Neighbor." The flyers explained that I would be speaking about my faith, about Islam.

Almost immediately, the phone calls started coming.

People expressed anger and outrage that the school would be hosting a "Muslim event." One hysterical person said she had heard that we intended to march children into a room, strap them into chairs, and force them to watch Muslim propaganda.

"That is the biggest fear I'm hearing," Mandy told me. "People think you are going to convert them."

"I don't know where that idea comes from," I said. "We don't have a call to spread the word. It's not our thing. It's kind of the opposite of our thing."

The phone calls and complaints continued. Someone accused Mandy of being a closet Muslim. Someone else called her a fake Christian. She phoned me in tears.

"I'm a Christian," she said. "I preach. I'm dedicating my life to preaching. I am a *Christian*."

"I know," I said. "I'm so, so sorry this is happening to you."

"I will not be intimidated. We will do this talk, right?" "Yes," I said. "We will."

Then, while she was visiting her family in Minneapolis, the superintendent of schools called and said he was concerned about the language she'd used in the flyers, specifically the word *Muslim*. Suppressing shock but wanting to calm the protests, Mandy agreed to pull all the advertising and rebrand the evening a "Christian sponsored event."

But then the school board called to discuss our request to live stream the event. We'd rented the auditorium and believed that we would have access to the school's audio-visual equipment. Not only did the members of the school board refuse to give us AV equipment to record the event, they asked Mandy for additional funds to rent the facility for the evening.

"You want more money?" Mandy asked. "Why? I don't understand."

"We think you should pay for our time," a member of the school board said. "We have spent so many extra hours discussing this. We've had parents calling, we've had to arrange for additional meetings."

"Above and beyond," someone else said.

Mandy lost it. "You know that Dr. Virji is the chief of staff of the hospital and the director of the medical clinic, right? He's one of the most respected people in this community. Everybody knows him. Musarrat runs one of the most outstanding businesses in town. Everybody knows *her*. People drive from everywhere to see these two. This is who you're dealing with. This is who they're protesting." In the end we paid the extra money, gave up on live streaming, and rented our own audio-visual equipment. We had committed to this evening, no matter what. Nothing would deter us.

"So," Pastor Mandy says, focusing on the audience before her, "tonight there will be guidelines as we engage in this conversation between two faiths. First, I ask that you speak out of your own experience. Please do not speak on behalf of an entire community. Use 'I' statements when you ask a question. Do not assume that all people think the way you do."

Then she goes right to the heart of the protestors' biggest fear.

"We are not here to *convert*," she says. "We are not here even to come to an agreement. We are here to understand and to learn to build bridges because in our society we build far too many walls."

It's a direct reference to the election, to the rhetoric that cuts me. *Separate them. Isolate them. Remove them. Build. A. Wall.*

"You are encouraged to challenge ideas," Mandy says, "but it will not be tolerated if you personally attack. If you choose to use words that could be interpreted as harmful or hateful, you will be asked to leave. This forum is entitled 'Love Thy Neighbor,' and we are not here to make others feel anything less than loved."

I'm not surprised at her directness, but I look around the room and wonder who will carry out her mandate. I don't see any extra security or police. I'm not exactly sure who would come forward to remove any protestors or hate speakers.

"With that being said," Mandy says, speaking now with a fervor I didn't expect and words that humble me, "it is with the utmost pleasure and joy that I introduce you to our guest of honor and some of the most brilliant and amazing people that I have ever had the honor of meeting and talking with: Dr. Ayaz

Virji, his amazing wife Musarrat, and his children Faisal, Imran, and Maya. Please give them a round of applause.”

I stand, smile at my family, and climb the stairs to the stage. At the podium, I place my outline and water bottle in front of me and look out into a bank of surprisingly blinding lights. I squint, searching for Musarrat’s face.

Only then do I hear the audience applauding, a sudden, rocking wave that builds into a standing ovation. I can’t see the people in the audience, but I can *feel* them. The heat of their collective embrace vibrates through me.

“Thank you, everyone,” I say as the applause subsides. “Thank you for that very kind welcome.” The audience sits and goes quiet, and I continue to squint into the glare of the lights. I briefly shield my eyes with my hand.

“It’s so great to see so many of you here,” I say with a rasp in my voice. I saw back-to-back patients today and whispered to all of them in order to save my voice for this hour-long talk. I’ll need to pace myself and sip water to get through it.

“So I want to say first and foremost, thank you to Pastor Mandy and to Grace Lutheran Church. I will tell you it has been an honor to meet her, her husband, Pastor Kelly, and her daughter.”

I lower my voice, trusting the microphone to pick up what I will say next, a thought that, to me, suddenly seems the most crucially important words I will say.

“I need to remind all of you—and myself—that I wasn’t the one who initiated this. It was Grace Lutheran who came to me and asked me to speak, to help dispel myths.”

I swallow and pause. I want to choose my next words extremely carefully.

“My . . . faith . . . is very personal. I don’t go around talking about it. But the . . . *feeling* in society and the *context* has come to a point where a talk like this is needed. It’s only through inspiration from people like Pastor Mandy, whom I learn from, that I come here and hopefully give you some information that may be of benefit to all of us. And hopefully, maybe we can start a dialogue based on truths, not on media, not on sensationalism.”

My voice cracks as it rises. “I want to talk from love and humanity and diversity. These are the premises of your faith. You know that very well. These are the premises of my faith. These are the premises of every faith.”

I look down at my outline. I’m lost. I’ve spoken from my heart, but what I’ve just said comes from an entirely different place in my outline. I realize it doesn’t matter. I’ve found a new place. My place is here, in this moment. I close my eyes and recite the Islamic phrase I say before I pray.

“I begin in the name of God, the most beneficent and most merciful. If any good comes out of this talk, then all praise goes to Him. Only the mistakes belong to me.”

I open my eyes, hold for a beat to take in the silence in the auditorium, and say, “First I want to introduce myself. Many of you know me. I am a physician. I work here in Dawson. I have been here about three years. We absolutely love the people in Dawson. It has been a pleasure to live in this community and to meet so many sincere people, people who speak honestly, from their hearts. Coming here to rural America—which is brand new for us—I have seen, in so many people, a dignified and humane way to approach life. We talk about this stuff all the time. It is a gem to be around you. We have had so many people thank us for being here. We want to thank you for allowing us to be here.”

Then something strange happens. I become aware of a kind of electrical current pulsing through the audience. Somewhere beneath the other, random sounds that surround it—a mash-up of bodies rustling, feet shifting, throats clearing, voices murmuring—there is a thrumming pulse that seems to show me my *purpose*. My need to be here. To talk to these people and connect with them. I can’t make out any of the four hundred faces in front of me, but—that *pulse* . . .

I’m feeling the beating of their hearts. I swallow, my voice scratchy.

“So.” I press the soles of my feet into the stage floor and cement myself *here*, in the present. I need this audience, all of them Christians, to know that I understand them, at least to some degree—more than they understand me—and so I say, smiling, “I want to tell you . . . I went to a Lutheran school for ten years of my life from pre-K to tenth grade.”

I exhale softly and say, “I have very good memories of that time. I went to church just like many of you do. I didn’t know Islam at the time.”

There it is.

My confession. My revelation.

“I went to a Catholic institution after high school—Georgetown University—for undergrad and medical school. I was very humbled by the intellect and scholarship among the Jesuits and the Catholics. I took classes at the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding, and I was blown away. John Voll, who is a Protestant, was one of my favorite professors at Georgetown. I’m very, very thankful to him. He taught me of the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas and introduced me to so much more. Amazing stuff. I learned a great deal about Christianity. I continue to study other religions in my spare time. Christianity is a religion of love, of kindness, of peace, of justice. I am very proud and happy to have gone to Christian schools. It was my honor to do so.”

I pause and hear—silence. No one stirs. My throat raw, my thoughts careening, I say, “We can’t be scared of each other. We need to join together and build a foundation of love and respect. We don’t have to agree with everything, but let’s know first. I would hope we can do that. Let’s *know*.”

I suddenly feel unsteady. I squeeze my eyelids shut and grip the sides of the podium. For the briefest moment, I feel myself drifting off into a memory. I am not here. I am in a different time, a different place

. . .

I see a highway . . . a white sun . . .

Clearwater, Florida.

2003.

Two years after 9/11.

A young woman, twenty-three, a cautious yet confident driver, checks the rearview mirror of her van and glances over her right shoulder at her two children, aged nine months and two years old, strapped in their car seats behind her. She smiles at them, turns back, lightens her grip on the steering wheel, and absently pats her hijab, her head scarf. She drums her fingertips on the steering wheel and again checks the rearview mirror.

That's when she sees the Jeep. It roars up to her rear bumper, nearly smashing into it, then swerves into the right-hand lane and pulls alongside her. She doesn't want to make eye contact with the driver, but she catches a glimpse of him in her peripheral vision. His features blur. All she knows for sure is that he is white.

The driver shoves his head out of his window and screams an obscenity at the young woman. She recoils, blinks, her mouth quivering. She sees that he is clutching a baseball bat. He waves it at her like a weapon, wagging it, and then he swings it toward her car.

The young woman gasps. Tears leak down her face.

She leans forward and steps on the accelerator.

The driver of the Jeep speeds up, keeping pace. Suddenly he whips his steering wheel sharply, and the Jeep crosses into her lane.

"Go home!" the driver of the Jeep screams.

I am home, the young woman says to herself, tears pooling in her eyes. *This is my home.*

The Jeep swerves out of her lane and then back, the driver laughing now, waving the bat, taunting her, pretending to be about to ram the Jeep into the side of her van. Feeling trapped, the young woman grips the steering wheel, her fingers turning chalk white.

"Mommy" she hears from the back seat.

"It's okay," she says, her voice trembling. "Everything's fine."

Ahead, a traffic light flashes from yellow to red. For a second, the young woman considers running the light, but she thinks of her two children in the back seat and steps on the brake.

“Please,” she whispers, a prayer through her tears. Just that—*please*. No other words come.

The driver of the Jeep pulls up next to her and leans half of his body out the window. He curses at her again, thrusts the bat toward her car. And then, as if God has answered the young woman’s one-word prayer, the Jeep speeds down a nearby exit ramp and disappears.

The traffic light turns green. The young woman, frozen, her mind blank, her heart hammering, finally becomes aware of car horns bleating behind her. She sniffs, eases the van slowly forward, and drives three more miles to her destination, the doctor’s office.

She enters the medical building with her baby in her arms and her two-year-old’s hand clasped in hers. She charges past the receptionist and pushes into the doctor’s office, startling the doctor, a young man of twenty-nine.

I am the doctor. The young woman is my wife.

I leap up from behind my desk, take our baby, Imran, cradle him against my chest, and hold Faisal’s small hand. Only then does Musarrat allow herself to let go. The sobs come in force, aching, nearly driving her to her knees.

“Ayaz,” she wails. “*Where are we?*”

I blink the memory away. Peering into the audience, I realize that my eyes have become accustomed to the glare of the lights. I pick out Musarrat among the tide of shimmering faces, remembering how she didn’t wear her head scarf for several years after that incident on the highway, until we moved out of Florida.

I take a deep breath and look down at my outline.

“I heard there were many people who were protesting this talk,” I say. “Obviously, that stings a little bit. Of course you have the right to protest. You have the right to call the superintendent or the police department or whatever and talk about your fears. But . . . this is not a conversion fest. I have zero interest in that. My advice, from my heart, to any Christian, would be that you should love like Jesus, pray like Jesus, and live like Jesus. If you do that, you will be better than ninety-nine percent of all people in the entire world—including Muslims.”

I swallow, pause, and then whisper into the microphone, my voice echoing through the silent auditorium.

“I understand that some people felt threatened. I hope you don’t. I know it’s not the majority. I know it’s a small minority. I know that.”

I stab my finger at the outline and read, “From Proverbs: ‘Never rely on what you think you know. Never let yourself think you are wiser than you are. The Lord corrects the ones He loves. Wisdom is more valuable than jewels. The Lord created the earth by His wisdom.’ And Muhammad said, ‘The ink of a scholar is holier than the blood of a martyr.’”

I pause and then say, “I know that for some of you, this is the first time you’ve ever heard from the 99.99 percent of Muslims. There are 1.7 billion Muslims in the world. According to the State Department, two hundred thousand, at most, are labeled as terrorists. That comes out to 0.01 percent. What you see in the far-right media—that’s not us. That 0.01 percent are insane. They are a disgrace to my religion. They are a disgrace to me. They are a disgrace to humanity. I condemn them. They pervert my religion. They have nothing to do with Islam. They are splinter groups. It’s like saying that Christianity is the KKK or David Koresh and Heaven’s Gate and the Jonestown Massacre or the Salem witch trials. That would be a distortion of your religion. It would be very disingenuous of me to do that because Jesus was a man of peace. In my opinion, those people are not Christians. They don’t represent Christianity.”

I catch my breath, and when I speak next, my voice rises. “All I’m saying is please, when it comes to other religions—to my religion—let’s know the facts. There’s no such thing as *alternative* facts. There are either facts or falsehoods. Truth or lies. Let’s not judge without knowing. Is that not sensible? Is that not the right way? To all of those people who protested this talk, I ask them—I ask you—”

Behind me, my face appears projected on a screen. I’m wearing a lab coat, a tie, and a wide smile. I look so young, almost like a kid playing doctor. I shrug at the audience.

“Do I look that intimidating?”

The silence in the auditorium burns through me.

“Do I look like a terrorist?”

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