

Mosque vandals saddened many but did not shake our faith

By Asma Mobin-Uddin

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Vandals destroyed the Islamic Foundation of Central Ohio's Islamic Center on East Broad Street in Columbus, Ohio last weekend. Images of the smashed water pipes, broken light fixtures, fallen ceilings, water soaked carpets, and torn and scattered Qur'ans filled news reports. These events have caused me to reflect on my past experiences at the center.

For the past 25 years, the Islamic Center has been a spiritual home to central Ohio's Muslim families. It serves as a mosque, weekend school, and community center. When I was young, my family came from an hour away on Sundays to attend classes and come together with the community. Many of the lessons I learned there have stayed with me. One of the stories I remember was about an imam (religious leader) who was informed that he had become rich by his ships' prosperous trading and then later learned that all his wealth had been lost in storms at sea. The imam's reaction in both cases was the same: he calmly gave thanks and praise to God. When our teacher, Mr. Razi, told us this story, I remember wanting to be like that imam and have that much faith in God. When I follow my stocks and finances today, my calmness is a result of the values I internalized from those teachings: God is the One who provides. Trust Him. Others from my childhood religion classes have related personal experiences similar to mine.

The others from my classes have now grown up and many have moved away. Roshon came back to Columbus last month when her father died. She is now a physician in Pittsburgh. Selma has completed her PhD and is now in residency training at a children's hospital in St. Louis. Out of the blue, I saw Ashraf on TV three months ago. From the interview, I found out he was one of the volunteer firefighters living near New York who went to the scene to help out after the September 11 attacks.

The cycle of life revolving around the mosque continues through generations. In a simple ceremony ten years ago, I got married there. A few years ago, I served the center as a member of its Executive Committee. Now I look forward to putting my daughter into the patient and capable hands of Sister Betty, an American convert to Islam who has taught the kindergarten class there for more than twenty years.

In difficult times like these, we are increasingly aware that we as human beings do not control all the challenges placed before us. But we do control our responses. The Qur'an teaches that we will be tested, that we should be patient, and that we should forgive and repel evil with good. "But if any show patience and forgive, that would truly be an exercise of courageous will and resolution in the conduct of affairs." (Qur'an 42:43).

My overriding emotion in response to the destruction at the Islamic Center has been sadness. Not because a building is gone, but sadness that some people don't know the Muslim community well enough to not feel threatened by us or hate us. Sadness that people don't know the kind, devout families from the Islamic Center who nurtured me as I grew up. I am saddened that someone could find satisfaction in the destruction of a peaceful house of worship, and I feel sad that good Muslim people in our community have been targeted and hurt because of hate which stems from ignorance and misunderstanding.

What do those who would desecrate a place of worship think they will

accomplish? Are they so filled with hate that it gives them satisfaction, or do they think they can destroy religion? Those who think they can destroy religion by such acts should look at what happened on Sunday when the damage was discovered. Worshippers motivated by their love for God had come to the mosque at dawn for prayers. When they found the mosque unusable, they prayed in the parking lot, bowing before God on frost-covered asphalt in sub-zero temperatures. From their remarks, it is clear that they did not hate back. Their patience and perseverance are examples for all of us.

Many central Ohio families have fond memories of the old Islamic Center building on Broad Street, and we are better people because of our experiences there. But our love for God, our gratitude for His blessings, and the inner peace and strength we get from our faith are not dependent on physical structures. Vandals can violate a building and inconvenience us, but they cannot violate the sanctity in our hearts, the true home of our faith.

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