



***COVERED HEADS MEET
UNVEILED BIGOTRY***

*Daneshpour, M. (2002) Covered heads meet unveiled
bigotry. Star Tribune. Minneapolis.*

I am a Muslim woman from Iran and I try to represent myself as an example of modesty and as a sanctuary to female independence by wearing hijab (Islamic head cover). I also serve as coordinator of the Marriage and Family Therapy program at St. Cloud State University, teach graduate courses, provide supervision for Marriage and Family Therapy students and see clients in my private practice to keep my stories and skills fresh. It has become second nature to get very curious looks from students, clients and professionals when I walk into a classroom for the first time, when I come to the lobby to greet a client or when I go to the podium to present at a conference. So, to put people at ease, I usually talk about my faith and hijab, and only then do I talk about my professional training and my experiences in marriage and family therapy. I always welcome questions and try to get people to stay away from culturally sensitive politeness; otherwise, they would inevitably walk away with more stereotypes than those they held before. I have worked very hard to be at the place I am today.

During my years of training, I always needed to start with a provocative, almost shocking conversation to let my professors, supervisors and mentors know about who I am and what some of my beliefs are, including the idea that my hijab represents my hard-core feminist ideology that women should be respected for the intelligence and skills they possess, not for their body image. I tried hard to convince these concerned professionals that maybe my people skills could go beyond my Middle East accent and my appearance, and that maybe it was possible for a walking, talking stereotype to be more than just that. In fact, I might just be a very capable professional, even if some people thought I looked like a slave of Ali Baba. I had become comfortable using my people skills, and had come

to think that I might just have gotten through to a few people who otherwise would have seen me for what they wanted me to be, when Sept. 11 happened.

The very next day, a struggling contract worker for my in-laws left me a message about her discovery that I was the terrorist involved. She very kindly informed me that her next phone call would be to the FBI. It seemed she wanted to take advantage of a horrific and mind-boggling tragedy to somehow squeeze some extra bucks out of us. "You should be detained and questioned by the FBI," a 56-year-old client shouted at me two days later.

He was among my many clients who knew that I am from Iran and that I got back from a visit to Iran two weeks before the events of Sept. 11. He honestly believed that all Muslims should be questioned, including his supposedly friendly and effective therapist, who just happened to be helping him get over his fear of everything and his constant and chronic anxiety! He went on to say that since I had just visited Iran, it must have been related to the attack. This democracy-loving patriot found it fishy that I happen to go on vacations.

A week later, another client arrived wearing a T-shirt with Osama bin Laden's picture on it. Underneath it said, "Wanted: Dead not Alive." I couldn't help glancing at her T-shirt as I was bringing her to my office. So she pulled her jacket over her shirt and said: "Oops, I am sorry, I didn't mean to offend you. You might actually admire the guy!" I was tempted to ask her if Timothy McVeigh was on her Christmas list, to get the message through to her humorously. But I have learned that saying nothing at all sometimes can be better than any combinations of words in the English language.

These harsh or insensitive comments actually led us to have interesting but painful conversations, and I tried not to take these remarks personally. In fact, in their shoes I

might just do the same. I had become a symbol for everything that they wanted to hate and blame. Somehow I was the representative of the enemy, and maybe it gave them comfort to have identified the cause instead of being oblivious of the perpetrator's identity. Right there in front of them is this Muslim woman who wears hijab and explains her Islamic orientation at the beginning of the evaluation session. So, how is it possible for her to be anything but a fundamentalist and a terrorist? She must be an enemy of freedom and democracy, probably as a result of her constant oppression and violation of her rights by Muslim men.

Years after becoming proud of my flexibility in having face-to-face and heart-to-heart conversations, I suddenly feel agitated, exhausted and overwhelmed. Despite countless efforts to enlighten people about their misconceptions and stereotypes, I will always be a democracy-hating, bomb-carrying, Muslim terrorist who just happened to educate herself along the way. Reminders of war When I came to the United States 17 years ago, Iran was involved in an imposed war with neighboring Iraq. The war started in 1980, a year after the Islamic revolution, and continued until 1988. One million people died, 2 million were disabled and three major cities were destroyed. I still have vivid memories. I can almost smell the burning flesh and hear the roar of airplanes as they came to drop bombs on us while we prayed, frantically and helplessly. I remember what it felt like to think I would be next, what it was like to feel shut out of daylight with the windows painted black and to hide in the basement. And I remember the snippets of film on TV of people screaming as they look at their hanging limb or their dead child on the ground. I can still hear the numbers of the body count called on the television, and I remember praying that I wouldn't be next. So, on Sept. 11, watching people running and screaming was not just

horrifying but also a reminder that life is precious but taken away so easily and, worst of all, unfairly.

That I had been in an airplane just two weeks before made my stomach churn; every time I closed my eyes I saw myself and my two daughters as passengers in the ill-fated flights of Sept. 11. I could actually quite identify with what many in New York were feeling.

Nevertheless, I was immediately put on the other end of the continuum by the media and government officials. Tony Blair called this an attack against freedom and democracy.

However, when I remember eight years of war after Iranians elected a democratic government, and how the U.S. and British governments helped Saddam Hussein destroy our country, somehow it doesn't seem that democracy is actually that valued in the greatest democracy in the world either. President Bush calls this a war between good and evil, but I know that 5,000 children die every month in Iraq because of the U.S. economic embargo; I cannot see those children as evil, nor can I see the American government's enforced embargoes as good.

Hatred for U.S. policy

So I don't mind making the extra effort to have conversations about differences. I don't even mind discussing the same issues over and over again. But I get discouraged when I am always the one on the defense. It will be so refreshing to see people actually seek out sources of information other than CNN, ABC and NBC to see what is really happening out there, both politically and culturally. There may have been a "20/20" program about an oppressed woman in Lebanon, but that does not mean that people will know everything about all of us Muslim women who wear hijab. Sally Field's film portrayal of a woman who would not leave a Muslim country without her daughter does not mean that

all Muslim women deal with such situations, nor does it mean non-Muslims do not. With American society so overpowered by the media, it's no wonder that so many teenage girls become vulnerable to anorexia, bulimia and other eating disorders. Think of the cultural and political equivalent. We starve our minds from understanding political issues and cultural stereotypes just as girls starve themselves of much-needed carbohydrates. I have heard many Americans say, "I just don't understand what we have done that these people hate us so much." I can tell you for a fact it isn't you they hate, it is these oppressive and life-threatening foreign policies of the government they cannot endure. And when you stand up so proudly and claim to the whole world that you are No. 1 because the government is in your hands and does what you want it to do, it is only inevitable that the mother in Iraq who has just watched her child starve, the father who has just been beaten crazy after trying to protect his home and family in Palestine, and the grandmother who lost her family in the war in Iran, aren't going to like you so much for having such great control over your government and making such peace-loving decisions. So what is the message in all of this that I, the crazy, Middle Eastern, Osama-loving, bomb-carrying, freedom-and democracy-hating Muslim woman might relay here? Well, most of the time, refraining from being narrow-minded is just what the doctor ordered for a bad case of chronic belief in stereotypes, and proving a stereotype wrong a day keeps the ignorance and misunderstandings away. Understanding each other through our ability to open our minds a bit is just like taking our much-needed vitamins: It gives you that extra boost you need every day to hit the world head-on with all its oppression, unfairness and chaos. Inevitably, some of us just stop taking our vitamins and ignore the fact that we need them. Do we not grow complacent about stereotypes in much the same manner? Are

we weary of struggling to purge our misconceptions?

Maybe we can use our cultural sensitivity to push us one step further, to a world where open-mindedness is just another term for honesty, just another way to make us understand each other in depths that we never imagined we could. I believe when coming into contact with people from diverse backgrounds we cannot afford to cling to our stereotypes. So do we have the capacity to use cultural sensitivity as the ultimate tool to make this world a diversity-loving, stereotype-free place? Or are we just pretending to be open-minded?

Manijeh Daneshpour Published Jan 27 2002

Manijeh Daneshpour is a licensed therapist and coordinator of the Marriage and Family Therapy Post-Master Program at St. Cloud State University. She also sees clients at Associated Psychological Consultants in Bloomington, Illinois, USA.