



Saima Ahmed's Realization

By Saima Ahmed

I am Saima and I arrived in Canada eight years ago from Rawalpindi, Pakistan. I had never lived anywhere other than Pakistan so coming to Canada was truly a big move for me. I had to become used to the weather and the life here. I had to put behind my life back home. I had studied English in school but hardly got a chance to converse in it when I was there. After living in Edmonton for seven years, I now have a circle of friends. Through the Multicultural Women and Seniors Services Association (MWSSA), I got the opportunity to meet other women and show off my sewing skills. I now participate in most events that the Center holds, however this was not the case two years ago when my children were younger and I could not drive.

Last year, I attended the ladies only Christmas/Hannukah/Eid/Diwali celebration for the first time. My friend Nadia insisted that I join her, but at first I was unsure as I did not know what kind of entertainment it would be, and I thought the interfaith part will be boring and pointless. I know what my religion is about and our faith is the true faith. Nadia was very persistent and she told me that the food would be great and there will be singing and dancing from different countries. I was hesitant to go to a place that would have dancing, but she convinced me that it is a woman only event so I ended up going with her. There were over three hundred women there, some were familiar faces that I knew from the MWSSA, but most were new.

The event started with the singing of the national anthem by a young girl named Amna. This was followed by a hymn (song in praise of God) in Persian by Fatima from Afghanistan. Both girls had strong, beautiful voices so I enjoyed the songs although I didn't understand the language. Then I heard four speakers talk about their faith. I was told that Sofia Yaqub from MWSSA has been organizing this interfaith, multicultural ladies event for many years. In addition, Sister Rosaleen Zdunich from the Christian Community and Karen Gall from the Jewish community have been important to these celebrations. Nadia told me that they have graciously participated in these celebrations, sharing their beautiful traditions and promoting goodwill and friendship which MWSSA members appreciate.

This occasion reaches out to women newly immigrated to Canada by allowing them to meet and interact with women of different faiths. I was told by Sofia that through such events, MWSSA hopes to building bridges which allow its members to become exposed to the diverse religions. They get to see the individuality of each faith, witness the similarities and the differences each offers. Most often, immigrants come from countries that have no or limited opportunities to experiencing religious diversity. In some countries, due to cultural restraints, women have



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inadequate exposure to the different faiths. By celebrating events such as these, we not only create opportunities for women to celebrate their own faith and culture but to also become exposed to the different faiths that are practiced around the world.

As a Muslim I knew that we shared some common beliefs with Christians and Jews but I had not given much thought about the way each practiced their religion. As I listened to the speaker, I experienced a change in my thoughts and feelings. I felt as if there was a new bond of friendship and understanding with these women. I began to realize that fasting was part of all the faiths. We fast for the same reasons but in different ways. I was truly surprised for I thought that Muslims only fast. But I learned that the Christians fast during Lent and Jews fast as part of Yom Kippur. Although I had been living here in Canada among Jews, Christians and Sikhs, standing in lines next to them at the bank or grocery store, attending school events or talking to them, it dawned on me that I did not know much about their religions. But now listening to them I can see that for these women, their faith was as important to them as my faith was to me. That was one thing we had in common. When I heard these women talk, they spoke with the same emotion towards God as I would. They spoke of values that are similar to Islamic values. I felt a little ignorant and guilty. I questioned my knowledge of my faith too. One speaker quoted the following lines from The Quran:

To Thee We sent the Scripture in truth, confirming the Scripture that came before it, trustworthy and a witness over it. So judge between them by what God Hath revealed, and follow not their vain desires, diverging from the truth that hath come to Thee. To each among you have We prescribed a law and an open way. If God hath so willed, He would have made you a single people, but (His plan is) to test you in what He hath given you; so compete (all of you) in good deeds. The return of you all is to God; then He will inform you about that which you used to differ. (Surah 5 Verse 48)

I must have read these lines a dozen times but today it meant something different to me. Islam talks about respecting and accepting different religions and I had not done enough in the past. I promised myself that I would make more effort to learn and practice my own religion as well as appreciate what is good in others and celebrate and enjoy with others what we have in common.

The Diwali presentation was lovely and I learnt something about the Hindu and Sikh religions. The singing and dancing by the Polish, Romanian, Thai, Pakistani, Bollywood and other groups that went on for the next two hours that evening was very entertaining. Then we all sat and enjoyed a delicious meal together – sisters from different faiths and cultures – I felt that we as women too, had much in common. I cannot wait to go again this year and promise to take a new friend with me.