

Chicken Soup for the Soul: Love/Overcoming Obstacles

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What's it like to be an American woman married to a Muslim man? I get this question all the time. Before 9-11, people were friendly, kind, and accepting despite the obvious differences between our family and the average "Bible Belt" family of North Carolina. We speak different, we look different, we ARE different. Nonetheless, our two restaurants were busy, patronized by locals and tourists alike; our children were happy, and all was well with the world. Then everything changed in one terrible day.

The first and most dramatic difference had to be the way people looked at my husband, Karim. He looks Middle Eastern, even though he is not. He has an accent, despite the fact he has lived in the US since he was ten years old. Neighbors who used to wave, or stop by for friendly chats suddenly looked uncomfortable when we were around. They skulked by, watching nervously as if they expected us to start lobbing bombs we had concealed beneath our T-shirt and shorts. Business income dropped dramatically. We were forced to let employees go, and close our second location. Racial slurs started rolling in. I will never forget the look on my husband's face when a man went so far as to spit at him and call him a "Sand Nigger", right inside of our restaurant. Then, to my horror, I discovered the apple tree in our back yard had been chopped down. What was next? Was I going to find my husband swinging from a tree? Were we going to be attacked by an angry mob? Were our children going to be harassed in school? Sadly, for the first time in our lives, we came to realize the incredible depth of human hatred, fear, and ignorance.

Despite the increasing difficulties after 9-11, we decided to hold an "All You Can Eat" Spaghetti dinner to raise money for the victims of the World Trade Center. We donated all the food for the cause, despite the fact we were flat broke and faced foreclosure on our business property. Employees and friends volunteered their day off to help us out. To our great surprise, we ended up serving over two hundred people in an hour and a half, and raised well over a thousand dollars. The people who showed up had to be the kindest souls we have ever met. There were loyal friends, but mostly it was a house full of generous strangers who deeply cared for others in need, and wanted to help in any way they could. Many stuffed three to four times the amount owed for their dinners into the fund-raiser jars, offering warm smiles of reassurance, and hugs of appreciation. In addition to the funds we raised, they gave us something money could never buy... faith in our fellow man.

With renewed strength, we held our heads high, knowing we had nothing to be ashamed of. We struggled to hang on even through the most difficult of times. Gradually, the tide began to turn. The restaurant started to pick up again, and we caught up with all of our

bills. The awful man who spit at my husband was arrested for felony assault on a police officer in Texas. Deep and meaningful friends had sifted from the chafe of humanity; and our children's friends, much to our relief, had never even blinked a wary eye, unlike so many of the adults around them.

One day as we stood on our back porch, my husband and I watched in astonishment as an unusually large beaver emerged from the pond and dragged off what was left of our apple tree. Apparently, she was the evil culprit who had cut it down, and with great determination was back to finish the job. At that moment, through our laughter, we knew our lives could never be about hate or fear. Our life together had always been about love, despite our cultural and religious differences; love for family, love for friends, and most of all, love for the people who are willing to give others a chance, no matter who they are.

Trained in legal and creative writing, DJVM writes primarily for newspapers. She is marketing an original script, "Shattered Pearl"; based upon her husband's family struggle to survive in Uganda, under one of the most brutal dictatorships in recorded history. The script was a Quarter Finalist of the 2002 Scriptapalooza Scriptwriting contest. She is currently working on another script, which may be adapted into a musical.